Brand authentication: creating and maintaining brand auras

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to consider the process of creating and maintaining brand auras through the assertion of authenticity and to address the gap in the literature.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study research strategy was adopted. The organisational processes considered justified the case study approach. Interviews with key actors were supported by other methods of gathering data and the triangulation of findings: documentary analysis and participant observation also provided valuable insights.

Findings – The paper evaluates the validity of Beverland’s six attributes of authenticity to the brand considered in this research. The results show that three of the attributes are more significant in the case considered here: stylistic consistency, relationship to place and downplaying commercial motives.

Research limitations/implications – Future research may wish to consider other mass-market products and the relative importance of identified sources of authenticity. Consideration should be given to the degree to which consumers are willing to assimilate and act on messages related to authenticity and its antecedents.

Originality/value – The findings are conceptually developed with reference to Leigh et al.’s levels of authenticity and considered with reference to six sources of authenticity important in the creation of brand auras. This paper originally and innovatively considers authenticity by looking in depth at the way in which a company operating in a mass-market context, rather than a luxury market setting, seeks to assert authenticity.

Keywords Brands, Product positioning, Heritage

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Authenticity has become an important dimension of brand identity as marketing managers seek to create stronger brands. The allusion to the genuineness of a product, which authenticity in its most immediate sense implies, is nothing new. The genuine or original quality of a product is a fundamental claim for some brands. Look no further than a pair of 501 jeans from Levi Strauss & Co. for information on the company’s place of origin – “San Francisco Cal.” – and the date from which the product originates – “patented in US May 20 1873” – and the assertion that this is the “original riveted quality clothing”.

Brands seek their aura of distinction and pedigree through allusions to time and place. For luxury products, the importance of heritage or pedigree is an almost self-evident imperative. Luxury brands and those brands that seek to establish iconic credentials weave their heritage into their brand fabric. Burberry’s Great War trench coat is an example of brand story created through historical association: a profound example of the cultural and social place in which brand legitimacy and provenance is given expression and through which aura is created. Fine wines are defined by their...
year of production as are their houses by their year of foundation and of course by their terroir, the soil or earth from which they emanate.

Grounding a product, providing it with heritage and pedigree, may be asserted through historically provable facts, such as a patent date, an associated event, or perhaps, as Beverland (2005) notes, through less provable assertions of provenance. According to Forden (2001, p. 24) Gucci’s signature styling of girth strap webbing in red and green, horse bits and stirrups were enhanced by Aldo Gucci’s “marketing genius” as he “began spinning the myth that the Guccis had been noble saddlemakers to medieval courts – a fitting image for the clientele to which the Guccis were catering”.

However, as the Levi example illustrates, while luxury brands in particular emphasise their actual or created heritage, it is not only luxury brand managers that seek to exploit their brand’s heritage by locating the brand in time and space. Fine wines do not have a monopoly of place and time. Beer cans or bottles, the litter of barbeques and watching sport with friends, compete, perhaps idly, for recognition of pedigree. Carlsberg, “by appointment to the Royal Danish Court”, boasts it has been “brewed since 1847” and has “preserved its fine Danish heritage”. There are echoes here of Lanson “depuis 1760”, “Reims France” or Bollinger “maison fondee en 1829 Ay France”. Some brewers may go further back in time in their efforts to create a pedigree; the Belgian beer Stella Artois is associated in its brand story with the year 1366. Others are more modest in their claims; Heineken, in its 2007 time-travelling cab advertisement, is sufficiently content to take its product and the actor in its commercial back to the late nineteenth century: “unchanged since 1873”.

Brand stories like any good story need a setting – place – and a time. The aura created by a brand’s authenticity – the miasma of meaning surrounding a brand – is a well established feature of branding, but not of marketing theory. As Beverland and Luxton (2005, p. 103) note, “no research reports exist on how firms create and maintain such auras”.

This paper begins the process of considering the creation and maintenance of brand auras through the assertion of authenticity. It does so by considering a product that is not positioned at the luxury end of the market. While Beverland’s seminal work on luxury wines (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Beverland, 2006) has provided considerable insight into the use of brand authenticity, it does so at an end of the brand spectrum where authenticity is readily associated with heritage, the antecedent of authenticity. Here a mass-market beer brand is considered within the context of a co-branding relationship with a sponsored sports team. This facilitates the consideration of the levels, attributes and sources of authenticity. It is a consideration of the management process of brand aura creation. It does not look specifically at the consumer dimension; rather, it considers managers’ responses to perceived stakeholder group needs and responses. By looking at brands that are positioned for a mass-market audience, it is possible to explore how a wider range of brands might create and maintain their own auras of authenticity.

**Literature review**
Beverland and Luxton (2005, p. 103), in their consideration of luxury wine firms, choose to use Fine’s (2003, p. 155) definition of authenticity derived from his ethnographic study of self-taught art. However, Fine’s (2003) definition is somewhat removed from the realities of most marketed products. It is very much oriented toward the concept of
artisanal creation and an absence of conscious presentation to the market. Undoubtedly, authenticity in its purest non-commercial form does exist at one end of a spectrum of products. However, other product areas will be less able to convey authenticity to the same degree, although they will be able to articulate some of the resonant qualities.

In any consideration of authenticity, reference has to be made to the considerable literature that has emerged from the consideration of the leisure and tourism sectors. Whether it is the consideration of the commodification of the American West at stock shows and rodeos (Peñaolaza, 2000), the semiotic consideration of indexical and iconic authenticity at tourist attractions (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), the consideration of Scottish goods sold to tourists in retail and festival locations (Chhabra, 2005), Scottish tourism (Yeoman et al., 2005), the consideration of themed environments such as Irish pubs (Munoz et al., 2006), heritage attractions (Goulding, 2000, 2001), the meaning derived from travel by budget tourists (Obenour, 2004), the evaluation of historical districts by visitors (Naoi, 2004) or other tourist sites (Cohen-Hattab and Kerber, 2004), the leisure and tourism literature provides a rich vein of research that has addressed the issue of authenticity.

The antecedents to these articles are to be found in the sociology literature. Indeed, MacCannell’s (1973) article is a good example of the linkage between the two literatures. Building on the work of Erving Goffman (1959), MacCannell (1973) considered staged authenticity and the notion of regions that essentially stand between the constructed front presented to tourists and unmitigated authenticity, the space that motivates consciousness, which lies at the back of the ersatz experience that unadventurous tourists experience. In contrast, recent literature is prone to the notion expressed by Brown et al. (2003) that authenticity is a contrivance rather than a reality. In this, the literature has been influenced by postmodernist thinking on the presentation of brand essence and meaning. In Goulding’s (2000, 2001) consideration of nostalgia at heritage attractions this theme is synthesised through the perspective of consumers’ engagement with the fronts presented to them.

Nevertheless, recent considerations of authenticity recognise more than one meter by which to assess authenticity. Authenticity may be defined objectively by the process of creation and the physical materials used in the creation process or by constructive values that are subjective and derived from users’ perceptions of authenticity (Chhabra, 2005). This dichotomy is echoed by Leigh et al. (2006). They acknowledge MacCannell’s (1973) and Grayson and Martinec’s (2004) view that originality can be measured and that the tangible object can be objectively measured for authenticity. Likewise, they recognise that “constructive authenticity allows for different interpretations of reality on the basis of consumers’ projections onto objects” (Leigh et al., 2006, p. 483). This symbolic meaning they note as similar to Grayson and Martinec’s (2004) iconic authenticity. However, they suggest there is also a third form of authenticity that may be described as “existential authenticity” (Leigh et al., 2006, p. 483) that is a product of postmodern consumers’ orientation toward pleasure which is brought into being through the “liminal process of activities” (p. 483). For Leigh et al. (2006), through their consideration of MG owners’ quest for authenticity, there are three qualities of authenticity:

1. objective;
2. constructive; and
3. existential.
Authenticity for them is derived from three sources:

1. object;
2. community; and
3. self.

Thus, from MacCannell (1973) through the leisure and tourism literature noted above to Leigh et al. (2006), the existing literature is very much concerned with consumers actively engaged in the seeking of and creation of authenticity. Branded products have not been the primary point of reference. Even Leigh et al. (2006) consider an orphaned brand: MG. Therefore, the recent consideration of branded products (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Beverland, 2005, 2006) is particularly welcome. However, this literature is still in its infancy and, as Beverland (2006, p. 258) suggests, requires research that examines authenticity by building “case histories of brands or undertaking longitudinal research”. He also emphasises the need to understand how brand managers downplay commercial concerns and how this would be well supported by case studies that “go ‘behind the scenes’ of espoused marketing practices to identify how firms walk this fine line” (Beverland, 2006, p. 258). This paper addresses that gap in the literature through the consideration of a company’s attempt to authenticate a brand through a co-branding relationship.

Methodology

Research environment

The research findings reported here emerged from a research project that considered a co-branding relationship between a sponsoring organisation and a sponsored organisation. Authentication emerged as a fundamental theme in the relationship. The sponsoring organisation in this case is the brewer S.A. Brain and Co. Limited, the sponsor organisation of the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU). The authenticated brand therefore is the mass-market Brains beer.

S.A. Brain and Co. Limited was established in 1882 and has remained for much of its history a Cardiff (the capital of Wales) based brewer and retailer of beer. The Brains brand has been very much a traditional beer brand, serving the local market and environs. More recently an acquisition programme took the company into West Wales and placed the company in a position where, given the demise of other Welsh brands, it was able to assert itself as the beer brand of Wales. In the last few years a new management team has sought to develop and reposition the brand.

Research methods

A case study research strategy was adopted. As Carson et al. (2001, p. 95) have observed, “case-based research is often more appropriate for the more complex situation involving two or more people and/or their organizations”. Indeed, as they note, understanding the relationship between two businesses is particularly appropriate to the case study approach. Therefore, the social and organisational processes inherent within the relationship between the two organisations considered here justified the case study approach as understood from the development of the case study method by Allison (1971) through to the more recent formulation of the case study approach (Yin, 1993, 1994) and its expression (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007).
Given the relationship that lies at the heart of the study – that is the relationship between the “sponsor” and “sponsored” – the case study was considered appropriate. Therefore, an important part of the research involved the gathering of information through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Personal interviews were held with the marketing and communication team at S.A. Brain and Co. Ltd and with the marketing team and team management at the WRU. The interviews involved individuals closely engaged with the development of the co-branding relationship and the management of the Brains brand. Interviews were held with the marketing team at Brains, their counterparts within the WRU operation and individuals associated with the national team at the squad and management level.

Out of courtesy to the interviewees, the duration of the semi-structured interviews was kept to 60 minutes in most cases, although some interviews lasted as long as 90 minutes where circumstances and conditions allowed. Likewise, the formality or informality of data gathering meetings altered over time. By the very nature of qualitative research and as a result of the increased contact and rapport with interviewees or research informants, formal interviews began to merge into less formal meetings or even conversations as the research progressed.

While 18 core interviews/meetings/conversations were conducted in total, given the environment in which the brand development process occurred, it was also considered appropriate to employ other research methods. Other methods were used in the gathering of data and the triangulation of the findings: documentary analysis and participant observation also provided valuable insights. Documentary evidence included:

- planning material;
- research data collected by other organisations on behalf of the co-branding organisations; and
- publicly broadcast advertising and viral marketing material.

Participant observation grew naturally from the interviews conducted and included meeting individuals associated with the relationship between the two organisations on the day of international competition in order to understand the dynamic of the relationship within the theatre of experience. In this, the participant observation was “participant-as-observer” as defined by Burgess (1984), where the observer formed relationships, participated in activities, and clearly signalled an intention to observe events and responses to events.

The co-branding relationship considered in this study covers the period June 2004 to March 2006. Research material, such as documentary evidence, predates this period, while interviews were carried out in the period May 2005 to March 2006. The research, in line with Stake’s (1995, p. 55) advice, initially “concentrated on a few things, yet” was “ready for unanticipated happenings”.

**Research objectives**

Therefore, the initial research questions were:

- **RQ1.** What values are associated with the branding of the sponsoring organisation?

- **RQ2.** How are the values of the sponsoring organisation articulated within the co-branding relationship?
However, as experienced qualitative researchers will recognise, these questions are “broadly scoped” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 26) and are only a starting point for research and are themselves subject within the research process to transmogrification and redefinition. This grows out of the need to retain an open mind not only as far as the conceptual predisposition of the researcher is concerned, but also as far as a fundamental understanding of the core research questions is concerned.

Findings
At a very early stage in the research personal interviews and documentation provided a clear indication that the dominant theme within the co-branding relationship centred on national identity and authentication derived from that association. It became evident that this articulation was through advertising and promotional messages that articulated the central positive thinking message, and from 2004 the shirt sponsorship relationship with the WRU. In this, while the brand management team at both the brewery and the national team were conscious of shared heritage, both were at pains to emphasise that their brands had come into being within 12 months of each other in 1881-1882; both brand teams were conscious that the past had to contribute to a positive future rather than a self-indulgent nostalgic past.

Therefore, for the brewer, the national team provided a strong national identity. The sponsored brand association clearly anchored the brewer’s aspiration for a national rather than a local identity:

There’s no doubt for me, one of the main benefits of the rugby sponsorship has been taking Brains from a Cardiff based brewer and beer retailer to be a Welsh company (Brains interviewee).

Rearticulated brand values
This reorientation from the local to the national level was supported by documentation that identified this to be the ambition of the company from 2002 when the brewer redefined its brand map. The sponsor’s focus on Welsh identity predated the sponsorship deal. As part of their repositioning, their new advertising message was built around the slogan “more positive thinking from Brains”. Brains corporate repositioning strategy was articulated within the company in the summer of 2002 (Brains document). On the basis of value levels that were described as the core brand essence, company values, product values and tonal values, the company built a brand map around existing values and desired values. At the company level, the values remained remarkably similar. There were immutable values such as “family heritage” and “independent”. They remained unchanged while other mutable values such as “honesty” were reconstructed as “integrity”. At the product level, while the new values were in part resonant of the old values “familiar”/“authentic” and “Cardiff”/“Wales”, there was also a transmogrification so that brand meanings that might be taken for granted became more challenging, “innovative” and “individual”. At the tonal level this was even more clearly emphasised. While “warm” could be at least in part read into the new values of “engaging” and a “knowing sense of humour”, the “optimistic” and “contemporary” values set a new tone. However, it was at the heart of the brand, the core brand essence, that a fundamental change occurred. Here the “local” tonal value
that strongly associated the product brand with Cardiff and the “old fashioned”, “familiar” company images that this implied was replaced. The tonal “engaging” values of a “knowing sense of humour”, essentially “optimistic” in nature and “contemporary” in its message, established the brand within a universally applicable value system of “positive” thinking which related well to the sponsorship vehicle.

For Brains, “being positive” did not mean abandoning its roots. It involved rearticulating them in a new context. By accentuating the positive, the brand sought to embed values it perceived in its “employees, customers and consumers alike”, who “have a positive frame of mind and attitude to life” (company document, Desired Brand Map). However, the company sought to do this in a context where the company wanted to place itself within an “ambitious and optimistic” Wales of the future (company document, Desired Brand Map, 16 August, 2002). In this, Brains consciously placed itself and its brand within the contemporary rearticulation of the Welsh brand.

The redefinition of the brand in 2002 led to a roll-out of messages that used a consistent style built around the imagery of a glass considered half full rather than half empty: “positive thinking”. After 2004, this imagery was embedded within the messages associated with the sponsorship relationship.

Sponsorship authentication

The sponsored organisation clearly recognised that Brains had achieved a Welsh status as a result of the sponsorship agreement:

We have given them the platform they wouldn’t have achieved with any other sport in Wales (WRU interviewee).

Within the sponsored organisation there was a clear recognition of the way that the sponsor had been canny in their timing and use of the sponsorship:

A sponsorship deal that is synonymous with Wales, they were synonymous with Cardiff (WRU interviewee).

The national team’s success in international competition improved dramatically in the first year of the sponsorship deal and included the team completing a Grand Slam (winning every game) in the 2005 Six Nations Championship for the first time in 27 years. This success resonated extraordinarily well with beer brand’s positive thinking message and allowed the brewer to sustain a remarkably consistent style of message for a considerable period of time.

The sponsored organisation was not under any illusion about the benefits and values derived by the sponsoring organisation from the co-branding relationship:

Somebody somewhere deserves an award really, as a company what they have done as a company with that sponsorship because of the brand leverage has been phenomenal (WRU interviewee).

Ironically, the sponsored team also believed that the relationship with Brains had increased their own Welsh identity:

It’s helped to take Welsh rugby to parts of Wales that were feeling perhaps left out (WRU interview).

They saw the marketing strategy employed by the sponsoring organisation providing them with a voice in parts of the country where rugby was less important than it is in
the South of the country. They could not afford the marketing communication provided by the sponsor.

Discussion
With reference to the framework proposed by Leigh et al. (2006) Brains, through engagement in community activities, whether on the day of an international match or through retail outlets selling its product, sought to engage with the sponsored community and the value systems of that community. The company sought to place its tangible product, with its objective claims to be an authentic match-day Welsh beer, into the communal space where interpersonal and intrapersonal expressions of authenticity were defined. The rearticulation of the Brains brand attempted to maintain a balance between the company’s heritage and its future.

Brains engaged in the five techniques noted by Holt (2002) that “present brands as relevant and authentic cultural resources” (p. 84): ironic, reflexive brand persona, coat-tailing on cultural epicentres, life world emplacement and stealth branding. Using Holt’s (2002, p. 84) phraseology, Brains distanced “the brand from the overly hyped and homogenizing conceits of conventional advertising” through the creation of an “ironic, reflexive brand persona”. They coat-tailed the brand within cultural epicentres in order to be part of the community rather than “parasites” on it. Their use of stealth branding through indirect net-based viral communication channels sought to place the brand within a “real life framework” and consumer space.

Through an “understanding of the sociocultural roots and dynamics” (Leigh et al., 2006), not least through the mechanism of humour, Brains sought to engage with the community on objective, constructive and existential levels. The beer they marketed had objective claims to be an authentic Welsh beer. However, it was the rearticulation of that identity that expressed and established the authenticity of the product. Through the co-branding relationship the company was able to engage in a constructive evaluation of the beer as a Welsh beer.

The brand’s relationship to place and the downplaying of commercial motives was seen as fundamental to the brand message and creation of brand aura. Thus, the brand took the objective authenticity epitomised by heritage within a constructive framework and sought to relate it to the contemporary social space of the match-day atmosphere and hence the experience of its consumer group.

Conceptual development
Beverland (2006, p. 257) identifies six attributes of authenticity: “heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives”. In the case presented above, all six attributes are represented. However, some were more significant than others. In part, this might be the result of the particular authentication task faced by the company. Likewise, the particular product considered may also affect it.

In this case, while quality commitments, production method as well as heritage and pedigree are part of the creation of the overall authentic brand message, they are essentially implied through the lens of stylistic consistency and relationship to place rather than articulated in their own right. They are accepted rather than promoted attributes. Likewise, stylistic consistency might be described as sharpening and encapsulating the authentic brand message but is a facilitating factor rather than a
promoter of authenticity in its own right. The key, promoting, attribute emphasised here is relationship to place conveyed through an articulation that celebrated the downplaying of commercial motives. The relationship to place was the central value conveyed in stylistically consistent messages. Above all, the brand was placed within an externally created social space provided by the co-branding relationship.

Figure 1 presents the relationship between the attributives of authenticity – production method, quality commitment, heritage and pedigree, stylistic commitment, relationship to place and the down playing of commercial motives – as suggested by the case studied here. That is, each builds to create an aura relevant to the end user.

Through stylistic consistency the brand emerges out of the back stage of production onto the front stage of representation. Through quality commitments, the brand values are accepted as objectively genuine and through the production method, and hence through the resonance of established practice, an origin is provided. In Fine’s (2003) words, the production methods appear to exist as much as possible in an “absence of cognitive understanding”, thereby “creating an unmediated experience” through its longevity. Hence the back stage activities are expressed through a stylistically consistent imagery. However, stylistic consistency also begins the process of front stage activities and engagement through representation within a social space where commercial motives are played down through tonal presentation and the articulation of shared aspirations in an ostensibly non-commercial environment. The back stage and front stage activities echo MacCannell’s (1973) and Goffman’s (1959) regions.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of authenticity attributes
Conclusion
This paper has sought to initiate the process of addressing the gap in the literature identified by Beverland and Luxton (2005) and Beverland (2006) – that is, through a “behind the scenes” (Beverland, 2006, p. 258) consideration of “how firms create and maintain” (Beverland and Luxton, 2005, p. 103) brand auras. It has done so with reference to a company operating in the mass-market context, albeit within a particular market setting and through the lens of a co-branding relationship.

The authenticity of brands is certainly based on “original, genuine, and unaffected” associations; however, as the tourism literature has clearly recognised, ‘authenticity is a fluid concept that can be negotiated’ (Goulding, 2000, p. 837). There are, in the mass production of products or services, elements of social construction, commodification and constructed meaning (Gotttdiener, 2001) that make it impossible to create an “unmediated experience” in the “absence of cognitive understanding” (Fine, 2003). Rather, while authenticity is not enhanced by overt commercialism, commercial communication is able to create “moral legitimacy” (Beverland, 2005, p. 460) through conscious marketing efforts to embed the brand within a genuine context.

Limitations and future research
The research presented here has sought to provide a deeper understanding of how authenticity is managed and brand aura enhanced. As noted in the literature review, previous research (Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Beverland, 2006) has focused on luxury products, whereas the focus of this research is a mass-market product. By focusing on a brand using a co-branding relationship it is inevitable that that relationship has highly influenced the means and methods used to assert authenticity and create a brand aura. Other contexts might provide further understanding of the attributes of authenticity and their inter-relationships. For example, the backstage attributes in this case study of quality commitments, production method and heritage and pedigree may emerge more strongly in other cases.

Likewise, the product under consideration is part of a market where heritage and nostalgia are often used in marketing campaigns. Therefore, in some ways, like luxury wines, the product considered here might possess characteristics that are untypical of mass-market products that use authenticity to build brand aura. Future research might like to consider other mass-market products that are less easily associated with connotations of heritage and pedigree. The relative importance of authenticity attributes described here from a corporate perspective requires consideration in other contexts and the derived sources of authenticity subsequently require consideration in the context of research into consumer behavior. How the back stage attributes of production method, quality commitments and heritage and pedigree may be successfully articulated in a mass market context in order to engage rather than alienate an audience during the creation of brand aura requires consideration with reference to the degree consumers to which are willing to assimilate and act on messages related to heritage and pedigree.

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