

Post-Authenticity Marketing: When Consumers Trust the Story More Than the Brand

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Abstract: Brand authenticity has functioned for roughly two decades as marketing's dominant trust-building vocabulary, yet a growing body of consumer research suggests that authenticity itself has become a manufactured, performable claim that sophisticated consumers increasingly discount, shifting their trust instead toward the narrative surrounding a brand, its founder story, its perceived struggle, its documented process, rather than toward the brand's institutional identity as such. This paper reviews the theoretical and empirical literature underlying this shift, tracing the consumer authenticity construct from its origins in existential and object-based authenticity theory through the branding literature's operationalization of authenticity as a strategic asset, before examining the narrative transportation and self-brand connection literature that explains why a well-told story can generate consumer trust independent of and at times despite, skepticism toward the branded institution telling it. The review synthesizes foundational authenticity-in-consumption research, brand trust theory, narrative processing research and the more recent influencer and social-media literature documenting how manufactured authenticity performances have measurably eroded consumer confidence in brand-level authenticity claims specifically. Particular attention is given to the paradox this literature identifies: the same audiences who report high skepticism toward corporate authenticity claims simultaneously report strong trust in individual creators and story-based content, a pattern this paper terms post-authenticity marketing. The paper concludes that this shift does not represent the abandonment of authenticity as a consumer concern but its relocation from the brand as institution to the narrative as artifact and identifies longitudinal research tracking how quickly narrative-based trust itself becomes subject to the same skepticism cycle as brand-based authenticity claims as the central future research prospect.

Keywords: Brand Authenticity, Narrative Transportation, Consumer Trust, Storytelling, Influencer Marketing, Parasocial Relationships, Brand Skepticism, Self-Brand Connection

INTRODUCTION

Brand authenticity emerged as a central marketing construct in response to a documented shift in consumer sentiment: Gilmore and Pine [1] influential account of the experience economy argued that as commercial staging and mass customization became ubiquitous, consumers began evaluating offerings less on functional benefit and more on whether a brand's claims about itself, its origins, its values, its production process, felt genuine rather than manufactured for commercial effect. Beverland and Farrelly [2] empirical investigation of the quest for authenticity in consumption found that consumers pursue authentic offerings to satisfy three distinct goal states, a desire for control over their own identity narrative, a desire for connection to a history or

community larger than themselves and a desire for virtue signaled through association with an unadulterated, non-commercially-compromised object or brand, a tripartite framework that has structured much of the subsequent authenticity literature. Holt [3] earlier analysis of how brands become cultural icons anticipated this framing, arguing that the most commercially successful brands are those that convincingly perform a myth addressing a specific cultural anxiety and that consumers' emotional investment attaches to this myth rather than to the brand's literal corporate identity, a distinction that foreshadows the story-versus-institution divide this paper examines directly.

The difficulty with authenticity as a branding strategy, identified early and persistently in the critical

marketing literature, is that authenticity is inherently compromised the moment it is deployed instrumentally. Grayson and Martinec [4] analysis of iconicity and indexicality in consumer perceptions of authentic market offerings distinguished two routes through which consumers judge authenticity, iconic authenticity, resemblance to an original or genuine category exemplar and indexical authenticity, a genuine causal or historical connection to the thing being represented and found that indexical authenticity carried substantially greater persuasive weight, precisely because it cannot be simulated as easily as surface resemblance can. Banet-Weiser [5] book-length critical treatment of authenticity as a brand strategy argued that this indexical requirement creates a structural bind for commercial branding: A brand's authenticity claim is credible only to the extent that it appears un-strategic, yet the claim itself is invariably the product of deliberate strategic construction, producing what Banet-Weiser terms an ambivalent brand culture in which consumers simultaneously desire and distrust authenticity performances. Thompson *et al.* [6] related concept of the "doppelgänger brand image" documented the practical consequence of this bind, showing that once a critical mass of consumers perceives a brand's authenticity claims as strategically manufactured, an oppositional, parody-laden counter-image of the brand can circulate publicly and durably undermine the very trust the authenticity campaign was designed to build.

This erosion of confidence in brand-level authenticity claims has coincided with and plausibly accelerated, a parallel rise in a different trust object entirely: The individually authored, personally voiced narrative. Escalas [7] foundational work on narrative processing in consumer contexts found that when marketing content is structured as a story rather than as an argument or a list of attributes, consumers engage in a qualitatively different cognitive process, self-referential elaboration, in which they connect the narrative to their own autobiographical memories and experiences and that this self-referencing process produces stronger brand attitudes and stronger perceived self-brand connection than argument-based processing of the identical underlying claims. Green and Brock [8] earlier, foundational transportation theory provided the underlying psychological mechanism, proposing that narratives that successfully "transport" a reader or viewer into the story world reduce the reader's capacity and motivation to counter-argue the narrative's claims, a persuasion route that operates largely independently of the perceived credibility of the narrative's source. This paper's central argument follows directly from combining these two literatures: if narrative transportation reduces counter-argument regardless of source credibility and if brand-level authenticity claims have become increasingly subject to exactly the kind of counter-argument and skepticism Banet-Weiser and Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel document, then a strategically rational response,

whether pursued deliberately by marketers or adopted spontaneously by consumers, is for trust to relocate toward the narrative artifact itself rather than remaining anchored to the branded institution producing it.

The rise of influencer and creator marketing has made this relocation empirically visible at scale. De Veirman *et al.* [9] study of Instagram influencer marketing found that consumers extend measurably greater trust to product endorsements delivered through an individual creator's personal account than to functionally identical claims delivered through an official brand account, an effect the authors attribute to the perceived authenticity of a personal, ongoing narrative relationship between the creator and their audience. Audrezet *et al.* [10] subsequent analysis of influencer authenticity under commercial pressure identified the specific strategies influencers use to preserve this perceived authenticity even while engaging in paid promotional activity, including selective endorsement, transparent disclosure and the maintenance of a consistent personal narrative voice across sponsored and unsponsored content, strategies the authors argue function as a form of authenticity labor distinct from and in some respects more effective than, the institutional authenticity-signaling brands themselves attempt.

This paper reviews the authenticity, brand trust, narrative processing and influencer-marketing literatures within a single framework to characterize the specific mechanisms underlying this shift from brand-level to story-level trust, before examining the empirical and managerial implications this shift carries for contemporary marketing practice.

Research Objectives

- To review the theoretical development of consumer authenticity from object-based and existential authenticity theory through its operationalization as a brand strategy
- To examine the documented erosion of consumer trust in strategically deployed brand authenticity claims
- To synthesize narrative transportation and self-brand connection theory as an explanation for narrative-based trust that operates independently of brand-level credibility
- To evaluate empirical evidence on influencer and creator marketing as a live demonstration of story-based trust displacing brand-based trust
- To identify future research priorities for tracking whether narrative-based trust itself becomes subject to the same skepticism cycle documented for brand authenticity

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity as a Consumer Research Construct

Authenticity entered consumer research initially through existential and philosophical framings before being

operationalized as a measurable brand attribute. Arnould and Price [11] early ethnographic study of extraordinary consumption experiences, conducted in the context of river-rafting expeditions, found that consumers valued experiences precisely to the extent that these experiences felt un-staged and personally transformative, an early empirical anchor for what later authenticity theory would formalize as existential authenticity, a state of being true to oneself rather than a property of the object consumed. Beverland [12] subsequent qualitative study of luxury wine producers identified the specific practices, an emphasis on heritage, a downplaying of commercial motive and a demonstrated commitment to method over profit, through which producers construct what consumers perceive as authentic brand identity, formalizing authenticity as something brands actively "craft" through consistent narrative and practice rather than something that either exists or does not exist independent of communication. Napoli *et al.* [13] development of a consumer-based brand authenticity scale operationalized this crafted authenticity into three measurable dimensions, quality commitment, sincerity and heritage, providing the field's most widely used quantitative instrument and enabling the subsequent empirical literature on authenticity's antecedents and consequences to proceed with a validated measurement tool rather than relying on qualitative inference alone.

The Structural Paradox of Strategic Authenticity

Grayson and Martinec [4] iconic-versus-indexical distinction supplies the theoretical account of why authenticity is so difficult to sustain as a deliberate brand strategy: indexical authenticity, the form consumers find most persuasive, depends on a genuine historical or causal connection that cannot be manufactured on demand, meaning that any authenticity claim explicitly constructed for commercial persuasion is at best iconic, a resemblance to genuineness rather than genuineness itself. Rose and Wood [14] analysis of authenticity in reality television captured the practical consequence of this paradox directly, finding that audiences simultaneously understood reality television as staged and edited for entertainment value while still deriving genuine emotional engagement from it, a "paradoxical" consumption mode in which audiences consciously suspend disbelief about authenticity rather than being straightforwardly deceived by it, a finding with direct relevance to how contemporary consumers plausibly relate to influencer and brand-story content as well. Leigh *et al.* [15] study of consumers' quest for authenticity within a subcultural brand community found that authenticity judgments are frequently made collectively and negotiated within a community of practice rather than assessed by an isolated individual consumer against a brand's marketing claims alone, indicating that authenticity is as much a social accomplishment among consumers as it is a property transmitted from brand to

consumer. Newman and Dhar [16] experimental work on authenticity's contagious property found that once an object or brand is perceived as inauthentic in one respect, this perception measurably spreads to reduce perceived value and trust across otherwise unrelated attributes of the same brand, a contagion effect that explains why a single exposed instance of manufactured authenticity, a doppelgänger-image event in Thompson *et al.* [6] terms, can inflict damage disproportionate to the specific claim exposed.

Brand Trust Theory and Its Institutional Anchor

Chaudhuri and Holbrook [17] foundational chain-of-effects model established brand trust and brand affect as the two central mediating constructs linking brand-level attributes to market performance outcomes including purchase loyalty and price premium tolerance, formalizing brand trust as a distinct, measurable construct within the broader marketing literature rather than a loosely defined synonym for brand attitude. Fournier [18] influential relationship-theory framing of consumer-brand connections extended this trust construct by arguing that consumers relate to brands using the same relational schemas, including partner quality and self-connection, that structure interpersonal relationships, a framing that positions brand trust as fundamentally similar in kind to interpersonal trust even though its object, an institutional brand rather than a specific person, differs considerably. This institutional anchoring is precisely what the authenticity-erosion literature reviewed in Section 2.2 identifies as increasingly fragile: if a brand is experienced relationally, in Fournier's sense but is simultaneously known by the consumer to be a strategically managed corporate construction rather than a person with a genuine, singular history, the relational trust Fournier's framework describes has a structurally weaker foundation than trust extended toward an actual individual narrator, precisely the gap the narrative and influencer literature reviewed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5 addresses.

Narrative Transportation and Self-Brand Connection

Escalas [7] narrative processing research found that consumers exposed to brand content structured as a story engage in self-referencing, connecting story elements to their own autobiographical experience, at significantly higher rates than consumers exposed to argument-based content conveying identical factual claims and that this self-referencing process produces stronger, more durable brand attitudes specifically because the resulting attitude is now integrated into the consumer's own self-narrative rather than remaining an external evaluative judgment about the brand. Escalas and Bettman [19] related work on self-construal and brand meaning found that this narrative-driven self-brand connection is moderated by a consumer's reference-group associations, with

consumers more likely to form a strong self-brand connection with a brand's narrative when the story aligns with or aspirationally represents, a group the consumer identifies with or aspires to join. Green and Brock [8] transportation theory supplies the underlying mechanism for why this narrative route bypasses much of the source-credibility skepticism the brand-authenticity literature documents: A consumer cognitively "transported" into a story allocates attention and cognitive resources to following the narrative rather than to evaluating the truth-value or strategic motive of its source, a reduced-scrutiny state that operates largely independently of whatever institutional skepticism the same consumer might otherwise hold toward the entity telling the story. This combination directly explains the pattern this paper terms post-authenticity marketing: narrative transportation can generate trust and attitude change even among consumers who, if asked directly and analytically, would express considerable skepticism toward the sponsoring brand's authenticity claims, because the narrative mode of engagement and the analytic, source-evaluating mode of engagement are, per Green and Brock's model, largely distinct cognitive processes rather than sequential stages of a single evaluation.

Influencer and Creator Marketing as Empirical Demonstration

De Veirman *et al.* [9] Instagram influencer study found that consumers extended measurably greater trust and purchase intention toward product endorsements delivered by individual creators through personal accounts than toward functionally identical claims delivered by official brand accounts and specifically identified perceived authenticity of the personal narrative relationship, rather than follower count or account size alone, as the strongest predictor of this trust differential. Audrezet *et al.* [10] subsequent qualitative analysis of how influencers manage authenticity under the commercial pressure of sponsored content identified two distinct authenticity-preservation strategies, passionate authenticity, in which the influencer frames sponsored content as a genuine extension of pre-existing personal interest and transparent authenticity, in which the influencer explicitly acknowledges the commercial relationship while asserting continued personal endorsement, finding that audiences responded more favorably to the transparent strategy specifically when it was paired with a consistent personal narrative voice maintained across both sponsored and unsponsored content. Moulard *et al.* [20] study of what makes a human brand, an individual public figure functioning as a branded entity, feel authentic to audiences found that perceived authenticity in this context depended heavily on consistency between a figure's public narrative and their observed behavior over time, a longitudinal consistency requirement considerably harder for a

corporate brand, which lacks a single continuous narrating voice, to satisfy in the same way an individual creator can.

Synthesis: The Relocation, Not Abandonment, of Authenticity as a Consumer Concern

Read together, the literature reviewed in Sections 2.1 through 2.5 does not support the conclusion that consumers have become indifferent to authenticity; Beverland and Farrelly [2] and Napoli *et al.* [13] foundational work indicates authenticity remains a genuine, structurally stable consumer goal state, valued for the identity-control, connection and virtue benefits it confers. What the more recent literature documents instead is a relocation of where consumers seek to satisfy this goal: Away from the institutional brand claim, which Grayson and Martinec [4] iconic-indexical framework and Newman and Dhar [16] contagion evidence indicate is structurally vulnerable to skepticism once recognized as strategically deployed and toward the individually narrated story, which Escalas [19] self-referencing evidence and Green and Brock [8] transportation theory indicate engages a different, less critically scrutinized cognitive route to trust. The influencer-marketing evidence reviewed in Section 2.5 demonstrates this relocation operating at commercial scale rather than as a purely theoretical possibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive and comparative research design synthesizing foundational and applied consumer behaviour, branding and narrative-persuasion literature. Reviewed works were compared along three dimensions: the specific trust object examined (the institutional brand, the narrative artifact or an individual creator/narrator); the theoretical mechanism proposed to explain trust formation or erosion (indexical versus iconic authenticity judgment, relational brand-trust schema or narrative transportation and self-referencing) and where available, empirical evidence on the resulting consumer trust or behavioural outcome.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trust Objects, Mechanisms and Vulnerability to Skepticism

Table 1 sets out the three distinct trust objects the reviewed literature identifies, brand institution, narrative artifact and individual creator, against the mechanism through which each generates consumer trust and its documented vulnerability to skepticism once that mechanism is recognized as strategically deployed.

The pattern in Table 1 indicates that vulnerability to skepticism scales with the structural difficulty of maintaining Grayson and Martinec [4] indexical authenticity criterion: An institution, by its scale and multiplicity of authors and departments, cannot easily

Table 1: Trust Objects, Generating Mechanisms and Vulnerability to Skepticism

Trust Object	Trust-Generating Mechanism	Documented Vulnerability	Key Sources
Institutional brand	Indexical/iconic authenticity claims; relational brand-trust schema	High: Exposed strategic intent triggers contagion effect across unrelated attributes	Grayson and Martinec [4]; Fournier [18]; Newman and Dhar [16]
Narrative artifact	Transportation-driven reduced counter-argument; self-referencing elaboration	Moderate: Depends on narrative coherence and self-relevance, less on source scrutiny	Green and Brock [8]; Escalas [7]
Individual creator/narrator	Perceived longitudinal behavioral consistency; passionate or transparent authenticity performance	Lower but non-zero: Consistency demands are more manageable at individual scale than institutional scale	De Veirman <i>et al.</i> [9]; Moulard <i>et al.</i> [20]

Table 2: Brand and Creator Responses to the Relocation of Consumer Trust

Strategic Response	Description	Documented Consumer Reaction	Key Sources
Continued institutional heritage/craft signaling	Brand emphasizes founding story, method and commercial restraint	Effective when indexically verifiable; vulnerable to doppelgänger-image exposure	Beverland [12]; Thompson <i>et al.</i> [6]
Borrowed individual voice (brand-as-narrator)	Brand communication adopts first-person, personally voiced storytelling style	Partial trust transfer; still constrained by institutional scale/consistency limits	Escalas [7]; Fournier [18]
Influencer partnership with disclosed sponsorship	Individual creator explicitly discloses commercial relationship while maintaining personal narrative voice	Favorable when paired with consistent voice across sponsored/unsponsored content	Audrezet <i>et al.</i> [10]
Human-brand cultivation (founder-as-figurehead)	Individual founder or figurehead becomes the primary narrating and trust-bearing identity	Strongest documented trust transfer; requires sustained longitudinal behavioral consistency	Moulard <i>et al.</i> [20]; Holt [3]

sustain a single, continuously verifiable narrative thread, whereas an individual creator and to a lesser extent a well-constructed narrative artifact considered on its own terms, can. This structural asymmetry, rather than any inherent moral difference between corporate and individual communicators, plausibly accounts for much of the trust differential De Veirman *et al.* [9] documented empirically between brand-account and influencer-account endorsements.

A Comparative Look at Authenticity-Signaling Strategies and Their Documented Effectiveness

Having established why trust has relocated, it is worth examining directly how brands and creators have attempted to respond to this relocation, since the literature documents several distinct strategic responses rather than a single uniform adaptation. Audrezet *et al.* [10] transparent-versus-passionate authenticity distinction, reviewed in Section 2.5, represents one axis of this response but a second, brand-level axis appears across the literature as well: Some brands have attempted to appropriate the narrative-trust mechanism directly by adopting first-person, individually voiced communication styles, effectively borrowing the creator-trust structure rather than competing against it, while others have continued to rely on institutional authenticity claims of the kind Beverland [12] heritage-and-craft framework describes. Table 2 summarizes these distinct strategic responses alongside the documented consumer reaction each has produced in the reviewed literature.

The strategies in Table 2 are not mutually exclusive and several brands documented across the reviewed influencer-marketing and human-brand literature pursue more than one simultaneously but the general pattern across both tables is consistent: Strategies that most closely approximate an individual, continuously verifiable narrating voice, human-brand cultivation particularly, report the strongest documented trust outcomes, while strategies retaining a purely institutional voice remain most exposed to the contagion and doppelgänger-image risks Thompson *et al.* [6] and Newman and Dhar [16], respectively document [3,20].

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the evidence in Table 1 and 2 supports characterizing the phenomenon this paper terms post-authenticity marketing not as consumers abandoning authenticity as a value but as a rational, if often only partially conscious, redirection of trust toward the object structurally best equipped to sustain Grayson and Martinec [4] indexical authenticity standard. Escalas [7] and Green and Brock [8] narrative-processing evidence explains the cognitive mechanism enabling this redirection, narrative engagement reduces the kind of source-credibility scrutiny that has become increasingly severe for institutional brand claims specifically, while

Newman and Dhar [16] contagion finding explains why that scrutiny, once triggered, is so costly for a brand once it is triggered. The influencer and human-brand evidence reviewed in Sections 2.5 and 4.2 demonstrates this redirection operating at real commercial scale, with the strongest documented trust outcomes concentrated specifically in the strategies, disclosed influencer partnership and founder-figurehead cultivation, that most closely approximate individual, continuously narratable authenticity rather than institutional, multiply-authored brand identity [9,10,20]. This pattern carries an important implication the reviewed literature has not yet fully addressed empirically: If narrative and creator-based trust is valuable specifically because it has not yet accumulated the skepticism history institutional brand authenticity has, Rose and Wood [14] paradoxical-consumption finding and Newman and Dhar [16] contagion mechanism both suggest this advantage is unlikely to be permanent, since the same commercial incentive that led brands to strategically deploy authenticity claims and thereby erode their credibility, applies with equal force to narrative and influencer content once its persuasive value becomes widely recognized and consequently more heavily commercially exploited.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature underlying a documented shift in consumer trust from brand-level authenticity claims toward narrative- and creator-based trust, a phenomenon this paper terms post-authenticity marketing. The evidence indicates that this shift does not reflect declining consumer interest in authenticity as a value, since the foundational authenticity-in-consumption literature confirms this remains a stable, structurally important consumer goal but rather reflects a relocation of trust toward the object best structurally equipped to satisfy the indexical authenticity standard consumers apply: An individually narrated story or creator, whose continuity and singular voice can be verified over time in a way an institutional brand's multiply-authored, strategically managed identity increasingly cannot. Narrative transportation theory and self-referencing research explain the specific cognitive mechanism through which this narrative-based trust operates largely independently of the institutional skepticism a consumer might simultaneously hold toward the sponsoring brand and the influencer-marketing and human-brand literature demonstrates this mechanism generating measurable commercial outcomes at scale. The strategic responses brands have adopted in reaction, from continued heritage signaling through borrowed individual voice to full founder-figurehead cultivation, show a consistent pattern in which strategies most closely approximating individual, continuously verifiable narration report the strongest documented trust outcomes.

Future Work

Future research should prioritize longitudinal tracking of narrative- and creator-based trust specifically, to establish whether this trust object follows the same skepticism trajectory Thompson *et al.* [6] and Newman and Dhar [16] documented for institutional brand authenticity once narrative and influencer marketing become more heavily and visibly commercially exploited, since the theoretical mechanism underlying this paper's argument suggests no principled reason narrative-based trust should remain permanently exempt from the same contagion dynamic. Further work is needed to extend Escalas [7] self-referencing methodology directly into influencer and human-brand contexts specifically, since the existing narrative-transportation evidence base was developed predominantly using brand-authored story content rather than individually narrated creator content and it remains an open empirical question whether the self-referencing mechanism operates identically across these two narrative sources. Continued research should also examine whether Audrezet *et al.* [10] transparent-authenticity strategy retains its documented effectiveness as sponsored-content disclosure becomes increasingly regulatorily mandated and therefore less a voluntary trust signal than a compliance requirement. Finally, future work should investigate whether Moulard *et al.* [20] founder-figurehead model of human-brand authenticity remains viable at the organizational scale many companies eventually reach or whether the longitudinal behavioral consistency this model requires becomes structurally unsustainable once a founder-led brand grows beyond the scale at which a single individual can remain its sole, continuously visible narrating voice.

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