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A Multi-Dimensional Framework for the Development of Authentic Consumer Products

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ABSTRACT

A common assumption in product value literature is that authenticity is what contemporary consumers value the most. However, as this paper illustrates, the meaning of authenticity is unclear, and the term appears foreign to product development practitioners. The purpose of this paper is to explore in what ways product development professionals talk about product value in general and how this relates to authenticity. The analysis of the interviews reveals that product developers must embrace authenticity as a holistic framework if the phenomenon is to be constructive for companies within the product development industry. In line with the concept of authenticity as a multi-dimensional framework, this paper suggests that authenticity does not solely result from certain intrinsic tangible or intangible product characteristics, and that commercially strong products and brands do not automatically become “authentic”.

The contribution of this paper to the product development field is a framework for a multi-dimensional construct of authenticity, and an account of what representatives within selected companies talk about when asked about how they create consumer value, and how they contribute

to valuable consumer experiences. The findings are analysed and discussed in the context of literature on product development, brand management and marketing management.

JEL classification: D47, M11, M31

Keywords: brand value, product value, product authenticity, brand authenticity, authentic design, consumer value.

1. INTRODUCTION

Delivering high consumer value to the contemporary consumer market has been described as equivalent to delivering authentic experiences (Brown et al., 2003, p. 21; Boyle, 2004; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Potter, 2010). These highly valued experiences emanate from authentic brands and their authentic goods (Beverland, 2005a; Beverland, 2005b). Companies are told how important it is to be authentic, and relevant aspects of authenticity are brought forth (Authentic 100, 2017; Lewis & Bridger, 2001; Martinec, 2004). However, what companies must do to generate authentic experiences remains partly unclear. Authentic experiences are a holistic phenomenon comprising everything that a consumer might encounter with a company and their products (Steiner & Hermon, 2009, p. 2071).

It is fairly well established what consumers seek in products (Beverland, 2006a; Beverland, 2006b; Hanna, 2011; Ulwick, 2005). Available research has not, however, described how authenticity relates to product value within the product development domain. The concept of authenticity has not been examined in relation to input from product development practitioners. Advice, given to companies which pursue the goal of being experienced as authentic, that does not consider authenticity in a holistic way may lead to unbalanced priorities within the product development process. This paper has the ambition to address this condition.

1.1. The Aims of this Paper

In order to get a more complete understanding of authenticity as a major value within the product development domain, the first aim of this paper is to investigate what issues engineers, designers and marketing managers within product development discuss when asked how they perceive valuable consumer products and experiences. As such, this paper focuses on giving a company perspective on consumer value.

The second aim is to suggest a framework behind the development of valuable consumer products and experiences that are related to authenticity as it is understood by the industry and product development literature. The results are intended to assist the product development industry in the future.

This paper is organised as follows: Firstly, the literature review section will define the state of the research field and explain why it is important to further investigate authenticity within product development. After this, the research method and the manner of coding the collected data will be accounted for. Finally, the results will be presented and analysed in order to explore and discuss theory and a new framework in relation to existing research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Authenticity

According to Potter (2010), finding the authentic in life has become the foremost quest of our time equalling the search for the Holy Grail. What counts as authentic, and why, is suggested to be one of the most pressing questions facing both producers and consumers (Potter, 2010).

Martinec (2004) argues that authenticity is a key component of contemporary life. It has also been purposed that the most recent market is intimately entwined with debates about product authenticity and that there has been an “explosive growth in ideological importance” of what is regarded as most authentic or inauthentic in society at large (Hartman, 2002; Filitz et al., 2013, p. 1). According to Lewis and Bridger (2001), there has been a switch of consumer value from scarcity to abundance, and from abundance to authenticity. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007), our contemporary economy has moved in even finer steps from scarcity to abundance, from abundance to cost, from cost to quality and finally from quality to authenticity.

In an extensive American survey from 2007, respondents were asked to pick from a list of words that best defined the word authentic. 61% chose “genuine”, and 19% opted for “real” (Zogby, 2008).

Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 49) suggest five major forms of authenticity with a focus on consumer value:

1. The first is *natural authenticity*, and it refers to customers’ perception of things that exist in their natural state as authentic. The pure, the raw, the unaltered or unpolished, the organic and the untamed. We see natural elements such as earth, water, air, wind and fire promoted on numerous products, all in order to appeal to natural authenticity.
2. Secondly, *original authenticity* is about products that possess originality in their form, function or brand. This form of authenticity lies close to the lexical definition. Historically, to claim that a product is “authentic” has been to say that it is what it claims to be. An “authentic” diamond is a diamond found in the crust of the earth, and an “authentic” Louis Vuitton bag is an “original” bag made by Louis Vuitton and no one else. This form of authenticity was in later years referred to also as indexical authenticity (Grayson, 2004). A recreation or copy can, however, also be authentic. Grayson (2004) suggests the term “iconic authenticity” for physical manifestations that resemble something that is authentic.
3. Thirdly, Gilmore and Pine describe *exceptional authenticity*. It concerns services and a broader context of offerings that may be experienced as unauthentic or authentic depending on how exceptionally well these services are carried out.
4. Fourthly, *referential authenticity* is experienced if a product or service refers to some other desirable context, drawing inspiration from human history, or taps into shared memories and longings.
5. Finally, *influential authenticity*. It influences higher entities, calling to higher goals and aspirations of, for example, a cleaner planet, or a better way to live. A coffee offering may feel more authentic if the paper mug has a panda or Fairtrade logo on it just because this connects to a higher cause of our inner aspirations (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Other researchers have found additional factors such as the personal goals of consumers to underpin the meaning of authenticity. According to Beverland and Farrelly (2009), these “self-relevant assessments of authenticity” are control, connection and virtue. The first is related to products that fulfil consumers’ desire to feel in control and to master their environment. The second is related to consumers’ desire to be connected to important others, to community, culture and society at large. This goal connects to Gilmore and Pine’s (2007) “referential authenticity” as described above. The last of Beverland and Farrelly’s (2009) consumer goals is virtue. It is

concerned with morals, purity of motive and appears to be similar to Gilmore and Pine's (2007) "influential authenticity".

2.2. Authenticity in Consumer Products and Product Development

As described in the previous section, researchers define authenticity quite differently. This, in itself, is confusing, but the state of affairs gets even more problematic when attempts are made to describe how "the authentic" is embodied in the context of consumer products. Over 30 different forms of product qualities related to "authentic products" have been documented (Kristav, 2016). Nevertheless, attempts have been made to solve the problem by redefining authenticity by using different terminology. An example of such an attempt, from the field of marketing, is to introduce the word "aura" (Björkman, 2002; Alexander, 2009). Instead of a product being authentic, they suggest that a product has an aura. This aura has been assigned a market value.

Advice given to companies about establishing and maintaining authenticity has often been confusing and superficial. Brand development consultancies give advice such as: "Projecting an aura of authenticity impresses consumers, attracts clients, and helps to keep employees engaged" (Workdesign, 2014). Attempts have been made to assess to what degree consumers experience products as authentic by using analogue scales (Kristav et al., 2012). It remains unclear, however, if the consumers' definition of authenticity is equivalent to the definition researchers use. According to Napoli (Napoli et al., 2014, p. 1090), there are no exact scales to measure the meaning of authenticity, and there are no empirical studies presenting pragmatic insights of how companies have maintained images of authenticity over time (Beverland, 2005a, p. 461). What is perceived as authentic is also, in part, ideologically driven and arbitrarily assessed (Boyle, 2004). In short; the term "authenticity" remains problematic (Beverland, 2005b, p. 1006), and it has been regarded with suspicion and as being utopic (Potter, 2010).

2.3. Authenticity in Branding

If one looks at the fields of product development and the discipline of brand management, brands are perceived through products, services and how these offerings are marketed. Product association with branding has been shown to play an increasingly important role in the commercial success of premium mass-market products (Ranscombe, 2012). However, scientific publications about authenticity that are relevant and helpful to the field of product development are scarce. One has to turn to marketing and brand management literature to find research in this area.

The suggestions about what authenticity is, in the context of products and brands, are numerous, complicated and span over many fields (Grayson, 2002). Beverland has gone as far as stating that there is no generally acceptable definition for the term authenticity that is applicable to brands and branded products (Beverland, 2005b, p. 1006). There are, however, agencies and communication businesses on the global market that list which brands are the most authentic (Authentic 100, 2017; Marketing charts, 2017; Cohn & Wolfe, 2014). Whether these listings are doing anything more than just listing the most profitable brands on the market might be debateable. What Cohn & Wolfe (2014) claim to do is offering companies valuable and detailed mapping about what authenticity in business is today. Further, they claim to canvas what corporate behaviours are valued in authentic brands, and what issues will most likely damage brand authenticity. Through their data, they claim to provide a full understanding of the mind-set of the global consumer. Their slogan is "*Being authentic is now the ultimate crisis preparedness for brands*". This and similar catchphrases like "*Authenticity: What consumers really want*", promote authenticity as important for brand managers and product developers.

It is not feasible to give an unabridged account of all the strategic advice given to companies in order for them to be experienced as authentic. The essence of the strategies will, however, be

given below. The examples are here so the reader can relate them to the interview results and the discussion section.

Beverland (2005a) states that companies must show integrity, moral legitimacy and downplay commercial motives to be experienced as authentic. Beverland (2005b) adds that companies also need to be experienced as unique, original and sincere in everything they do. Beverland (2009) advises companies to stick to their roots, to communicate devotion and love for what they do, to be one with the community, to engage staff into brand values, to be genuine and know whom they are, to know their consumers and their market well, to be open, honest and to lead by example. Alexander (2009), Kissmetrics (2016) and Brand Alpha (2017) further point out the importance of showing consistency. In addition, Boyle (2004) suggests the following: Make it personal, maximise human contact, split up the organisation, be yourself, beware of traditions, provide customers with choices, create real places, encourage social innovation, tell stories, commit to culture and tradition. Along similar lines, Lewis (2001) agrees about the importance of having a story to tell and nurture a cult about the company. He also stresses the importance of being trustworthy and giving the consumers the possibility of self-actualisation (Lewis, 2001). Kissmetrics (2016) suggests companies be charitable, be clear/avoid mixed messages, be real and true to themselves, know their limits, mean what they say and back it up, be responsive, respect privacy, be accountable, be resilient and patient, highlight their reputation, show their history and nurture and have a dialogue with their consumers. Finally, Brand Alpha (2017) connects to earlier advice by stating that brands should aspire to higher purposes that “feel authentic”.

2.4. Product Value and Perceived Consumer Value

Product value depends on how consumers value products on the market. Consumer value derives from the utilitarian tangible functions of products and from the intangible experiences that they arouse (Steiner & Harmon, 2009, p. 2071). Different practices and fields of research present numerous alternatives to product value and perceived value (Sánchez-Fernández & Iñiesta-Bonillo, 2007; Holbrook, 1999). Which one to choose is driven by circumstantial objectives. This paper agrees with suggestions that see consumer value as a complex multi-dimensional concept embracing all the perceptions a consumer may experience that influence product value (Sánchez-Fernández & Iñiesta-Bonillo, 2007).

Researchers have sought to define intangible value, but it is still a hot topic of debate today because of its somewhat abstract properties (Driskill, 2015a). Although the exact definition is disputed, it is widely agreed upon that an intangible value has no standard metric and is strictly qualitative. Thus, the concept of product function is diverse and partly non-physical. Examples of such product functions are those that fulfil social recognition or aesthetic goals (Crilly, 2010). Baruch Lev sums up the complexity by saying: “An intangible asset, like any other asset (a machine or a rental property), is a source of future benefits, but in contrast with tangible assets, intangibles lack a physical embodiment” (Kempf-Leonard, 2005, pp. 299–300).

When consumers choose between products, they may predict perceived value, but during use they actually experience received consumer value (Woodruff, 1997, p. 141). Raaij points out that it is on the basis of usage, rather than on the basis of production or purchase, that our personal identity is created (Raaij, 1993, p. 558). It is through our consumption activities and other preferences that we identify ourselves rather than through our professions (Raaij, 1993, p. 558). It is through this (re)presentation of self-image(s) of ourselves that we begin to conceive “the self” as a valuable and marketable entity to be promoted, positioned and customised as a product (Firat et al., 1995, p. 40).

The advent of relationship marketing is a response to these societal changes (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2002; Iglesias et al., 2011). Relationship marketing has come to include consumer relationships and the relationship networks established by companies that influence the life

of consumers as producers of consumer experiences (Moller & Halinen, 2000). Examples of such relationship marketing strategies that claim to create authenticity include the experiences that form when a company starts supporting a local community (Smith, 2017; Gilmore & Pine, 2007, pp. 72–77; Beverland, 2009) or creates company-associated places for people to meet (Boyle, 2004). The provision and maximisation of human contact and dialogue in situations when consumers interact with companies and their products has also become a maxim for brand-associated authenticity (Boyle, 2004; Kissmetrics, 2016).

3. METHOD

3.1. The Interviews

Three medium-sized companies (*market leaders in their segments*) with strong reputations for developing branded products with a high consumer value, typically associated with authenticity, in their respective markets, have been studied. They were chosen as they are strong representatives of these particular characteristics. Their main facilities are situated in the centre of Scandinavia. Their market is, however, global. The companies were Thule, Ifö and Bang & Olufsen (see Figure 1).

Thule manufactures sports and cargo products that make it easier for consumers to live an active life. The company offers roof boxes for cars, carriers for cycling transport, luggage and hiking backpacks, tents for motorhomes and caravans, strollers and child seats. Ifö is a producer of bathroom fixtures. It offers most products for furnishing bathrooms such as toilets, washbasins and shower cabins. Bang & Olufsen produces electronic technology for home environments. It offers a broad range of audio and screen technology.

An engineer, a designer and a marketing manager in each company were interviewed, each responsible for their respective departments. The total number of interviewees was, thus, nine. They were between 35–64 years old; eight of them were men, and they had been working in their positions for between 5–32 years. The companies volunteered all the interviewees. The three engineers were all in-house employees, two of the designers and two of the marketing managers were members of in-house staff. Consequently, two of the interviewees worked for independent design and marketing management agencies outside the companies. These interviewees were in charge of collaboration regarding the projects discussed. The collaboration with these agencies had been ongoing for over 5 years.

Figure 1

The three companies under study in this research

	R&D	Production	Markets	Export	Employees	Turnover
B&O	Stuer, Copenhagen in Denmark	The Czech Republic	Global	90%	1690	350 million Euros
Thule	Anderstorp, Malmö in Sweden and in the USA	Europe, the USA and South America	Global	90%	2200	500 million Euros
Ifö	Bromölla in Sweden	Sweden	Europe	60%	700	200 million Euros

Source: Figure data from 2016.

A specific in-depth interview method was chosen in an attempt to hamper the common tendency to use new empirical data to only confirm already formed theoretical preconceptions. The measure applied to mitigate this tendency was to use a grounded theory method to carry out the interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory enables the researcher to “ground” hypothesis in empirical data.

Within grounded theory, interviews are often conducted with a specific type of semi-structured interviewing technique named intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 55–82). The positive characteristics of intensive interviewing is a combination of flexibility and control. Its objective is to let the interview cover certain areas of interest in a gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores the *interviewee's* own perspective and personal experience within the research topic. Open-ended questions are meant to elicit a loose structure, and questions work merely as a guiding foundation for the interviews. The interviewees were asked to cover the main question area about product value, and the questions were constructed along the lines of “Tell me something about product value ...” or “How would you describe your products...” (see appendix for the interview guide).

The interviewees were spread across different professions for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure a propagation of the interviewees within the companies; secondly, to be able to detect if representatives of various professions talked about product value differently even though they partially work together. Research shows that social collaborative work between departments is extensive and that engineers, in particular, spend a lot of time on collaborative work (Robinson, 2012). Secondly, because collaboration between different departments in a company affects the design process (Lee, 2016). Design processes are, in turn, normative (Kroes, 2002); thus, they influence product characteristics and the values that are given priority within a company.

All interviews with Swedish subjects were carried out in their native language. Interviews with subjects from Denmark were carried out in Danish or English. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English (*The authors/transcribers were fluent in all these languages*). This methodological procedure is well established within similar research study contexts (Person, 2016).

Before the interviews started, each of the three companies was asked to choose one of their recent products to talk about. Conducting interviews in this fashion allows the interviewees to tell stories in a more independent way than if fed with continuous questions from an interviewer (Rooney, 2016; Lloyd, 2000). The companies all chose products that had not yet been launched at the time the interviews were carried out. Thule selected its latest bike carrier platform VeloSpace 917/918. Ifö selected its new rim free toilet series Spira. Bang & Olufsen selected its new product solution that enables old passive Bang & Olufsen loudspeakers to become active and controlled directly via a mobile phone.

3.2. Analysis and Coding of the Interviews

In this paper, a qualitative approach inspired by grounded theory was chosen to explore research questions. It was selected because qualitative research is well known for addressing the questions “how” and “why” informants experience a phenomenon under study (Yin, 2002). The interviews were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, pp. 105–112). It resembles the Charmaz method of creating categories in order to find underlying meaning (Charmaz, 2014). This form of “bottom-up” theoretical coding is used within grounded theory to facilitate finding patterns in collected data, as its structured coding paradigm facilitates the development of conceptual categories that, in turn, result in theories about the content (Holton, 2010).

The qualitative content analysis method was chosen as it is well suited to investigate explorative research questions. The qualitative content analysis presents a well-arranged overview

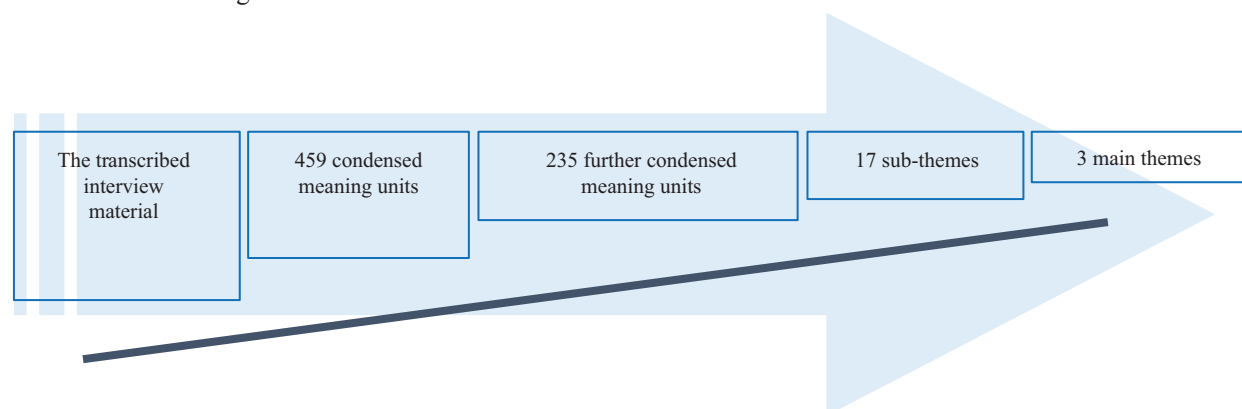
of interview results at the same time as it facilitates and elicits the discovery of underlying content structure and meaning. In this way, the reduction of the data complies with Miles and Huberman's (1994) iterative principles of data analysis based on coding emerging from the empirical findings (*in-vivo coding*) that places emphasis on the spoken words of the interviewees in combination with the formation of themes identified through the review of relevant literature (*a priori-categories*). See Figure 2.

Emergent theory has, in this way, ensued from the process of constant comparison and theoretical sampling. The purpose of this comparison has been to assure that the data supports new emerging categories and themes that have been created (Glaser, 2003, p. 24). Strauss and Corbin (1998) have suggested a hierarchical structure of coding levels. This involves clustering groups of codes that share similar meaning into more abstract categories. With this comes a reduction of the coded data that enables the formulation of theory with a smaller number of higher level categories (Glaser, 1994). In accordance with this procedure, the sentences collected in the interviews have been transformed into condensed meaning units. An example of such a condensed meaning unit is "Looks integrated/fit in its context with adjacent products". An example of one of the three sentences from the interviews that constituted this condensed meaning unit is: "*Well, it is a product family that has to be attractive in all its parts, but that has to hold together from a form perspective*".

Each condensed meaning unit was assigned a frequency-number indicating how many times it had been mentioned during the interviews and whether it had been mentioned by engineers, designers or by marketing interviewees. The condensed meaning units with similar content were merged and reduced into further condensed meaning units. Each condensed meaning has only been used in one further condensed meaning unit; the one with the best fit. The further condensed meaning units were then grouped together in interpreted sub-themes according to content similarities. An example of such an interpreted sub-theme is "Intangible product experience". All further condensed meaning units that described intangible product experiences were assigned to the same interpreted sub-theme. These sub-themes were, in turn, grouped into main themes. For example, all sub-themes that mainly concerned product characteristics were assigned to the same main theme (see Figure 2). This procedure for coding interviews according to theme resembles bookmarking and is, according to Flick (2007, p. 144), one of the most common ways to categorise interview content.

Figure 2

The established procedure for reducing interview data into meaning units and themes in order to find underlying structure and meaning



Source: own research 2018.

3.3. Validity and Reliability

The qualitative method is a well-established approach to studying actors within product development management. The generalisability of the data generated through qualitative interviews carried out at the three companies is limited from a quantitative point of view. The qualitative data obtained through studies does, however, constitute valid examples of situated reality (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). Hence, it is a sound assumption to propose transferability of the results to a far greater number of companies with similar context characteristics to those investigated.

Counting interview content has been described as a common practice that helps researchers to see what interview content is about (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 245–246). It is, however, arguable that the importance of the content in an interview is not fully correlated with the number times an interviewee mentions that particular content. Nevertheless, the fact that different interviewees have associated a certain content independently and repeatedly indicates the strength and relevance of that particular content (Krippendorff, 2013).

The validity of the condensed meaning units in this study has been tested. A cross-check of the coding scheme has been made by another coding person with focus on how the condensed meaning units were reduced into further condensed meaning units. The control was made in accordance with an intercoder reliability test, as presented by Lombard et al. (2002, p. 601), and a correlation of 90.4% was found. Sub-themes have been extracted from the further condensed meaning units. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of alternative formations of sub-themes to be made by other researchers. The three main themes are the furthest away from the original interviews; they are, hence, the categories that had the highest susceptibility to subjective interpretation and theoretical preconceptions. They were, thus, created in an iterative process interpreting the sub-themes in the light of theory.

Regardless of the categorisations made, and their rating and ranking, the condensed meaning units and the further condensed meaning units give an adequate account of the content that came up during the interviews.

This research addresses the subject of consumer value and consumer perception of value; yet, no consumers have been interviewed in this research. Their views on the subject are, however, presented by consumer value literature and by the interviewees who have been involved in extensive investigations into consumer value and consumer experiences pursued by the companies included in the study.

The full qualitative content analysis Excel chart is available from the author.

4. RESULTS

4.1. A Content and Frequency Analysis of the Interviews and the Created Categories

A high number of condensed meaning units under a sub-theme indicates that a theme was extensively discussed during the interviews, thus has a high significance for that particular sub-theme. The extracted sub-themes and main themes are presented in Table 1.

The main themes have been created in an attempt to extract a common meaning from the sub-themes. The procedure for achieving this reduction is delicate. In part, because each step of the reduction takes the data one step further away from the original interview data, and partly as the reduction on this level is especially susceptible to the interpretations and the intellectual framework of the authors. The first pattern observed when the sub-themes were analysed was that some of them concerned exclusively products, others concerned solely brands, whilst others

concerned consistency between the two. Further attempts were made to find a common and purposeful meaning behind this pattern.

If one examines the product-related sub-themes in Table 1 and asks why they are important for product value, one gets the following questions: Why is the intangible product experience important for the value of the product? Why is the product form language important for the value of the product? Why are the product design elements important for the value of the product, etc.? A fair answer is that they all make the product distinguishable from other products. In this way, the three main themes were extracted through reduction. Inversely, it appears plausible that the three main themes: distinguishable products with a recognisable brand, coupled with product and brand consistency have a potential to evoke valuable consumer experiences.

Table 1

The three main themes, the 17 sub-themes they were derived from, the number of condensed meaning units that constituted each sub-theme, as well as the number of times they were mentioned by the interviewees

Main theme (Interpreted)	Sub-theme (Interpreted)	Number of condensed meaning units	Times mentioned
Being distinguishable as product	Intangible product experience	22	26
	Product form language	26	36
	Product design elements	8	13
	Innovative features/novelty in product	14	24
	Tangible product performance	61	171
Being recognisable as brand	Brand experience	36	58
	Brand and product form	19	23
	General brand values	30	46
	Consumer considerations	63	88
	Brand strategies	57	79
	Brand stories/conceptions	23	31
	Product development strategies	36	48
Being consistent as product and brand	Consistency of experiences	7	10
	Consistency in products	8	13
	Consistency in product form	11	12
	Consistency in tangible product quality	13	13
	Consistency in brand values, visions and strategies	23	28

Source: own research 2018.

Table 1 shows that the sub-theme “consumer considerations” had the highest number of condensed meaning units, and that “tangible product performance” had the second highest number of such units. In the column for the number of times each sub-theme was mentioned, the same pair are still in the lead, but they have changed places, tangible product performance was mentioned about twice as often as consumer considerations. If the numbers of mentions in the main three themes are added up, we get the following:

1. First comes “Being recognisable as brand”, with 264 condensed meaning units and 373 mentions.
2. Second highest is “Being distinguishable as product”, with 131 condensed meaning units and 270 mentions.

3. “Being consistent as product and brand” is third with 62 condensed meaning units and 76 mentions.

The further condensed meaning units have also been rated depending on the total sum of times they were mentioned. The 42 most frequent of the 235 further condensed meaning units can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

An account of what came up during the interviews, displayed in the form of the most frequent further condensed meaning units

Sub-theme (interpreted)	Further condensed meaning units	E*	D*	M*	Total
Intangible product experience	It is about the product experience	1	3	7	11
Product form language	Product must be aesthetics	0	8	2	10
Product design elements	New design of parts	4	2	1	7
Innovative features/novelty in product	Develop new technical features	4	0	1	5
Tangible product performance	Product has unique functionality	0	3	2	5
	Better product performance/functionality	12	7	6	25
	High tangible product quality	3	6	4	13
	Product robustness/reliability	15	3	0	18
	Greater product versatility	12	1	4	17
	Adapting to new specifications	2	1	2	5
	Live up to technical standards	5	0	5	10
	Meet practical needs of consumers	4	2	3	9
	Easy to install and serve	2	1	2	5
	Easier to handle/use, operate, simple, intuitive	7	4	2	13
	Ease of use is important	2	3	0	5
Brand experience	See new product in relation to brand portfolio	6	1	3	10
	We create quality associations to maintain the brand	1	1	5	7
	Steer brand associations in intended direction	0	1	4	5
	Our consumers experience safety	1	4	3	8
	Provide positive shopping experience	2	3	5	10
	We supply valuable advice to our consumers	2	1	4	7
Brand and product form	Adapt design to brand value	4	5	3	12
General brand values	We maintain high quality specifications	5	1	0	6
	Employees personally devoted/passionate users of product category	2	4	2	8
	We are creative/sensitive to trends, have visions	5	0	1	6
	We stand for active lifestyle	4	0	4	8
	We build on insight/solve real needs	1	3	1	5

Sub-theme (interpreted)	Further condensed meaning units	E*	D*	M*	Total
Consumer considerations	Listen to voice of the consumers/ expectations	5	5	7	17
	Adapt to consumer perspective	4	1	1	6
	Products signal consumer identity	0	4	1	5
	Consumers show solidarity, trust and love to our brand and our products	3	8	5	16
	Consumers associate us with high quality	0	2	5	7
Brand strategies	Initiative to find emotional links, build associations to the brand	1	2	7	10
	Marketing through earned media /good reviews from others	0	1	5	6
Brand stories/conceptions	We are a strong brand with high brand value	3	2	1	6
	We have positive, strong/bright future	2	3	5	10
	Our high quality and heritage is our strongest assets	0	1	4	5
Product development strategies	Drive development according to plan, in intended direction	3	0	2	5
	Getting consumer activity orientation closer to emotions than solving technical task	0	5	1	6
Consistency in product form	Aline brand identity/values with all designed products in portfolio	2	4	0	6
Consistency in tangible product quality	We develop products that are and have to be perfect when they reach the market	3	0	2	5
Consistency in brand values, visions, strategies	Brand meaning has arisen through work with product portfolio consistency	0	1	7	8

* **E** – number of times the further condensed meaning unit was mentioned by engineers; **D** – number of times the further condensed meaning unit was mentioned by designers; **M** – number of times the further condensed meaning unit was mentioned by marketing managers

Source: own research 2018.

The further condensed meaning units in Table 2 are followed by numbers which indicate the number of times the further condensed meaning unit was mentioned by engineers, designers and marketing managers, respectively. The sub-theme of tangible product performance has the highest sum of further condensed meaning units and the highest total sum of mentions in the interviews. It comprises the further condensed meaning unit “Better product performance/functionality” with the highest frequency. It was mentioned 25 times, and 12 of those mentions came from engineers alone. Also, the second and third most frequent further condensed meanings belong to the sub-theme of tangible product performance. “Product robustness/reliability” got 18 mentions, including 15 from engineers. “Adding new product functionality” came in third place with 17 mentions, including 12 from engineers.

Two of the five further condensed meaning units mentioned 15 times or more relate directly to consumer concerns. They were “Listen to voice of the consumers/expectations” and “Consumers show solidarity, trust and love to our brand and our products”.

An additional pattern was found in the coded material when ways of creating consumer value were considered. Four major related areas of work practice have been found to which all the condensed meaning units appear to correspond. Some of the condensed meaning units may, however, be relevant to more than one of these areas. These work practice areas were firstly discovered when the further condensed meaning units were analysed in light of the literature

(*a priori*-categories) that proposes strategies to be followed by companies that want to be experienced as authentic (see under heading 2.3.). This is how the meaning behind the pattern is verified.

1. The first area concerns the conceptions that appear to reside within the investigated companies. Together they appear to form a specific **company climate or culture**. Common beliefs, values and guidelines are parts of this area. The presented literature advises companies that want to be experienced as authentic to show integrity, moral legitimacy, to be true to themselves, to be responsible and to engage staff into brand values, and the sub-theme “General brand values” is strongly represented in the interview material (see Table 1). The two strongest further condensed meaning units under this sub-theme were “*Employees personally devoted/passionate users of product category*” and “*We stand for active lifestyle*” (see Table 2).
2. The second area that emerged concerns **product characteristics**. These product characteristics consist of product tangibles and product intangibles. Product design, product functionality and innovation are examples of such product characteristics that belong to this area. The presented literature advises companies that want to be experienced as authentic to develop innovative long lasting and reliable products, made of genuine materials with a high or even superior quality, and the sub-theme “Tangible product performance” is strongly represented in the interview material as it was mentioned more often than any other sub-theme (see Table 1). The strongest further condensed meaning unit under this sub-theme was “*Better product performance/functionality*” (see Table 2).
3. The third area concerns the **relationship to the consumer**. Strategies that are formed to obtain knowledge about consumers in order to connect to them and the strategies to enhance the relation to these consumers belong to this area. Also, the strategies to strengthen the relation between the consumers as a group and to enhance the relation between the consumer and the products belong here. The presented literature advises companies that want to be experienced as authentic to develop long lasting dialogues with their consumers. To make it personal, to maximise human contact with them, to be accountable and respect the privacy of their consumers and to encourage social innovation, to be one with the community, to create real places for their consumers to create relations to the company and to each other as a group. The sub-theme “Consumer considerations” is represented by the largest number of condensed meaning units from the interview material (see Table 1). The strongest further condensed meaning unit under this sub-theme was “*Listen to voice of the consumers/expectations*” (see Table 2).
4. The fourth area concerns two fields: **brand and market management**. Even though closely interconnected, they are often divided in industrial practice. Strategies to strengthen and maintain the brand and means of promoting its products belong to this area. The presented literature advises companies that want to be experienced as authentic to develop brand and marketing strategies. Strategies given are to be consistent and clear; they need to avoid mixed messages, stick to their roots, highlight their history, nurture a cult, split up their organisation, communicate their reputation and uniqueness, stress that they are original and have a competitive edge. The sub-theme “Brand strategies” is one of the strongest as represented in the interview material (see Table 1). The strongest further condensed meaning unit under this sub-theme was “*Initiative to find emotional links, build associations to the brand*” (see Table 2).

These areas will be used as the four building blocks that will constitute the multi-dimensional framework of authenticity proposed in this paper.

5. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

5.1. Discussion about the Categories and their Score

Looking at the differences between the most frequent further condensed meaning units in Table 2, it is striking to see that the engineers focus so much more than industrial designers on giving products high tangible performance in the form of “Better product performance/functionality”, “Product robustness/reliability” and “Greater product versatility”.

The further condensed meaning unit “Adapt design to brand value” appears to have a quite even spread amongst all three questioned professions. This contradicts the traditional conception that adapting product design to align with brand value is a concern mainly amongst marketing managers and possibly industrial designers. This is particularly interesting because its high score also indicates that consistency between the product, its design, and a brand is considered important.

An interesting observation is that none of the interviewees ever mentioned authenticity when describing their work practice. They used other operational concepts to describe how they created consumer value. The most prominent ones are listed in Table 2.

Another interesting observation one can make from Table 2 is that engineers are the most concerned about giving products high quality in the form of tangible performance, whilst it is the designers and marketing managers who mention that the consumer conception of those qualities, with association to the brand, is the most important. It is also the marketing managers that talk the most about content associated to intangible product qualities in relation to product value.

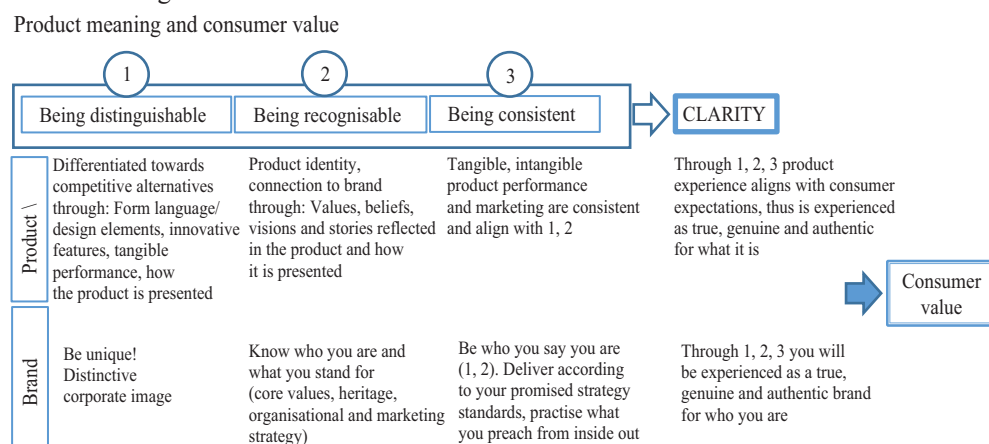
5.2. Starting to Build a New Framework of Product Value

If one looks at the main themes created in the qualitative content analysis (distinguishable, recognisable and consistent) formed from the 17 sub-themes in Table 1, the main themes align with the strategies given to companies from brand developers, consultant agencies and literature to develop and maintain strong authentic brands. Consistency between product characteristics, brand value and brand promises from the manufacturer ought to align in order to gain the favour of consumers. Consistency and resilience have been put forward by literature as important drivers behind authenticity (Kissmetrics, 2016; Brand Alpha, 2004).

Figure 3 illustrates these conditions of the main themes from the coded content analysis regarding the strategies for brands available to companies to develop and maintain strong authentic brands. The figure also includes interview data that shows what this implies on the product level.

Figure 3

How products being distinguishable, recognisable and consistent fits with advice given to companies on how to build and strengthen brands.



Source: own research 2018.

It is suggested that certain tangible and intangible qualities may well reside in products that are developed to be experienced as authentic and highly valuable. It is, however, also suggested that it is fundamentally the structure of these inert qualities in relation to the brand and its promises that constitutes the foundation for consumer value (Figure 3). This aligns with Ranscombe (2012) who concludes that a strong and meaningful brand is a decisive factor behind products that are highly valued on the mass-market.

5.3. Prelude to the Framework of Authenticity

The findings in this paper support the idea that product value is built so long as the consumer expectation is fulfilled or is slightly exceeded (Hanna, 2011; Iqbal, 2011). From this, it follows that a product may be experienced as highly valuable, even though it might be of inferior tangible quality, provided that there is consistency in how the product is presented, how the producer of this product presents itself, and the consumer expectations of that particular offer. This reflection is supported when the results are compared to the literature that exemplifies advice given to companies that want to be experienced as authentic (Beverland, 2005a; Beverland, 2009; Boyle, 2004; Kissmetrics, 2016; Lewis, 2001). These conditions are further elucidated in Figure 3.

Thus, the unauthentic exists exclusively in companies' active, routine-like or unconscious deception of consumers. Claiming that a product or a brand is something that it is not is to be inconsistent and, thereby, unauthentic. This paper supports the idea that consistency is an essential part behind being authentic (see the bottom rows in Table 2.). If a company says that it delivers value, it must confirm this in a trustworthy manner in all that it does, or consumer trust and, eventually, positive meaning and value are lost. Reflections of this kind have also been made by other authors (e.g. Boyle, 2004; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Potter, 2010). Pine (2004) exemplifies this principle when he says: *"If you say you are authentic, you better be authentic"*.

It has been argued that a product or a brand can never truly be experienced as authentic unless it is associated with positive meanings and values (Potter, 2010, p. 6). These conditions are in accordance with Figure 3. Highly valued products must be developed with distinguishability, recognisability and consistency in relation to the brand to which they belong. Otherwise, clarity and trust are lost. Hence, it will no longer be experienced as trustworthy, genuine and real. Lack of clarity has been described as an enemy of strong authentic brands (Kissmetrics, 2016).

5.4. The Multi-Dimensional Framework of Authenticity

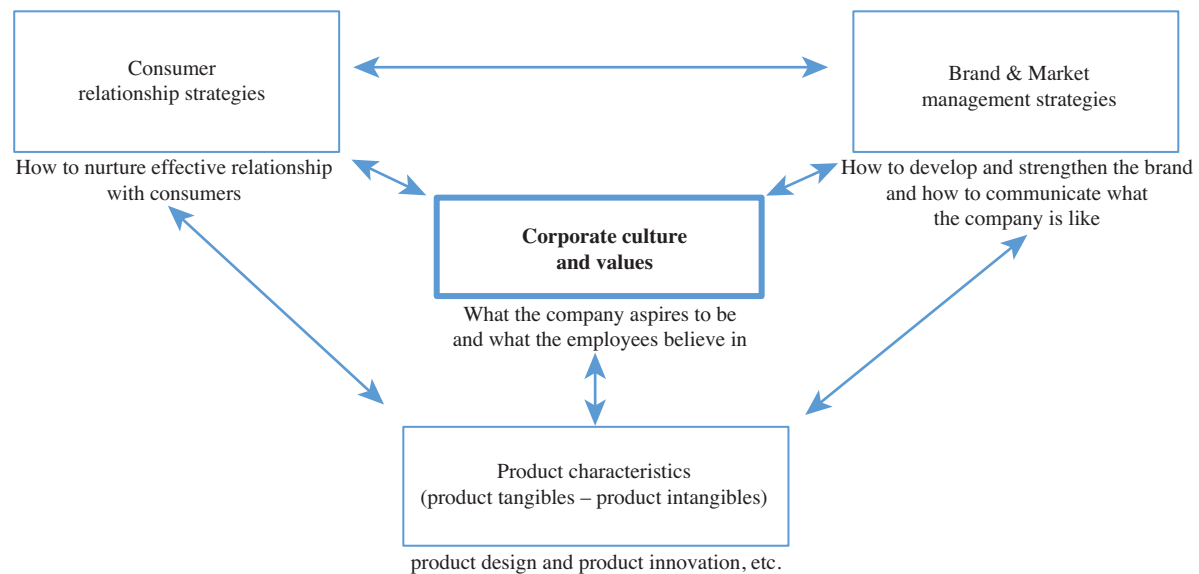
This paper attempts to present authenticity within product development as a multi-dimensional framework (Figure 4). This initial proposed framework is developed to be used as guidance in the consumer product development industry. It may, however, also have relevance for the business to business industry and, if correctly adopted, also for the service sector. The framework aligns with found literature on product authenticity and brand authenticity, and it is supported by what has come up from the company interviews (Tables 1 & 2); it aligns with Figure 3 and corresponds to the four main areas as presented above in 4.1.

Product value and authenticity are complex and ambiguous concepts comprising a great variety of aspects that have to be negotiated. The building blocks are mutably dependent on each other and must be recognisable, and distinguishable in relation to other offerings and brands. The building blocks must be consistent over time and in relation to each other. In reality the building blocks may also, to some extent, be blended with each other. The branding practices of a company that intends to generate authentic consumer experiences are, for example, mixed with the corporate values of that particular company.

Figure 4

The multi-dimensional Framework/Construct of Authenticity behind highly valued consumer products and brands within product development

The Construct of Authenticity behind highly valued consumer products and brands within product development and industrial design



Source: own research 2018.

To implement the generic framework in industry is, admittedly, a delicate act that demands clear sight, knowledge, and a unified strategy. This paper suggests that it is an insufficient practice for companies to isolate authenticity by regarding authenticity as a one-dimensional construct. All the concerned departments must be included, and all the building blocks in the framework must be thoroughly mapped and correctly understood. When this is done, each company will end up with its own unique mapping, built upon a framework that is implementable. Companies must, thus, map and evaluate all their efforts to create consumer value. If we, for example, look at the building block “consumer relations”, a company must map all their consumer relation efforts and marshal them into a consistent strategy.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper makes a contribution to the ongoing debate on authenticity by bringing together the fields of product development, brand management and marketing to enrich the knowledge of consumer value.

The paper also attempts to better understand the meaning of authenticity in the context of product development through the interviews with practitioners within product development companies. Thus, it reveals what engineers, designers and marketing managers within product development talk about when asked how they create consumer value, how they contribute to this value and how this is related to authenticity.

This paper also makes a contribution to the field by proposing a new multi-dimensional framework for authenticity that explains how product development practices relate to authenticity. This framework may help product development companies to implement new practices that help to promote the inclusion of authentic experiences to their future offerings.

To be implementable, the framework of authenticity still needs to be further validated. The first step of this further research is to analyse, in detail, how a greater number of companies that develop products with a high consumer value correspond to the framework. The second step will

be to test how such a framework can be implemented to assist product development companies in practice. The framework might, in the future, benefit from being more detailed than it is in its initial present state.

The important relation between pricing, perceived quality and value for consumers is, for example, well known and well documented (Zeithaml, 1988) but not that clearly linked to this framework. This is also stressed in condensed meaning units coming from four marketing managers in this study. Three of them are: “*Not to develop too niche or expensive products*”, “*Competitive value in relation to price and quality*” and “*Must justify the price segment we aspire to with a competitive edge*”. Yet, pricing is not explicit in the framework. And no literature has been found that explicitly discusses the relation between authenticity and pricing. Nevertheless, it is certainly there. Thorough mapping while implementing the building block of brand and marketing management strategies will, however, find that pricing is embraced in this building block. As such, the framework suggests that these pricing strategies must be consistent over time and align with the rest of the building blocks of the framework.

As mentioned in the section about validity and reliability, it can be debated to what degree the importance of interview content is correlated with the frequency with which different interviewees mention that particular content. Nevertheless, the numbers are indicators of what the interviewees have been talking about. But, perhaps, the most interesting results lie beyond the numbers. They lie in what the interview sentences really mean. On a basic level, the interviews simply mean what the interviewees say. But what has been extracted is an underlying structural meaning. This meaning is described in two different ways in this paper. Firstly, as the higher levels from the qualitative content analysis, most prominently in the form of the three main themes. And secondly, as the four major areas of work practice as described at the end of the results chapter. Together with the literature, they underpin a new framework for authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct.

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APPENDIX

The intensive interviewing themes to cover were:

1. Tell me about what drives you in developing this product!
2. How would you describe the value you add to the product?
3. What do you think renders this product special in the mind of the consumers?
4. How would you describe their appreciation?
5. Tell me something about your product development process in relation to this product!
6. Has everything become as intended?
7. What about the other departments? How do they contribute?
8. What is a successful product for you?
9. What renders a product successful?
10. Tell me something more about these products!
11. Tell me about the consumers!
12. What do they value?
13. How do you know this?
14. What do you think about the creation of consumer value?
15. Are the consumers pride owners?
16. What does the product mean to them?
17. What measures do you have in order to maintain or increase customer value for the future?
18. How do you experience the consumer image of you and what you do?
19. Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
20. Is there something else you think I should know to understand better?