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# **Strategic Communication and The Negotiation of Authenticity in Informal Market: Evidence From Onitsha Main Market, Nigeria.**

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# ABSTRACT

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## **Strategic Communication and The Negotiation of Authenticity in Informal Markets: Evidence From Onitsha Main Market, Nigeria.**

This study examines how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated through strategic communication in informal market contexts, with a focus on the Onitsha Main Market in Nigeria. While existing research often treats authenticity as a property of products or a matter of consumer perception, less attention has been paid to how it is produced through everyday market interactions. Adopting a qualitative, interpretative approach, the study draws on interview data with sellers and consumers to explore how actors make sense of authenticity-related communication situations where original and imitation goods coexist. The analysis is guided by a communicative-constructivist framework integrating social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, framing theory, and signaling theory.

The findings show that authenticity is not a fixed or verifiable attribute, but a communicative achievement shaped through strategic interaction. Rather than operating as a clear distinction between fake and original, authenticity emerged as a flexible and graded judgment shaped by consumers' expectations, intended use, and practical considerations. Sellers actively deploy communicative strategies to frame products, signal quality, and establish credibility, while consumers interpret and evaluate these claims based on experience, context, and purchasing priorities. As a result, authenticity remains negotiated, relational, and embedded in trust and everyday market conditions.

By situating authenticity within communicative practices, the study contributes to research on authenticity, strategic communication, and informal markets by demonstrating how meaning, value, and trust are produced in everyday exchange beyond formal institutional settings.

**Keywords:** *Authenticity, strategic communication, informal market, imitation goods, market interaction, Onitsha Main Market.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1. Contextual Background

In contemporary market environments, authenticity has become one of the most influential and debated ideas shaping how products are understood and valued. Traditionally, authenticity was linked to originality, verified origin, and craftsmanship. A product was considered authentic if it could be traced to a legitimate source or brand. However, in today's markets, this understanding has become more unstable. Authenticity is no longer viewed solely as an inherent product quality but as a perception shaped by interpretation, interaction, and communication (Beverland, 2005; Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

This shift reflects broader changes in consumption. Globalized production, mass-replication technologies, and the expansion of branding have blurred the boundaries between what is considered real and what is considered fake (Beverland, 2009). In saturated consumer environments, originality is often difficult to verify, and consumers rarely rely on material origin alone when evaluating products. Instead, meaning, symbolism, and communication play a central role in shaping values. Authenticity, therefore, functions less as an objective condition and more as a cultural idea that consumers seek, negotiate, and perform (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Early research on brand authenticity focused on concrete indicators such as heritage, craftsmanship, tradition, and continuity (Beverland, 2005). Later studies expanded this view by conceptualizing authenticity as a multidimensional construct involving credibility, integrity, symbolism, and perceived consistency over time (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). These perspectives emphasize that authenticity does not simply reside in products themselves. Rather, it emerges through how consumers interpret cues, narratives, and representations associated with goods and brands.

If authenticity can no longer be treated as an inherent property of products, the question becomes how it is established in practice. Addressing this requires a strategic communication perspective that views communication as a purposeful, goal-oriented activity through which actors seek to shape interpretation, influence evaluation, and establish credibility (Zerfass et al., 2018). In market environments, this is evident in sellers' active deployment of communicative strategies to position products, signal quality, and reduce uncertainty during exchange. From this perspective, authenticity is not simply perceived by consumers but is strategically communicated and negotiated through interaction.

This interpretative understanding of consumption highlights the relational nature of authenticity. Grayson and Martinec (2004) distinguish between indexical authenticity, which is based on factual origin, and iconic authenticity, which depends on symbolic resemblance. Their distinction illustrates that consumers may perceive a product as authentic even when its material origin is uncertain, as long as it conveys familiar, culturally recognized meanings. Authenticity, therefore, operates not as a fixed category but as an interpretation negotiated within specific contexts.

These dynamics become particularly visible in markets characterized by imitation and reproduction. Research on counterfeit consumption shows that consumers often purchase imitation goods knowingly, motivated by affordability, accessibility, and symbolic participation rather than deception (Gentry et al., 2001; Wilcox et al., 2009). In such settings, imitation products are not always perceived as inferior substitutes but as viable alternatives that allow participation in dominant consumption symbols. Authenticity does not disappear in these markets. Instead, it is reworked.

Banet-Weiser (2012) describes this condition as one of cultural ambivalence, in which authenticity functions as a flexible, often contradictory ideal. Within contemporary brand culture, authenticity can be claimed, questioned, performed, and negotiated. This perspective challenges simple distinctions between originals and fakes and suggests that authenticity is continuously produced through discourse and interaction rather than being guaranteed by ownership or legality.

## **1.2. Problematization**

Despite this growing recognition, much existing research still treats authenticity primarily as an outcome. Studies often focus on how brands attempt to project authenticity or how consumers assess authenticity cues through attitudes and perceptions (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). While these contributions remain important, they offer limited insight into how authenticity is produced during everyday market interactions.

This creates a conceptual gap between authenticity as an abstract social construct and authenticity as a lived, communicative process. When attention centers on brand strategy or consumer perception alone, the interactional work through which authenticity is explained, justified, contested, and negotiated during exchange remains insufficiently examined.

Addressing this gap requires a shift toward a strategic communication perspective. Rather than treating communication as a neutral channel for conveying information, strategic communication emphasizes how actors purposefully use it to shape interpretation, influence evaluation, and establish credibility within a specific context (Hallahan et al., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018). This perspective makes it possible to examine how authenticity is not only perceived but actively constructed through communicative practices embedded in interaction.

Such an approach is particularly important in informal, imitation-driven market environments, where authenticity cannot be easily verified through formal certification or institutional guarantees (Lindell, 2010). In these contexts, communication becomes a central mechanism through which sellers and consumers coordinate meaning, negotiate value, and manage uncertainty. However, research examining authenticity as a strategic and interactional accomplishment within such settings remains limited. Existing studies on authenticity and counterfeit consumption have predominantly focused on Western branding systems, ethical debates, or consumer psychology (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014). As a result, everyday interactional practices through which authenticity is negotiated in non-Western markets remain underexplored.

This limitation is significant because market communication does not operate uniformly across contexts. Cultural norms, historical trade structures, and relational communication practices shape how meaning, trust, and value are constructed. Therefore, understanding these processes requires

attention to context-specific communicative practices rather than relying on assumptions derived from formal, Western-oriented market systems.

### **1.3. Empirical Context: Onitsha Main Market**

The communicative dynamics discussed earlier have become particularly visible within informal imitation markets, where different versions of similar goods coexist openly. Informal markets are commonly understood as commercial spaces operating outside formal regulatory systems, characterized by flexible pricing, limited institutional oversight, and a strong reliance on interpersonal interaction and trust (Portes and Haller, 2005). In such settings, product legitimacy is rarely established through official certification or branding infrastructure but is instead shaped through direct interaction between sellers and consumers.

Within imitation markets, authenticity is therefore not assumed. It is actively discussed and negotiated during market exchanges. Sellers explain product differences, justify price variations, and frame quality through verbal descriptions and comparative claims. Consumers respond by questioning these framings, comparing alternatives, and assessing credibility through interaction. Authenticity emerges not through formal branding structures but through communicative practice embedded in the exchange itself.

Onitsha Main Market in southeastern Nigeria provides a particularly relevant context for examining these processes. Widely described as one of Africa's largest markets, it serves as a major commercial hub within regional and transnational trade networks (Madichie and Nkamnebe, 2010). The market is characterized by dense trading networks, high product turnover, and the open circulation of both original and imitation branded goods within the same retail spaces. Bargaining, explanation, and verbal negotiation constitute central elements of everyday commercial activity.

The marketplace thus operates not only as a site of economic exchange but as a social and communicative arena in which meaning, value, and trust are continuously negotiated. This positions Onitsha Main Market as an analytically valuable setting for examining strategic communication beyond formal organizational contexts and within culturally embedded market interactions.

#### **1.4. Aim and Research Question**

This study aims to examine how sellers and consumers make sense of authenticity-related communication in imitation markets, focusing on how actors strategically communicate, interpret, and negotiate authenticity within market exchanges in Onitsha Main Market, Nigeria. In doing so, the study explores how meaning, value, and trust are produced through these communicative processes.

The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do sellers in Onitsha Main Market strategically communicate and differentiate branded goods when authenticity is questioned?

RQ2: How do consumers interpret, evaluate, and respond to sellers' authenticity-related claims in market exchanges?

RQ3: How do sellers' and consumers' perceptions of repeated market interactions shape shared understandings of authenticity, value, and trust in market exchanges?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1. Strategic Communication as a Constitutive Practice in Market Contexts

Strategic communication has emerged as an interdisciplinary field focused on how communication is intentionally organized to shape meaning, manage relationships, and facilitate collective action within organizations and society. Instead of viewing communication as a neutral means of transmitting information, scholars see it as a constitutive process through which realities, identities, and social structures are created (Zerfass et al., 2018). From this perspective, communication not only supports strategy but also executes it.

Early approaches to strategic communication often relied on an instrumental logic, viewing communication mainly as a managerial tool to inform, persuade, or influence target audiences through planned campaigns and coordinated messaging efforts (Cornelissen, 2004). Such approaches proved useful for analyzing public relations programs, branding initiatives, and reputation management. However, critics argue that this transmission model reduces communication to a technical function and overlooks its broader social role in shaping meaning and organizing relationships (Carey, 2009). When communication is seen only as the delivery of messages, the everyday ways actors negotiate shared understanding remain hidden. Carey (2009) suggests that communication functions as a ritual process through which communities build and maintain shared realities. Similarly, the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) perspective suggests that organizations exist through ongoing interaction (Cooren et al., 2011). Communication, in this sense, does not just describe the world, it also creates social arrangements. These insights shift focus from messages to practices, from campaigns to interactions, and from transmission to meaning-making.

Strategic communication scholars expand on this shift by highlighting that construction is rarely accidental. Actors intentionally frame situations, choose symbols, and coordinate narratives to shape interpretation (Hallahan et al., 2007). Zerfass et al. (2018) define strategic communication

as the purposeful use of communication by organizations and other actors to fulfill objectives through stakeholder relationships. Likewise, Falkheimer and Heide (2018) argue that strategy unfolds not only in formal plans but also through everyday communicative practices that structure expectations and shape social order. Strategy, therefore, becomes visible in everyday interactions, not just in institutional campaigns. This reconceptualization broadens strategic communication beyond corporate public relations and frames it as a perspective for analyzing how meaning is actively constructed across various social settings.

This broader understanding is especially important when analyzing markets. Markets are often viewed mainly as economic systems driven by prices and transactions. However, sociological and communication-based research shows that markets are also spaces for communication where participants continually negotiate value, credibility, and trust (Araujo et al., 2008). Exchange depends on shared interpretations about quality, legitimacy, and worth. These interpretations are produced through talk, framing, and symbolic cues rather than being derived solely from material characteristics.

However, many studies in strategic communication continue to focus on corporations, media outlets, and formal organizations within Western regulatory systems (Cornish et al., 2011; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). This emphasis risks overlooking communicative practices that occur in less formalized economic settings, especially in the Global South. Markets in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America rely on personal networks, verbal negotiations, and reputation rather than standardized branding systems or regulatory protections. In these contexts, communication plays an even more vital role in economic coordination.

Research on informal economies offers valuable insights into this. Portes and Haller (2005) define informal markets as systems of economic exchange that operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, characterized by flexible rules, limited institutional oversight, and strong reliance on personal trust. Lindell (2010) further demonstrates that African marketplaces often rely on dense social networks, relational ties, and face-to-face interaction to facilitate trade. Instead of depending on contracts or certifications, actors establish credibility through repeated communication, reputation, and social embeddedness. These conditions enhance the strategic importance of everyday conversation. In such contexts, communication does not merely promote products; it

establishes legitimacy. Sellers must explain quality, justify prices, and signal trustworthiness directly to buyers. Consumers assess these claims in real time. The meanings of value emerge through interaction rather than through institutional guarantees. What counts as reliable or authentic, therefore, depends on communicative performance. Strategic communication becomes inseparable from the practical accomplishment of exchange itself. In markets characterized by informality and fluid regulation, communication is not supplementary to economic activity but constitutive of it.

This relational orientation also emphasizes important cultural differences. Much Western strategic communication theory presumes stable branding systems, formal corporate identities, and mass-mediated campaigns. However, studies of Global South markets show that communication often occurs through oral practices, bargaining rituals, and localized negotiation rather than standardized messaging (Lindell, 2010; Madichie and Nkamnebe, 2010).

These practices should not be seen as deviations from the formal strategic communication model. Instead, they reflect contextually embedded strategic logics shaped by local norms of trust, reciprocity, and social accountability. Strategy, in these settings, manifests as interactional competence rather than institutional infrastructure. Recognizing these differences is essential for this study. If strategic communication is narrowly understood as corporate campaigns or formal public relations activities, informal markets seem outside its scope. However, if strategic communication is viewed as the purposeful organization of meaning within social interaction (Zerfass et al., 2018), then everyday bargaining, explanation, and framing become strategic acts. Market actors constantly manage impressions, reduce uncertainty, and align expectations through communication. In this way, strategic communication functions at both the micro-level of exchange and the macro-level of organizational planning. This broader view provides the basis for analyzing authenticity within informal markets. If communication creates value and legitimacy, then perceptions of what is “real,” “original,” or “trustworthy” must also develop through communicative processes. Therefore, strategic communication offers not only a theoretical framework but also an explanatory mechanism for understanding how authenticity gains significance in everyday market life.

## 2.2. Conceptualizing Authenticity

Authenticity has emerged as a central yet contested concept across consumer research, marketing, and cultural theory, where it is frequently invoked to explain why certain products, brands, and experiences are perceived as meaningful, legitimate, or trustworthy, but remains difficult to define consistently across contexts (Beverland, 2009; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). What counts as “real,” “genuine,” or “original” varies across contexts, historical moments, and social groups. Rather than denoting a fixed property of objects, authenticity increasingly appears as an evaluative judgment produced within specific cultural and communicative settings.

Early philosophical and cultural accounts treated authenticity primarily as a moral or existential ideal. Trilling's (2009) historical analysis distinguishes between sincerity and authenticity, arguing that modern societies increasingly value expressions believed to originate from an inner, truthful self rather than from socially prescribed roles. In this formulation, authenticity is linked to naturalness, spontaneity, and the lack of calculated performance. Authenticity is seen as something that simply “is,” rather than something intentionally created. This view has shaped how authenticity is often understood in everyday language, where it is usually equated with purity, origin, or unmediated truth. However, consumer and market settings complicate this ideal. As products go through complex systems of production, branding, and mediation, the idea that authenticity can be directly verified becomes harder to maintain. Mass manufacturing, global supply chains, and symbolic branding detach goods from clear points of origin (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Under such conditions, authenticity can rarely be established through objective evidence alone, instead, it must be inferred through signs, narratives, and representations. This shift signifies a transition from viewing authenticity as an essence to understanding it as an interpretation.

Within marketing and consumer research, Beverland (2005) was among the first to systematically challenge essentialist ideas of authenticity. Studying luxury wine brands, he shows that authenticity is not just inherited from heritage or tradition but actively performed through what he described as authenticity work, which involves storytelling, selective sharing of history, and the careful management of symbolic cues. Brands seen as authentic strategically craft narratives that signal consistency, integrity, and continuity. Significantly, these practices show that authenticity does not exist independently of communication. It is built through strategic communication efforts

that persuade audiences to see a brand as genuine. In this way, authenticity becomes an achievement rather than an inherent quality.

Later research builds on this view, describing authenticity as multidimensional and perceptual rather than purely objective. Napoli et al. (2014) argue that brand authenticity comprises credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity, all of which are evaluated by consumers rather than inherent in products themselves. Similarly, Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualize authenticity as a consumer perception formed through assessments of reliability, sincerity, and value congruence. In both views, authenticity exists not in material features but in interpretative processes. A product becomes authentic when audiences judge it to be so.

Grayson and Martinec's (2004) influential distinction between indexical and iconic authenticity provides further clarity. Indexical authenticity refers to verifiable connections to a specific origin, such as historical provenance or physical traceability. Iconic authenticity, by contrast, depends on resemblance to culturally recognized meanings or expectations. Their research shows that consumers frequently rely on iconic cues even when indexical verification is absent. A replica can be perceived as authentic if it convincingly reproduces familiar signs of “realness.” These findings question the idea that authenticity relies on objective proof. Instead, authenticity develops through interpretive frameworks influenced by cultural understanding and communicative expression. These insights align closely with social constructionist approaches to meaning. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that social reality is produced and stabilized through repeated interaction and shared interpretation. Categories that seem natural or self-evident are, in fact, historically constructed through social processes. Applied to authenticity, this perspective suggests that distinctions between “real” and “fake” are not intrinsic properties of objects but outcomes of collective agreement. Within this perspective, authenticity cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between real and fake. It operates as a relational and interpretive framework through which different forms of value, credibility, quality, and symbolic meaning are negotiated. Products may be evaluated differently depending on the meanings consumers attach to them, their expectations, and the communicative processes through which these understandings are formed. Authenticity therefore, does not function as a fixed binary category.

This shift from essence to interpretation also introduces important tensions. If authenticity is socially constructed, it becomes vulnerable to strategic manipulation. Critics worry that attempts to deliberately manufacture authenticity may undermine credibility. Trilling's (2009) distinction between sincerity and performance suggests that deliberately staged expression of authenticity may appear artificial to the audience. Peterson similarly notes that authenticity loses symbolic power when audiences perceive overt orchestration or excessive staging (Peterson 1983 as quoted in Van Eijck, 2000). From this viewpoint, authenticity appears incompatible with strategy, the more intentionally the effort, the less authentic it seems. However, some research challenges this opposition. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) show that consumers are not necessarily opposed to strategic efforts to construct authenticity. Instead, they evaluate whether such efforts appear coherent and contextually appropriate. Consumers accept certain forms of staging as legitimate while rejecting others as contrived.

Authenticity is therefore not undermined by strategy per se but by poorly executed or culturally misaligned performances. This suggests that authenticity depends less on the absence of intention and more on the success of communicative alignment between the actors and audiences. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that contemporary brand culture is characterized by what she calls “authenticity ambivalence,” in which authenticity is both desired and recognized as constructed. Consumers are aware that authenticity claims are mediated, yet they continue to rely on them. This paradox reinforces the idea that authenticity functions as a cultural resource rather than an objective truth. It is negotiated, questioned, and reassembled across different settings.

Importantly, much of this research has emerged from Western, highly institutionalized market contexts, where authenticity is often tied to formal branding systems, legal protections, and corporate storytelling. However, scholars studying consumption beyond the Global North emphasize that authenticity operates differently in informal or resource-constrained environments. In many African and Asian marketplaces, trust is established less through institutional certification and more through interpersonal relationships, reputation, and situated interaction (Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2010). Under such conditions, authenticity judgments depend heavily on communicative processes between buyers and sellers rather than on official guarantees. Research on African markets demonstrates that value and legitimacy are frequently negotiated through talk, bargaining, and relational networks rather than through standardized branding mechanisms. Traders rely on

explanations, demonstrations, and social ties to establish credibility (Meagher, 2010). These findings suggest that authenticity in such settings cannot be reduced to product origin alone. Instead, it emerges through situated practices of persuasion and trust-building. Authenticity becomes something enacted in interaction rather than certified externally.

Taken together, this body of literature converges on several key insights. First, authenticity is not an intrinsic or material property but an evaluative judgment formed through interpretation (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Secondly, these judgments rely on symbolic and communicative cues rather than objective verification (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Third, authenticity is socially constructed through interaction and shared meaning-making (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Carey, 2009). Lastly, authenticity standards vary across cultural and institutional contexts, particularly in informal market environments where interpersonal communication substitutes for formal guarantees (Meagher, 2010). These insights collectively challenge any effort to treat authenticity as a fixed trait that can be measured or assumed. Instead, authenticity must be understood as a relational and contextual phenomenon that emerges through communicative practices.

### **2.3. Authenticity as a Communicative and Strategic Accomplishment**

Although research on strategic communication and authenticity often evolves along separate paths, both traditions ultimately explore the same fundamental question: how meaning, legitimacy, and trust are socially constructed.

Strategic communication research examines how actors intentionally organize communication to shape interpretations and coordinate action (Zerfass et al., 2018). Authenticity research, on the other hand, examines how audiences judge whether objects, brands, or actors seem authentic, genuine, or trustworthy (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). When looked at together, both perspectives reveal a common insight. What defines authenticity isn't found within products or organizations but arises through communication.

Early discussions of authenticity often depicted the idea as something natural or internally rooted. Trilling (2009) distinguished between sincerity and authenticity, suggesting that authenticity involves expression that feels true to the self rather than performed for external approval. This

view implies that strategic or calculated action may undermine authenticity because deliberate impression management can seem artificial. Similar concerns arise in cultural sociology and music studies, where Van Eijck (2000) notes that audiences often link authenticity to spontaneity and a lack of obvious planning. From this view, strategy and authenticity seem to conflict. If something is planned, it might be seen as fake. But this conflict relies on the idea that authenticity exists before communication as an inherent quality that strategy just distorts. More recent research challenges this idea. Studies in consumer culture and marketing show that authenticity judgments rarely depend on direct verification of origin. Instead, they rely on symbolic cues, narratives, and interpretive frameworks (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). What people perceive as authentic is therefore mediated through signs rather than uncovered as fact. This change redefines authenticity from an inherent trait to an evaluative process.

Grayson and Martinec's (2004) distinction between indexical and iconic authenticity provides a foundational contribution to this study. Their findings indicate that consumers tend to rely more on iconic cues than on factual verification. A product might be perceived as authentic because it meets expectations, even if its origin is unclear. Therefore, authenticity depends on interpretation rather than tangible evidence. Beverland (2005) demonstrates that brands perceived as authentic often engage in authentic work, including storytelling, selective disclosure, and careful management of heritage narratives. Similarly, Napoli et al. (2014) and Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualize brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct that includes credibility, integrity, and consistency. In these studies, authenticity is not seen as a fixed trait but as a communicative effect produced through representation and interaction. Concepts that appear natural or self-evident are in fact outcomes of repeated communicative practices. Carey's (2009) ritual view of communication similarly holds that communication is the process through which shared meanings are created and maintained, rather than merely transmitted. From these perspectives, authenticity cannot exist prior to communication, as meaning itself emerges through it. Symbolic interactionism further clarifies how these negotiations occur at the micro level. Carter and Fuller (2015), reflecting on Herbert Blumer's theory of interactionism, argue that meaning arises through interaction and interpretation rather than residing within objects themselves. Individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them, and these meanings develop through social encounters. Applied to market contexts, this indicates that authenticity judgments develop through continuous interactions between sellers and consumers.

Strategic communication theory provides an additional conceptual tool for understanding how such definitions are organized. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication to influence perceptions and relationships. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) extend this view by emphasizing that strategy is embedded in everyday communicative practices rather than limited to formal campaigns. Communication shapes reality by framing issues, coordinating expectations, and producing shared interpretations. Strategy, therefore, functions not only through advertising or branding but also through everyday interactions. When these insights are combined, the illusion of a contradiction between strategy and authenticity begins to fade.

If authenticity relies on interpretation and communication, it inevitably involves strategic actions. Actors must choose which cues to emphasize, which narratives to share, and which signals to use to seem credible. Goffman (1974) explains that framing theory demonstrates how individuals depend on interpretive frames to understand what occurs in each situation. Frames shape perception and influence expectations. In market exchanges, frames determine how products are evaluated. Sellers strategically invoke these frames to position goods, while consumers interpret claims through familiar cultural categories. Authenticity judgments, therefore, arise within framed interactions rather than outside of them. Spence (1973) using signaling theory, argues that actors use signals to reduce uncertainty when information is unevenly distributed. In markets, sellers often know more about product quality than buyers. To establish trust, they deploy signals such as warranties, demonstrations, pricing cues, or reputational references. These signals do not guarantee truth, they facilitate shared interpretations that make exchange possible.

Research on retail and service interactions shows how these processes unfold in real life. Studies of frontline service work demonstrate that employees actively establish credibility through talk, demeanor, and relational cues (Grandey et al., 2005). Customers assess authenticity not just through products but also by how convincingly actors demonstrate expertise and sincerity. Therefore, authenticity is linked to performances and relationships as much as to objects. It becomes a result of interaction. This interactional perspective is especially important outside formal branding settings. While much strategic communication research focuses on corporations, campaigns, or institutional messaging, everyday marketplaces also involve ongoing strategic

exchanges. Sellers clarify differences, justify prices, and manage impressions. Consumers question, compare, and negotiate. Meaning develops through conversation.

Studies of informal and low-regulation markets demonstrate that trust is frequently developed through communicative competence rather than institutional guarantees (Portes and Haller, 2005). Repeated interaction, reputation, and relational talk substitute for formal verification. Sellers who communicate convincingly are perceived as credible, while those who fail to do so lose consumers.

Therefore, authenticity becomes part of daily communication practices instead of relying on documentation. Cross-cultural research complicates assumptions based on Western branding systems. Scholars argue that communication norms, trust-building, and market relationships vary significantly across societies (Oyserman, 2017; De Mooij, 2019). What counts as credible or authentic depends on locally shared expectations. In many African and Global South contexts, exchange relies heavily on interpersonal negotiation, storytelling, and relational ties (Khanna and Palepu, 2010; Zoogah et al., 2015). Authenticity assessments, therefore, develop through social interaction rather than through abstract brand systems. This indicates that authenticity must be examined within specific communicative cultures rather than considered universal.

Taken together, these studies converge on the idea that authenticity is not something actors inherently possess but something they create. Through framing, signaling, storytelling, and interaction, communicators shape interpretations that seem credible and meaningful. When these efforts align with shared expectations, they are experienced as authentic, and when they don't, they appear artificial or deceptive. Viewing authenticity as a communicative and strategic achievement shifts the focus from the fixed qualities of products to the process of meaning construction. Instead of asking whether a product is objectively authentic, the more relevant question becomes how actors convey authenticity and how others interpret those messages. This perspective directly supports the present study's focus on seller and consumer interactions.

#### **2.4. The Communicative Construction Of Authenticity In Nigeria's Informal Market.**

Research on counterfeit consumption and informal markets has grown substantially over the past twenty years, yet much of this research still focuses on Western regulatory environments and formal branding systems (Wilcox et al., 2009). Counterfeits are usually considered illegal copies

that threaten intellectual property, undermine brand value, and erode consumer trust. In this common view, authenticity is considered a legal or ontological status linked to ownership, trademark registration, and the place where something is made (Paschina, 2023). The distinction between “original” and “fake” appears clear, and communication is positioned primarily as a defensive mechanism through which firms protect proprietary meaning and signal legal legitimacy (Napoli et al., 2014).

However, scholars are increasingly arguing that this binary model oversimplifies how counterfeit goods are understood and negotiated in everyday market contexts (Eckhardt et al., 2015; Gistri et al., 2009). Instead of just being deceptive substitutes, counterfeit products often move within socially accepted systems of meaning. Consumers may knowingly buy imitation goods while giving complex moral reasons for their choices (Sharma and Chan, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009). In such cases, authenticity is not simply violated, it is reinterpreted. As Eckhardt et al. (2015) demonstrate, counterfeits frequently operate within parallel evaluative systems in which legality is only one dimension of assessment, alongside functionality, affordability, and social acceptability.

Consumer research demonstrates that counterfeit consumption is shaped not only by price sensitivity but also by identity, status aspirations, and social signaling (Wilcox et al., 2009). People sometimes use imitation goods to gain symbolic capital linked to luxury brands, especially when formal access is economically limited. This symbolic focus complicates legal definitions of authenticity. If authenticity partly depends on the meanings consumers attach to products (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), then the social context of counterfeits cannot be simplified to illegitimacy. Authenticity judgments are negotiated depending on context rather than being universally fixed.

Recent research questions the idea that counterfeit consumption always indicates moral weakness or dishonesty. Eckhardt et al. (2015) argue that counterfeits exist along a spectrum of intentionality and awareness. In many cases, consumers recognize the status of imitation goods but evaluate them pragmatically rather than ethically. Gistri et al. (2009) similarly, show that consumers engage in moral rationalization processes that reframe counterfeit purchases as socially acceptable within specific peer groups. These reinterpretations become especially evident in emerging and informal

market settings. Studies in such contexts show that informal trade networks often operate through embedded social relationships, in which trust relies on reputation, relational continuity, and communication rather than on formal certification (Khanna and Palepu, 2010; Meagher, 2010). Under such conditions, authenticity is less about trademark legality and more about whether a product performs adequately and whether the seller communicates credibility convincingly.

These dynamics are especially evident within African informal markets. Scholars of African urban economies stress that informality is not just the absence of regulation but a structured exchange system guided by social norms, negotiation practices, and relational trust (Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2010). Markets function as communication spaces where value is constantly negotiated. Traders rely on persuasive speech, demonstrations, and relational positioning to establish legitimacy. Buyers evaluate claims through interaction, peer consultation, and firsthand experience.

In Nigeria, informal markets play a major role in the economy (Meagher, 2010; Zoogah et al., 2015). Dense interpersonal networks, bargaining practices, and fluid product categories characterize these markets. In such environments, distinctions are often expressed through localized vocabularies that do not neatly align with Western legal categories. Scholars studying African trade networks note that traders develop shared classification systems that influence expectations and pricing (Hansen, 2000; Lindell, 2010).

These categories serve a communicative purpose, shaping how products are understood and assessed. Importantly, research on informal retail settings shows that sellers constantly use strategic communication to distinguish their goods and explain price differences (Khanna and Palepu, 2010). Through storytelling, comparison, and performative expertise, traders establish hierarchies of quality that influence consumer perception. These practices closely align with strategic communication theory, which emphasizes the deliberate crafting of messages to influence interpretation (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007).

At the same time, research on authenticity suggests that such strategic efforts do not automatically undermine credibility. As Beverland and Farrelly (2010) explain that audiences accept a particular form of staging when it aligns with shared cultural expectations. In informal Nigerian markets, where negotiation and persuasive talk are common parts of bargaining, communicative performance may not indicate deception, instead, it might show competence. Grandey et al. (2005)

show that perceived sincerity is often evaluated through interactional cues such as confidence, responsiveness, and relational attunement, rather than through objective verification.

De Mooij (2019) argues that consumer evaluation processes differ markedly across cultural contexts, particularly in trust development and authority patterns. Oyserman (2017) similarly, emphasizes how cultural frameworks influence interpretation and judgment. In societies where formal institutions may be seen as unreliable or distant, interpersonal interactions often serve as the main basis for assessing credibility. Authenticity is thus judged based on social familiarity and communicative consistency rather than legal claims.

## **2.5. Synthesis**

By synthesizing the literature on strategic communication, authenticity, counterfeit consumption, and African informal markets, a clearer theoretical picture emerges. Authenticity is constructed through communicative practice, while strategic communication operates not only within formal organizations but also within everyday market exchange. Informal markets, therefore, are not devoid of strategy but are environments in which communication is actively used to shape meaning, signal value, and coordinate interaction. Nigeria's informal retail landscape provides a critical context for examining how authenticity categories are negotiated and stabilized in practice.

This integrated perspective provides a conceptual basis for analyzing how market actors create, interpret, and contest authenticity in everyday transactions, positioning authenticity not as a fixed attribute but as a context-dependent outcome of communicative processes.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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This chapter outlines the conceptual framework for examining authenticity and clarifies the ontological and theoretical foundations guiding the analysis.

The aim of this research is to explore how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in interactions between sellers and consumers in the Onitsha Main Market, as described by participants through interview data. In a market where original and imitation goods coexist, authenticity cannot be understood as a fixed or objectively verifiable attribute. Instead, it is approached as something that emerges through communicative processes embedded in everyday exchange. Accordingly, this study adopts a communicative-constructivist perspective, in which authenticity is conceptualized as a socially constructed, interactionally negotiated, interpretively framed, and strategically signaled achievement.

This perspective is grounded in the view that markets are not only economic systems structured by price and supply, but socially organized spaces in which meaning, legitimacy, and value are continuously produced. Product classifications derive their significance not solely from material properties but from shared interpretive frameworks, communicative practices, and relational negotiation among actors. Authenticity in this sense is not discovered but constituted through interaction, as understood and articulated by market participants.

To analyze how this constitution unfolds in practice, this chapter integrates four interconnected theories. First, social constructionism and the communicative constitution perspective establish the ontological foundation for understanding how market realities and classification systems are maintained through communication, providing insight into the research question, which addresses how sellers within the Onitsha market invent words to persuade their audience (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Carey, 2009; Cooren et al., 2011). Second, symbolic interactionism reveals how meanings and credibility are negotiated during interactions between buyers and sellers (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Third, framing theory clarifies how interpretive structures organize perception and guide the evaluation of authenticity claims (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Fourth, signaling

theory explain how credibility is communicated and assessed under conditions of uncertainty (Akerlof, 1970; Spence, 1973).

These perspectives are not viewed as separate theories but as interconnected components of a single analytical framework. Together, they offer a clear foundation for examining how market participants in Onitsha Main Market collaborate to develop and maintain shared ideas of authenticity during daily transactions. While these theories are broad and adaptable to any form of qualitative research, the focus will be on the interpretative perspective of the actors and what they can explain during data collection.

### **3.1. The Communicative Construction of Market Reality**

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on social constructionist epistemology, which views social reality as intersubjectively created rather than inherently fixed. In this view, categories of value, legitimacy, and authenticity are not treated as objective qualities inherent in material objects. Instead, they are understood as socially maintained meanings that develop through ongoing communicative interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Sandu and Nistor, 2021). Social reality, from this standpoint, is not discovered but constructed through ongoing processes of meaning-making that become institutionalized over time (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Sandu and Nistor, 2021).

This position challenges essentialist views of authenticity that assume it is a fixed trait determined by origin, authorship, or legal certification. While these criteria may apply within formal regulatory systems, they do not fully capture how authenticity becomes meaningful in practice. From a constructionist perspective, what is considered “authentic” is not solely based on inherent features but on socially organized systems of recognition and validation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Authenticity, therefore, becomes intelligible not as a property embedded in objects but as a status conferred through socially shared interpretive frameworks.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that social worlds are produced through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Individuals create patterns of meaning through repeated action, these patterns become objectified as institutional realities that appear independent of their creators. Over time, actors internalize these

institutionalized meanings as taken-for-granted truths (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Through repetition and collective reinforcement, classifications stabilize and acquire the appearance of objectivity. Applied to commercial exchange within the informal market, this indicates that authenticity categories become established through repetition, circulation, and collective reinforcement. A product is considered “original” not solely because of its history, but because actors repeatedly affirm, reproduce, and institutionalize that classification (Meagher, 2010).

Communication plays a central role in this process of stabilization. Carey (2009) contrasting the transmission model of communication with a ritual model, says the transmission view frames communication as the transfer of information between a sender and a receiver. By contrast, the ritual view understands communication as the symbolic process through which shared realities are created, maintained, and repaired (Carey, 2009). From a ritual perspective, communicative acts do not merely describe authenticity; they bring it into being. Through repeated negotiation, explanation, affirmation, and endorsement, actors collectively maintain a definition of what is real, legitimate, or credible (Carey, 2009).

The Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) perspective expands on this idea by asserting that social systems are created through communication. Cooren et al. (2011) explains that organizations are not pre-existing structures in which communication simply takes place; instead, they are formed through communication. Roles, norms, authority structures, and evaluative standards are enacted and maintained through interaction (Cooren et al., 2011). While developed in relation to organizations, this constitutive perspective offers important analytical leverage for understanding markets as communicatively enacted systems. Shared vocabularies, classificatory systems, and legitimacy criteria are continually reproduced through interaction rather than existing independently of it (Cooren et al., 2011).

Taken together, social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), ritual communication (Carey, 2009), and the CCO perspective (Cooren et al., 2011) support a coherent ontological and epistemological stance for this study. If social realities are institutionally stabilized through communication and markets are communicatively constructed spaces, then authenticity cannot be reduced to a legal or material trait. It must be analyzed as an intersubjective achievement reliant on shared recognition and ongoing communicative alignment.

This theoretical position has direct implications for understanding exchange within the Informal Market. In contexts where formal certification systems may be limited, inconsistently enforced, or socially distant, communicative interaction becomes increasingly important for coordinating exchanges. The lack of strong institutional guarantees does not eliminate the need for authenticity judgments, instead, it shifts their formation to interactional language that classifies what counts as acceptable, credible, or “real.” Authenticity is therefore not absent in informal markets, it is negotiated through communication and stabilized locally. By grounding the analysis in social constructionism and constitutive communication, this study treats Onitsha Main Market as a communicatively constructed arena of meaning-making.

### **3.2. Interaction and Meaning-Making: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective**

If authenticity is understood as socially constructed and communicatively stabilized (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), it becomes necessary to examine how such construction unfolds in everyday interaction. While the previous section established that markets are constituted through communication (Cooren et al., 2011), this section moves to the micro-level processes through which actors negotiate, interpret, and sustain shared meanings during exchange within the Informal Market.

Symbolic interactionism offers the conceptual basis for this change. Based on Mead's (1934) work and later expanded by Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism holds that meaning is not inherent in objects but is created through social interaction. According to Blumer (1969) Individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, which emerge from social interaction and are continuously modified through an interpretive process. Objects, therefore, do not have fixed significance, their meaning is negotiated, interpreted, and revised through communication (Blumer, 1969).

Applied specifically to commercial exchanges in Informal Market, this perspective indicates that products do not have stable authenticity on their own. Instead, authenticity becomes significant as actors interact, interpret claims, and align expectations (Blumer, 1969). A trader's description of a product does not automatically determine its status. Instead, such labels become part of an interpretive process where buyers evaluate, question, compare, and negotiate. Meaning develops

during the interaction itself, as actors define and redefine the situation through communication (Mead, 1934).

This interactional orientation has direct implications for understanding authenticity within the Informal Market, as actors rely heavily on situated cues to interpret meaning (Blumer, 1969). Tone of voice, narrative explanation of sourcing, embodied confidence, relational familiarity, and prior reputation within the market community become central resources in constructing credibility. Authenticity is therefore not verified solely through documentary evidence but evaluated through interpretive assessment within interaction (Mead, 1934).

Symbolic interactionism also highlights that meaning stays fluid rather than permanently fixed. Interpretations can be changed during negotiation, as actors constantly adjust their understanding in response to communicative feedback (Blumer, 1969). Within the Informal Market, a buyer might initially question a trader's claim of authenticity, request additional proof, compare stalls, or seek advice from peers before forming a tentative conclusion. Through this iterative process, authenticity is not simply claimed, it is interactively negotiated. An agreement, even if temporary, signifies a shared understanding of the situation (Meagher, 2010).

By emphasizing interaction as the center of meaning production in the Informal Market, symbolic interactionism locates authenticity within a constructionist epistemological framework that views social realities as ongoing communicative achievements. If markets are socially constructed spaces, then authenticity in Onitsha must be examined at the point where communication occurs between traders and buyers.

### **3.3. Framing and the Interpretive Structuring of Authenticity**

While symbolic interactionism explains how meaning is negotiated during interactions, it does not fully clarify how certain interpretations are highlighted while others fade into the background. To understand how authenticity categories are organized and made understandable in relation to the Informal Market, it is important to analyze the interpretive structures that influence perception both before and during exchanges. Framing theory offers this analytical perspective.

Goffman (1974) introduces the concept of frames as “schemata of interpretation” (p.21) that enable individuals to answer the question, “What is going on here?” Frames structure experience by

organizing events into meaningful patterns. They do not merely label reality; they shape how it is understood. Within market exchange, frames guide how products are categorized, how quality distinctions are interpreted, and how authenticity claims are evaluated (Goffman, 1974).

Building on this foundation, Entman (1993, p. 52) conceptualizes framing as a process of selecting and highlighting. To frame is to choose certain aspects of perceived reality and emphasize them in communication, thereby shaping a particular understanding of a situation, its causes, moral judgment, or suggested response. Framing functions not only through what is said but also through what is emphasized, foregrounded, and normalized.

In Informal Market, framing becomes crucial for understanding what authenticity means in a commercial environment where “original” and imitation goods coexist (Meagher, 2010). Traders and buyers use a set of classificatory terms, such as “original,” “premium copy,” “China original,” or “first grade.” These terms act as frames that categorize products within hierarchies of value and legitimacy. They influence the evaluation process by defining the product type and the applicable standards. For instance, describing a product as a “premium copy” shifts the perspective, viewing imitation not as deception but as a different category with its own evaluation criteria. The frame shifts the focus from strict originality to attributes like functional equivalence, durability, or affordability. In this way, framing reduces moral tension and helps organize the coexistence of originals and imitations within the same market space (Meagher, 2010).

Framing also influences how signals are understood. A sourcing narrative or quality demonstration lacks intrinsic meaning; its persuasive power relies on the interpretive framework in which it is embedded. If a product is framed as “factory direct,” certain cues become prominent indicators of credibility. If it is framed as “standard copy,” different expectations are set. Frames thus act as interpretive filters that shape how authenticity claims are interpreted during exchange (Goffman, 1974).

By integrating framing theory with social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, the analysis goes beyond the idea that meaning is negotiated to clarify how it is structured. Frames establish interpretive boundaries that make certain authenticity distinctions understandable within the communicative environment of Onitsha Main Market.

### **3.4. Signaling and Credibility Under Conditions of Uncertainty**

While framing theory explains how authenticity categories are interpretively constructed within the Informal Market, market exchange also involves structural uncertainty. Even when products are labeled as “original,” “first grade,” or “premium copy,” buyers cannot always independently verify the quality or origin of goods at the point of sale. Authenticity judgments, therefore, develop within conditions of informational imbalance that influence how credibility is established.

The structural aspect of this imbalance was traditionally explained by Akerlof (1970). He shows that when sellers have more information about product quality than buyers, markets are prone to adverse selection. The main issue is not just the existence of low-quality goods, but the challenge buyers face in telling them apart from high-quality options before buying. In such situations, claims about authenticity are naturally uncertain, and trust cannot be taken for granted.

Within this environment of uncertainty, signaling theory becomes practically important. Building on the problem identified by Akerlof (1970), Spence (1973) introduces signaling as a way for actors to communicate qualities that can't be directly observed using observable indicators. Signals are actions or traits intended to convey credibility in situations where direct verification is difficult. For a signal to work effectively, it must be clear and either costly or sufficiently constrained to reliably distinguish higher-quality from lower-quality actors.

Within the Informal Market, signaling depends on communicative practices rather than formal certification. Verbal assurances, sourcing stories, demonstrations of product features, references to loyal customers, and appeals to long-standing reputation act as observable indicators intended to communicate authenticity. However, these signals do not function on their own. Their persuasive power relies on the interpretive frames already present in the encounter. A signal gains credibility only when it aligns with the frame through which the product is understood. For example, if a product is framed as “factory direct,” references to supply chains or visible packaging details can serve as strong signals of credibility. If it is framed as a “premium copy,” emphasis may shift toward durability, finish, or comparative performance rather than strict originality. In this way, signaling is embedded within framing and interaction. It does not independently generate authenticity but operates through communicative alignment with shared expectations.

Moreover, signaling effectiveness relies on interactional recognition. As symbolic interactionism suggests, meaning is not inherent but develops through interpretative engagement (Blumer, 1969). A signal only maintains authenticity when it is acknowledged, accepted, or at least tentatively affirmed by the buyer. Authenticity thus emerges at the intersection of uncertainty, strategic signaling, and interactional interpretation.

When viewed alongside the earlier sections, this perspective defines authenticity in the Informal Market as a communicatively created, interpretively shaped, and strategically signaled achievement. Authenticity is not solely about the product's origin; it is formed through patterned communicative practices that establish credibility within a specific economic and cultural setting. This comprehensive framework guides empirical analysis by focusing on how actors make claims, shape interpretations, and handle uncertainty during everyday exchanges.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

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### 4.1. Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm and draws on social constructionism. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is shaped by actors' meanings rather than existing as an objective structure separate from interpretation (Tracy, 2019). Knowledge is therefore understood as contextually situated and produced through interaction rather than discovered as a neutral fact (Flick, 2014).

This epistemological orientation aligns with the study's main goal: exploring how authenticity is created and negotiated in sellers' and consumers' interactions at the Onitsha Main Market. The research does not aim to determine whether goods are objectively authentic, but rather to examine how actors define and maintain authenticity in exchanges. The interpretivist approach allows for examining actors' subjective understandings and the processes through which shared meanings develop (Prasad, 2018).

Social constructionism provides the epistemological foundation for this study. It assumes that social realities, including categories such as authenticity, are not inherent properties but are constructed and sustained through communicative and social practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In this view, authenticity is understood as a socially recognized status that emerges through shared classification systems and interactional negotiation. While the theoretical foundations of this perspective are discussed in detail in Section 3.1, its relevance here lies in guiding the study's methodological focus. Specifically, it emphasizes participants' interpretations and accounts of market interactions rather than treating authenticity as an objectively measurable attribute. Therefore, markets are understood not just as economic spaces governed by price mechanisms but as socially organized environments where value and legitimacy are discursively shaped (Cooren et al., 2011).

Adopting this approach requires a specific view of how knowledge is created. Data collected from interviews is not considered a clear mirror of external reality. Instead, they are interpretive stories shaped by participants' language use, relational experiences, and market positioning (Flick, 2014). The goal of analysis is not to verify objective claims about product authenticity, but to explore how authenticity is expressed, justified, and maintained in participant narratives. Within this framework, rigor is achieved not through statistical generalization but through conceptual coherence, contextual sensitivity, and analytic transparency (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The goal is to produce theoretically informed, contextually grounded insights into how authenticity is constructed in a specific market setting.

#### **4.2. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design because it is suitable when the goal is to understand how actors interpret and build social reality, rather than to measure predefined variables (Flick, 2014). Since this research investigates how authenticity is created and negotiated within seller and consumer interactions in Onitsha Main Market, the design allows access to participants' interpretations of the meaning-making process, classificatory language, and evaluative reasoning.

In qualitative research traditions, design decisions are not just technical; they are also grounded in epistemology (Prasad, 2018). If authenticity is seen as socially constructed and created through communication, then it cannot be treated as an objective trait that can be measured quantitatively. Instead, it needs to be examined using methods that capture actors' subjective interpretations and the discursive processes that stabilize market categories. Therefore, qualitative design ensures alignment between theoretical commitments and methodological practice.

The study uses semi-structured, one-on-one interviews as its primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet targeted framework that lets the researcher explore specific thematic areas while staying open to participants' own words and categories (Patton, 2015). This flexibility is crucial in a context where differences in authenticity can be expressed through locally embedded terminology, relational histories, and situational judgments.

Interviews are especially useful for exploring interpretive frameworks and decision-making processes. As Tracy (2019) notes, qualitative interviews enable researchers to understand how

participants interpret their experiences and justify their actions within specific contexts. In this study, the goal is to analyze how sellers and buyers explain the criteria they use to distinguish between “original” and fake goods. Therefore, interview narratives should offer insights into the cognitive and communicative structures that support authenticity judgments.

This study examines contemporary constructions of authenticity within a specific market context, focusing on how they are expressed and negotiated in current market exchanges. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, the focus is on credibility, transferability, and analytical transparency rather than broad applicability. The aim is to develop a theoretically informed and contextually grounded understanding of how authenticity is constructed in a particular social setting.

By adopting a qualitative, interview-based approach, the study maintains methodological consistency with its interpretive epistemology. The research design is therefore not a matter of convincing, but a necessary result of conceptualizing authenticity as an interactionally negotiated and socially constructed phenomenon.

#### **4.3. Case Study: Onitsha Main Market**

This study is situated in the Onitsha Main Market in Southeastern Nigeria, which was selected as an empirical setting due to its high-density interactions, diverse product categories, and complex informal trading structures. These characteristics make it particularly suitable for examining how authenticity is communicatively constructed and negotiated in everyday exchanges. The scale and intensity of market activity generate frequent interactions in which buyers and sellers must continuously interpret, assert, and evaluate claims about the authenticity of goods.

The market operates within a broader informal economic context, where transactions are not fully governed by formal regulatory systems but are structured through internally developed mechanisms such as traders’ associations, apprenticeship systems, kinship networks, and trust-based relationships (Lindell, 2010). In the absence of standardized certification and enforcement, these social and relational structures shape how claims about authenticity are assessed and accepted (Meagher, 2010). As a result, authenticity cannot be externally verified but depends on how it is communicated, interpreted, and recognized in interaction.

In addition, the coexistence of products labeled “original,” “copy,” and “China” within the same categories creates a setting in which distinctions in authenticity are not fixed but must be actively interpreted. This structural ambiguity, combined with intense competition, creates conditions in which claims about authenticity must be actively established and negotiated within market interactions. The selection of Onitsha Main Market is, therefore, methodologically significant, as it provides a context in which authenticity is not institutionally guaranteed but must be continuously established within market communication shaped by ambiguity, competition, and informal governance.

#### **4.4. Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection**

This study uses purposive sampling to select participants directly involved in commercial exchanges at the Onitsha Main Market. Purposive sampling is suitable for interpretivist research, where the goal is not statistical representation but choosing information-rich cases that can shed light on the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Since this study examines how authenticity is created and negotiated in seller and consumer interactions, participants are selected based on their relevant experiences with authenticity in market transactions.

The sampling strategy intentionally includes participants on both sides of the exchange. The study interviewed 9 individuals: four traders (sellers or business owners operating in the market) and five buyers with market-purchasing experience (see figure 1). Including both groups enables a comparison of how sellers assert, frame, and signal authenticity and how buyers interpret, evaluate, or contest it. This dual perspective is important because, as conceptualized in this study, authenticity is relational rather than unilateral.

Instead of aiming for demographic diversity as a goal, participant selection emphasizes involvement in transactions where distinctions such as “original,” “copy,” “grade,” or related categories are socially significant. This maintains consistency between the empirical material and the study’s theoretical focus on communicative construction and credibility signaling. Sampling is therefore guided by theory rather than randomness, aligning with qualitative research principles that value conceptual relevance over sheer numbers (Flick, 2014).

The proposed sample size of nine participants aligns with qualitative research traditions that emphasize depth of inquiry and rich analysis (Tracy, 2019). In interpretivist research, adequacy is assessed based on conceptual saturation and interpretive depth rather than a statistical cutoff (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Since this study uses semi-structured interviews intended to gather detailed narratives, justificatory reasoning, and classificatory language, each interview serves as a dense unit of analysis. The goal is to gather enough rich material to identify common patterns in how authenticity is constructed, framed, and negotiated across different actor positions.

Recruitment was conducted through relational access points and referral-based strategies, aligning with the socially embedded nature of market participation in southeastern Nigeria. Additionally, given the participants' demographics, referral strategies will facilitate access, as they often lack time for anything that is not financially beneficial. Snowball techniques are particularly effective where trust and relational endorsement aid in gaining access (Patton, 2015). This approach aligns with the relational structure of Onitsha's commercial networks and helps ensure participants' comfort and openness during interviews.

Importantly, the sample size reflects the study's epistemological approach. The goal is not to make broad claims about all Nigerian markets but to develop contextually grounded insights into how authenticity is constructed within a specific commercial environment where originals and imitations coexist.

| ID | Role   | Experience years | Duration of interview |
|----|--------|------------------|-----------------------|
| B1 | Buyer  | 22 years         | 71 minutes            |
| B2 | Buyer  | 5 years          | 45 minutes            |
| B3 | Buyer  | 4 years          | 67 minutes            |
| B4 | Buyer  | 6 years          | 50 minutes            |
| B5 | Buyer  | 16 years         | 69 minutes            |
| S1 | Seller | 26 years         | 71 minutes            |

|    |        |          |            |
|----|--------|----------|------------|
| S2 | Seller | 9 years  | 52 minutes |
| S3 | Seller | 12 years | 54 minutes |
| S4 | Seller | 4 years  | 78 minutes |

***Figure 1: List of participants of the study, their market experience, and the length of the interview***

#### **4.5. Data Collection Methods**

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted via WhatsApp video calls. Semi-structured interviewing is especially suitable for research focused on exploring participants' interpretive frameworks and meaning-making processes rather than measuring predetermined variables (Patton, 2015). Since the main goal of this study is to analyze how authenticity is constructed and negotiated within seller and consumer interactions in Onitsha Main Market, the method must enable participants to express their evaluative criteria, classificatory distinctions, and justifications that underpin their authenticity judgments (Tracy, 2019).

Qualitative interviews are particularly useful for understanding how actors explain actions, justify decisions, and construct social categories within specific contexts (Flick, 2014). In this study, authenticity is not viewed as a measurable product attribute but as a socially constructed category maintained through communicative practice. Interviews, therefore, allow access to the linguistic repertoires and narrative structures through which sellers and buyers define terms and explain how these distinctions influence transactional behavior (Patton, 2015).

The semi-structured format balances conceptual focus with conversational flexibility. While the interview guide ensures alignment with the theoretical framework, especially regarding framing, signaling, and interactional negotiation, the format allows participants to introduce contextually embedded meanings and emerging themes (Flick, 2014). This flexibility is methodologically important in interpretivist research, where rigid tools might impose externally defined categories that do not match participants' lived experiences (Tracy, 2019).

Interviews are conducted individually to enable deeper engagement and reflexive elaboration. One-on-one interviews allow participants to share detailed accounts of their evaluative reasoning without the social influences that can occur in group settings (Flick, 2014). Since authenticity in this study is viewed as relational and interactional, capturing both sellers' and buyers' perspectives requires space for the nuanced expression of credibility assessments, reputational considerations, and experiential learning processes (Patton, 2015).

Interviews were conducted via WhatsApp video calls due to the geographical distance between the researcher and participants. Digital interviewing is recognized within contemporary qualitative methodology as a legitimate mode of data collection when it supports accessibility and contextual relevance (Flick, 2014). Importantly, WhatsApp is deeply integrated into everyday commercial communication in Nigeria, serving as a routine platform for business coordination and client interaction. Using a familiar medium for interviews enhances participants' comfort and reduces technological barriers, thereby fostering richer narrative production (Tracy, 2019).

Each interview was expected to last 45-78 minutes, allowing sufficient time for thematic depth and elaboration (Patton, 2015). With informed consent, interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of participants' language. Recording and verbatim transcription are essential for maintaining analytic rigor, as they enable repeated engagement with participants' phrasing, emphasis, and discursive structure (Flick, 2014).

Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin to accurately reflect the linguistic realities of commercial exchange in southeastern Nigeria. Allowing participants to switch between languages enhances expressive precision and supports the articulation of culturally embedded classifications (Flick, 2014). Since this study examines authenticity as a communicatively constructed phenomenon, maintaining the original terminology during transcription is essential for analysis. When translation is necessary, understanding the context will be prioritized over literal equivalence to preserve semantic nuance (Patton, 2015).

The interview guide is structured around thematic areas derived from the theoretical framework: definitions of authenticity, criteria for product evaluation, communicative strategies used to signal credibility, interpretive frames guiding purchasing choices, and experiences of uncertainty or dispute during exchange (see Appendix 2). However, consistent with qualitative interviewing

principles, the guide acts as a flexible framework rather than a fixed questionnaire (Patton, 2015). Probing questions will be used to clarify conceptual distinctions and enhance analytic understanding.

By grounding data collection in semi-structured interviewing practices, this study maintains methodological consistency with its interpretivist principles. The chosen method enables a detailed exploration of the communicative process through which authenticity is expressed, interpreted, and reinforced in everyday market interactions.

#### **4.6. Data Analysis Strategy**

Data analysis in this study employs a qualitative thematic approach guided by systematic coding procedures. The goal of the analysis is not just to summarize interview content but to identify recurring patterns in how authenticity is defined, framed, signaled, and negotiated within seller and consumer interactions. Since the study adopts an interpretivist perspective, the analysis emphasizes participants' meaning-making practices and classificatory language rather than relying on frequency counts or variable measurement (Flick, 2014).

The analytic process begins with a verbatim transcription of all recorded interviews. Transcription is treated not as a mechanical step but as an interpretive phase of immersion in the data (Tracy, 2019). Repeated reading of transcripts allows the researcher to become sensitized to recurrent terminology, narrative structures, and justificatory patterns. Attention will be paid to locally meaningful classification, such as "original," "first copy," and other evaluative distinctions articulated within the context of the Onitsha Main Market.

Following immersion, the study employs a structured coding process inspired by Saldaña, (2013) coding framework. Initial coding will involve first-cycle methods that remain close to participants' language, including in vivo coding to preserve key terms and conceptual categories. This approach aligns with the study's aim of analyzing authenticity as a communicatively constructed concept; retaining participants' own vocabulary ensures that analytic categories are grounded in empirical material rather than imposed externally.

After the first-cycle coding, second-cycle coding will be undertaken to identify broader patterns and conceptual linkages across interviews (Saldaña, 2013). During this stage, codes will be

clustered into higher-order themes reflecting recurring modes of authenticity construction. These may include price-based signaling, reputational framing, experiential validation, relational trust, or strategic ambiguity. The movement from descriptive codes to patterned themes follows established qualitative analytic procedures that seek conceptual organization without stripping away contextual nuance (Saldaña, 2013).

Thematic development will proceed through iterative comparison across seller and buyer interviews. This comparative logic allows the study to examine how sellers articulate authenticity claims and how buyers interpret, accept, negotiate, or contest them. Such cross-positional comparison strengthens analytic depth by revealing alignment, tension, or asymmetry in authenticity constructions (Flick, 2014).

Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memo writing will be used to document interpretive decisions, emerging patterns, and conceptual shifts. Memoing serves as a bridge between coding and theorization, supporting analytic transparency and reflexive awareness (Saldaña, 2013). This practice enhances dependability by making the reasoning behind theme development explicit.

Analysis will remain theoretically informed but not theoretically imposed. While the coding process is inductive in its attention to participants' language, interpretation will be guided by the study's theoretical framework, particularly concepts related to communicative constitution, framing, and signaling.

#### **4.7. Ethical Considerations**

This study adheres to established principles of qualitative research ethics, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the protection of participants from harm (Tracy, 2019). Given that the research focuses on authenticity negotiations in an informal commercial setting, ethical sensitivity is particularly important because participants' disclosures carry potential reputational and economic implications.

Before participating, all interviewees will receive clear information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent will be obtained before each interview begins. Because interviews are conducted

via WhatsApp video call, consent procedures will be adapted to the digital format while maintaining clarity and transparency (Flick, 2014).

Confidentiality is especially significant in Onitsha's main market, where commercial reputation serves as a key mechanism of credibility. Participants may discuss practices, evaluative strategies, or authenticity classifications that could be sensitive if attributed to identifiable individuals or shops. To mitigate potential risk, pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants, and identifying details such as specific shop names, precise product categories, or unique business identifiers will be anonymized in transcripts and analysis.

Audio recordings will be stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. Transcriptions will remove direct identifiers, and digital files will be password-protected in accordance with the university data protection guidelines. Data will be retained only for the duration necessary for academic assessment and will be deleted thereafter.

Language use presents an additional ethical dimension. Interviews will be conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin to enable participants to express themselves comfortably and accurately. Care will be taken during transcription and translation to preserve meaning without distorting participants' intent. Because authenticity classifications may be culturally and linguistically embedded, contextual translation will be employed to avoid misrepresentation (Tracy, 2019). Participants will not be corrected, challenged, or evaluated for the terminology they use; their language will be treated as analytically significant.

Power dynamics are also considered. Although the researcher is geographically distant, shared cultural familiarity may shape interactional expectations. The researcher will remain attentive to avoiding leading questions, moral judgment, or assumptions regarding the legitimacy of commercial practices. The aim is to understand participants' perspectives, not to evaluate or police them. Reflexive awareness of the researcher's interpretive positions forms part of the ethical commitment to respectful representation (Flick, 2014). Also, the study does not seek to expose illegal behavior or report regulatory violations. The focus is on communicative processes of authenticity construction rather than on enforcement or compliance. This boundary is made explicit to participants to ensure clarity about the research's purpose and scope.

## 5. DATA ANALYSIS

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In this chapter, the analysis of interview data collected from buyers and sellers within the Onitsha Main Market focuses on how authenticity is strategically communicated, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday market exchanges. Rather than treating authenticity as a fixed or inherent property of goods, the analysis approaches it as something actively constructed through interaction, shaped by communicative practices, interpretive processes, and broader market conditions.

This perspective reflects a shift from a conventional understanding of authenticity as a stable attribute tied to origin or brand legitimacy towards a more context-sensitive view in which meaning is produced and sustained through social interaction, consistent with social constructivist perspectives (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In markets where imitation goods are prevalent, authenticity becomes less about objective verification and more about credibility, signaling, and interpretation, particularly in the absence of formal regulatory structures. The findings in this study build on this understanding by examining how such processes unfold in the specific context of the Onitsha Main Market.

This analysis is organized around six themes that capture recurring patterns across participant accounts. These themes reflect different but interconnected dimensions of the construction of authenticity, including how sellers strategically frame and differentiate products amid doubt, how buyers interpret and evaluate authenticity-related claims, and how responses to such claims are shaped by interaction and experience. In addition, the analysis considers how trust operates within these exchanges and how broader market conditions influence both communication and interpretation.

Importantly, while the themes are presented as distinct analytical categories, they are closely interrelated. Together, they illustrate that authenticity within this market does not exist as a pre-defined characteristic of goods but emerges through ongoing interaction between buyers and sellers.

### 5.1. Strategic Communication about Authenticity from the Seller's Point of View

In the Onitsha Main Market, sellers operate in an environment where claims about product authenticity are rarely accepted at face value. As a result, selling is not limited to presenting goods but involves actively managing skepticism through communication. Sellers do not assume that authenticity will be recognized, instead, they construct it through a range of strategies aimed at making products credible, distinguishable, and acceptable within the interaction.

One way this is achieved is by invoking institutional and procedural markers of legitimacy. For example, participant S1 emphasizes that “*the product we are giving you has SON Cap*” referencing the Standards Organization of Nigeria, while also noting that “*every product of electronics come with a warranty*” and “*we test every product before selling to customers.*” These practices introduce elements commonly associated with formal retail environments, allowing sellers to reinforce credibility by aligning their goods with recognizable systems of quality assurance. This reflects how actors strategically deploy communicative cues to shape interpretation and reduce uncertainty within exchange (Hallahan et al., 2007; Spence, 1973). In this case, authenticity is not presented as an inherent attribute of the product, but as something supported by processes that signal reliability.

While these strategies vary across product categories, they reflect a shared underlying logic. For sellers dealing in electronics, credibility is often anchored in institutional markers such as certification and warranty, whereas sellers of clothing emphasize tactile and visual cues such as material, sewing, and finishing. Despite these differences in expression, both approaches serve a similar function of providing buyers with accessible indicators through which product quality and authenticity can be assessed within the interaction.

At the same time, sellers consistently redirect attention from questions of origin to observable and experiential qualities. Buyers are encouraged to assess products through direct engagement, as seen in statements by participant S2 “*I will tell you to check the size, the sewing, the quality*” and “*you as the user will now feel the material... the label, the sizes, the quality, the finishing and the sewing.*” Similarly, participant S4 says that sellers invite comparison during interaction, with prompts such as “*feel this one.... feel that one.... do you see the difference?*” These strategies shift the basis of evaluation from abstract claims about authenticity to tangible indicators that can be

verified in the moment. This emphasis on sensory and experiential verification reflects how authenticity judgment are formed through judgment rather than objective proof (Morhart et al., 2015). In doing so, sellers align their communication with a locally grounded understanding of authenticity that privileges durability, usability, and visible quality over formal notions of originality.

Closely linked to this is the construction of graded distinctions between products. Rather than presenting goods as simply “original” or “fake” sellers articulate multiple levels of quality and value. As participant S3 explains, “*there are different grades... the cheapest one is the Chinese one... then even in that Chinese, they have a higher grade,*” while participant S2 notes, “*this one is lower grade of the other... the higher one would last for you longer.*” These distinctions are often reinforced through references to origin, such as Italian, Turkish or Chinese products, which function as shorthand indicators of expected quality. At the same time, participant S3 acknowledges that these products may appear visually similar, as “*if I show you the 3 of them, they all look alike,*” making communicative framing essential for differentiation. Rather than presenting authenticity as a fixed binary, these distinctions reflect a graded system of evaluation, consistent with research showing that authenticity in market contexts often operates along a spectrum rather than as a strict original versus fake divide (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Here, durability and performance become key markers of distinction, further suggesting that authenticity is being constructed as a matter of degree. This challenges the dominant branding perspective that treats authenticity as a fixed and origin-based attribute, instead pointing to a more flexible and context-dependent understanding (Beverland, 2005).

Beyond product characteristics, participant S2 also employs persuasive narratives to shape buyer perception and encourage purchase decisions. These include emphasizing recency and demand, as in “*this one just entered the market, this one just landed,*” as well as claims about popularity. In some cases, participant S2 explicitly acknowledged the strategic use of exaggeration, noting that “*sometimes we... lie to them... telling them that people have been buying it.*” Similarly, participant S4 describes inflating purchase quantities to create urgency “*you will say, I brought 1,000 pieces... so don't be standing here and be asking me whether it's going to sell or not.*” These practices highlight the performative dimension of selling, where credibility is not solely based on verifiable facts but is actively produced through persuasive communication. These practices align with what

Beverland (2005) describes as authenticity work, where actors actively construct narratives and signals to produce credibility.

In addition, sellers draw on relational and reputational resources to reinforce trust. Participant S3 indicates *“I have been here for years... it’s the sales that... is now speaking for me,”* indicating that past interactions and customer experiences function as ongoing signals of reliability. Also, participant S3 explained *“informed decision,”* as in *“I provide you an informed decision and you choose,”* positioning themselves not just as sellers but as advisors. In some cases, credibility is also performed through personal presentation, with participant S4 noting the importance of appearance: *“the first place they look at you is your dressing... what you put it on your body.”* These practices suggest that trust is not attached solely to the product but is embedded in the broader interactional context, including the seller’s identity and conduct. Such reliance on reputation and repeated interaction reflects findings from informal market research, where credibility is built through ongoing communicative exchange rather than formal institutional guarantees (Lindell, 2010).

Taken together, these findings show that sellers do not merely describe products but actively construct the terms through which those products are understood. In line with strategic communication theory, communication here functions as a constitutive process through which meaning, value, and credibility are produced (Zerfass et al., 2018). While signaling theory helps explain the use of observable cues such as certification, origin, and product features to communicate quality (Spence, 1973), the data suggests that communication in this context extends beyond signaling fixed attributes. Sellers simultaneously redefine what counts as relevant evidence, shifting between material quality, comparative grading, and relational trust depending on the situation. Similarly, the emphasis on presentation, persuasion, and interaction reflects elements of framing processes (Goffman, 1959), although in this context framing involves shaping evaluative criteria rather than simply managing impressions.

## **5.2. Consumer Interpretation and Evaluation of Authenticity Claims**

In contrast to the strategic efforts of sellers to frame and differentiate products, buyers in the Onitsha Main Market do not passively accept authenticity-related claims. Instead, they engage in active processes of interpretation, evaluation, and judgment, drawing on experience, sensory

assessment, and contextual knowledge to navigate an uncertain market environment. This aligns with an interpretive approach to consumer behavior, which emphasizes that meaning is actively constructed rather than passively received (Arnould and Thompson, 2005)

A central feature of this evaluative process is the role of accumulated experience. Buyers consistently emphasize that the ability to distinguish among products develops over time through repeated exposure to the market. As participant B1 explains, *“experience plays a lot of roles... knowing the market... knowing who stocks up on originals”* while B2 notes that having visited the market for over five years, each visit produces new knowledge. This experiential knowledge serves as informal expertise, allowing buyers to move beyond reliance on sellers' claims and make independent assessments of product quality. In this sense, credibility is not taken at face value but is filtered through what buyers already know. Such reliance on socially acquired knowledge reflects how market understanding is embedded within shared practices and interactional learning (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Closely tied to this is the importance of sensory evaluation as a primary method of verification. Buyers frequently physically engage with products to assess their quality, using touch, manipulation, and visual inspection. For instance, participant B1 explains the need to *“handle it... twist the leather... to see what type of cracks come”* while participant B2 notes, *“I know by the texture... once I touch the material, I will know”*. Similarly, attention is given to factors such as finishing, thickness, and durability, as participant B4 says, *“how is it comfortable... is it durable, is it breathable.”* Through these practices, buyers construct their own criteria for evaluating authenticity, often prioritizing durability and performance over formal indicators of originality. In this sense, authenticity is not verified through objective proof alone but assessed through interpretive and observational engagement with the product (Napoli et al., 2014).

At the same time, buyers exhibit a pronounced skepticism toward seller communication. Rather than assuming honesty, many participants approach interactions with caution, recognizing the strategic nature of selling. As participant B2 states, *“these people... they don't always have truth in their mouth,”* while participant B3 notes that sellers may present *“two fake items... as two originals.”* This awareness leads buyers to critically assess claims rather than accept them, often cross-checking information through their own observations or prior knowledge. Even when sellers

attempt to persuade, buyers maintain a degree of distance, as reflected in a statement by participant B2 “*I cannot be convinced by a seller.*” This dynamic reflects how credibility in informal market contexts must be continuously negotiated during interaction rather than assumed (Lindell, 2010).

Evaluation is further shaped by the interplay of multiple decision-making factors. Buyers do not rely on a single indicator, instead they combine considerations such as price, perceived quality, intended use, and personal judgment. For instance, participant B2 explains that “*I will make my decision based on my pocket*” while participant B3 notes that price becomes decisive “*if I can't tell the difference.*” In such cases, buyers acknowledge the limits of their ability to distinguish between products and adjust their expectations accordingly. This reflects a pragmatic approach in which authenticity is weighed against affordability and purpose, rather than treated as an absolute requirement. Based on the research, consumers often evaluate imitation goods through multiple value dimensions (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Despite this skepticism, trust is not entirely absent from buyer decision-making. Instead, it emerges selectively and conditionally, often based on prior interactions and established relationships. As participant B3 notes “*we have had repeated buying... sometimes the seller just tells me don't go for this,*” indicating trust can develop over time through consistent experience. Similarly, knowledge of specific sellers or distributors can serve as a point of reference, as highlighted by participant B1's discussion of reputation and certification. However, such trust remains situational and does not eliminate the need for independent evaluation (Meagher, 2010).

Importantly, buyers also recognize the inherent uncertainty of the market and limit their own evaluative practices. Even with experience and careful inspection, mistakes are acknowledged as inevitable. As participant B4 explains, “*you still make the mistakes of buying lower quality... especially if you are buying in bulk,*” while participant B2 simply says “*trying my best.*” This acceptance of uncertainty highlights that authenticity is not always fully clear at the point of purchase, but instead something that may only be confirmed through use overtime. In this sense, authenticity remains an ongoing evaluative judgment shaped by context, experience, and interaction (Napoli et al., 2014).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that consumers in the Onitsha Main Market are not passive recipients of authenticity claims but active interpreters who engage in continuous

evaluation and judgment. While sellers attempt to construct credibility through various communication strategies, buyers respond by developing their own framework for assessing quality and trustworthiness. This process reflects elements of interpretive consumer behavior, where meaning is actively constructed rather than simply received. At the same time, the findings suggest that evaluation operates within practical constraints, balancing skepticism with affordability and experience.

### **5.3. Responding to Claims: Acceptance, Adjustment, Pragmatic Compromise**

While sellers actively construct authenticity claims and buyers critically evaluate them, what ultimately emerges in the Onitsha Main Market is not a clear acceptance or rejection of these claims, but a range of adaptive responses. Buyers do not simply decide whether something is authentic. Instead, they adjust, reinterpret, and sometimes strategically accept claims based on their own needs, resources, and expectations. Authenticity, in this sense, becomes less of a fixed judgment and more of a flexible outcome shaped through practical decision-making under constraint.

A key pattern in these responses is pragmatic evaluation, where buyers weigh authenticity against affordability, purpose, and situational needs. For instance, participant B1 explains that even when aware of material differences, *“it really comes down to your choice,”* noting that lower quality products may still *“suit your lifestyle.”* Similarly, participant B5 highlights that purchasing decisions are often driven by what people *“can afford,”* rather than by strict adherence to authenticity standards. This reflects what Eckhardt et al. (2015) argue that consumers do not treat authenticity as an absolute category but instead balance it against other forms of value, such as price and functionality. In this context, authenticity becomes negotiable not because consumers are unaware, but because they make calculated trade-offs.

Closely related to this is the role of personal preference, which further destabilizes any singular definition of authenticity. Buyers demonstrate that even when authenticity cues are available, they may not be decisive. Participant B3, for example, states, *“I just go for the one that was more affordable and then style it up,”* while participant B1 describes how some individuals prioritize appearance or trend over material composition. These variations suggest that authenticity is filtered through individual taste, lifestyle, and identity goals. This supports the argument by Arnould and

Thompson (2005) that consumption is not merely about objective product qualities but about how individuals use market resources to construct meaning and express preference. What counts as “authentic enough” is therefore subjective and situational rather than universal.

At the same time, many participants redefine authenticity in functional terms, shifting emphasis from origin or branding to performance and utility. Participant B3 captures this clearly by stating, “*if it serves the purpose you bought it for... then it is authentic,*” while participant B1 similarly argues that durability and usefulness determine whether a product is authentic. Sellers reinforce this logic, with participant S3 explaining that “*the authenticity is actually measured based on the quality... not really where it is coming from.*” These accounts challenge traditional notions of authenticity tied to provenance, aligning with Napoli et al. (2014) and Morhart et al. (2015), who conceptualize authenticity as something evaluated through perceived reliability and value. Here, authenticity is not about being original in a strict sense, but about working as expected. This shift toward performance-based evaluation also reflects the distinction between indexical and iconic authenticity. While indexical authenticity relies on verifiable origin or direct linkage to an original source, iconic authenticity depends on resemblance to what is culturally seen as “*real*” (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In this context, buyers rarely rely on indexical verification, as product origins are often unclear or inaccessible. Instead, they assess authenticity through observable qualities such as durability, texture, and overall performance. A product is considered authentic because it behaves in ways that align with the expectations of quality.

This functional understanding does not eliminate the complexity of authenticity, instead it coexists with what can be described as an authenticity gradient, where products are not classified as simply “original” or “fake,” but positioned along varying levels of quality and value. Participants repeatedly refer to distinctions such as “*highest quality,*” “*medium,*” and “*low quality,*” as well as labels like “*Turkey,*” “*China,*” or “*local.*” Crucially, these categories do not correspond directly to geographic origin. Participant S4 explicitly clarifies that “*whatever they call it, Turkey or semi-Turkey, all of dem na China... they are just calling it... because of the quality.*” In this sense, origin labels operate as symbolic shorthand within a grading system rather than as factual indicators. This reflects how market actors use shared frames to organize interpretation, as Goffman (1974) suggests, but also reveals that these frames are locally defined and decoupled from their literal meanings. Within this graded system, buyers respond to authenticity claims not by verifying them,

but by locating products within a spectrum that aligns with their expectations and resources. For example, participant B1 explains that different grades reflect durability and intended use, noting that some items are suitable for “*one day*” use while others are meant to last. Similarly, participant S4 introduced the idea of “updates” as a category tied to trends, where consumers prioritize being current over durability. This introduces a temporal dimension to authenticity, where value is linked not only to quality but also to immediacy and relevance. In line with Banet-Weiser (2012), authenticity here is not simply about being real but about fitting within culturally meaningful moments and practices.

Importantly, these different logics do not resolve into a single shared understanding but are articulated, negotiated and contested through communication between sellers and buyers. While some participants insist that authenticity is purely about quality and durability, others treat it as relative, contextual, or even secondary to style and affordability. This tension highlights that authenticity in this market is not stabilized around a single definition but remains open, flexible, and continuously negotiated. Buyers are not passively influenced by sellers' claims, nor are they strictly resistant to them. Rather, they engage with these claims in ways that allow them to make workable decisions within the constraints they face.

#### **5.4. Trust as a Relational Infrastructure For Authenticity**

Trust within the Onitsha Main Market does not operate as a fixed condition or moral assumption about honesty, but as a relational infrastructure that enables exchange under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than being given, trust is continuously built, tested, withdrawn, and recalibrated through interaction. In this sense, trust does not eliminate risk, it organizes how market actors live with it. This reflects how trust in the informal market is understood as emerging through ongoing social interaction and relational embeddedness, rather than through formal institutional guarantees as Lindell (2010) argue.

A key mechanism through which trust is constructed is interactional assessment and personalization. Sellers actively attempt to “read” buyers, not only to maximize sales but to align their communication with perceived needs and capacities. Participant B1 explained that sellers “*size you up*” to determine whether one is “*a trader... an office worker... or a high-end earner,*” shaping how products and prices are presented. This reflects a strategic calibration of

communication, where trust begins with perceived understanding. Rather than presenting standardized claims, sellers tailor their interactions to signal attentiveness and relevance. In this sense, communication functions as a relational practice that organizes expectations, guides interaction, which is consistent with how Falkheimer and Heide (2018) conceptualize strategy as embedded in everyday communicative practices. At the same time, this personalization is not neutral, it is inherently strategic, blurring the line between relational engagement and persuasive intent.

However, trust is not simply built through strategic interaction. It is also earned through demonstrated consistency over time. Buyers repeatedly emphasize that trust develops through repeated exchanges where expectations are met. Participant B2 noted that once a relationship is established, *“you don’t have to go there to feel the texture... they can send it to me,”* while participant B3 described situations where sellers release goods even when payment has not been completed, based on familiarity. These practices indicate that trust functions as a form of social credit, reducing the need for immediate verification. Here, trust becomes embedded within ongoing relationships and mutual dependence, reflecting the kind of relational trust that Meagher (2010) identifies in informal economic systems.

At the same time, trust is not unconditional. It is selective, situational, and reversible. Buyers remain constantly aware that trust can be broken and therefore treat it as provisional. Participant B3 captures this clearly, saying, *“I trust you until I don’t have to trust you anymore,”* while participant B4 describes trusting sellers as *“your own risk.”* This highlights that trust operates alongside skepticism rather than replacing it. Even in established relationships, buyers remain alert to the possibility of opportunistic behavior, particularly when financial stakes are high. An important dimension of trust-building lies in performative honesty and selective transparency. Sellers often establish credibility not by claiming perfection, but by acknowledging limitations or directing buyers away from certain products. Participant B3 explains that when a seller says, *“Don’t buy this, it is fake,”* they are more likely to believe them. Similarly, participant B4 associates trust with sellers who clearly differentiate between *“high quality, medium quality, and low quality.”* These moments of apparent honesty function as strategic signals that enhance credibility. Rather than undermining trust, selective disclosure strengthens it by aligning with buyers’ expectations of realism. This reflects the idea drawn from Carey (2009) that meaning and

credibility are constituted through communicative practices rather than transmitted as objective facts.

Trust is also closely tied to reputation and collective validation, extending beyond individual interactions to broader market networks. Participants describe how certain sellers, shops, or “lines” become known for specific standards that signal authenticity. Participant B1 explains that being guided to a known distributor creates a “safeguard” that what is being purchased is genuine. Similarly, S3 highlights how referrals, testimonials, and customer feedback circulate trust across networks, with new buyers relying on the experiences of others. In this sense, trust becomes socially distributed, shaped through shared knowledge and repeated interaction, echoing Berger's and Luckmann's (1966) argument that reality is constructed and stabilized through collective processes.

At a structural level, trust is reinforced through informal and semi-formal institutional mechanisms. While the market operates largely outside formal regulatory systems, participants point to the role of market unions, shop registration, and complaint channels as forms of accountability. As S1 explains, the existence of receipts and complaint numbers provides a framework for dispute resolution. These mechanisms do not replace relational trust but complement it, offering a minimal layer of security that supports ongoing exchange. This reflects how informal markets often develop hybrid systems of coordination, combining social relations with organizational structures, as discussed by Portes and Haller (2005).

Despite these trust-building processes, both buyers and sellers openly acknowledge the strategic and sometimes manipulative potential within trust relations. Participant B5 explicitly states that sellers can deliberately misrepresent quality “*if they want to deceive you,*” while S2 describes tactics such as offering drinks or creating a relaxed atmosphere to increase buyer compliance. These practices reveal that trust can be actively engineered and exploited, reinforcing its fragile and negotiated nature. Trust, therefore, is not inherently moral; it is a resource that can be used both to sustain and manipulate exchange relationships.

For sellers, maintaining trust is closely linked to long-term business sustainability. Participants repeatedly emphasize that deception carries reputational risks that can undermine future transactions. Participant S4 notes that once customers realize a product is substandard, “*your name*

*becomes sorry,*” which means your business name will be brought down, while participant B2 explains that sellers may go out of their way, even buying from competitors, to satisfy customers and retain them. This indicates that trust functions as an economic asset, in which credibility directly influences repeat patronage and market survival. In this sense, trust becomes embedded within strategic considerations, shaping not only how sellers communicate but how they manage relationships over time.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that trust in the Onitsha Main Market is not a background condition but a central organizing mechanism of exchange. It is built through interaction, reinforced through repetition, negotiated through skepticism, and sustained through both relational and structural means. Rather than guaranteeing authenticity, trust enables actors to make decisions in contexts where authenticity cannot be fully verified. This supports Napoli et al.'s (2014), view of authenticity as an evaluative judgment rather than an objective property, while also reflecting the relational and embedded market dynamics described by Lindell (2010)

### **5.5. Co-Constructing Authenticity through Repeated Interaction**

Authenticity within Onitsha Main Market is not established through a single encounter but is progressively constructed through repeated interactions between buyers and sellers, accumulated experience, refined judgment, and the building of practical knowledge of both products and the market itself. Rather than relying solely on immediate claims and trial or error made during exchange, participants demonstrate that knowing what is “original,” “fake,” or “good quality” is something learned over time through continuous engagement.

Across the data, participants consistently emphasize experience as the foundation of this knowledge. For instance, participant B1 explicitly links long-term engagement with the ability to evaluate products, stating that “*experience plays lots of roles... experience of using a particular thing allows you to know which is more durable.*” Similarly, participant B2 explains that after years of involvement in both buying and sewing, they are no longer easily persuaded by sellers, noting that “*I cannot be convinced by a seller... if I see fabric that is not good...I know.*” These accounts show that repeated exposure reduced dependence on seller claims and shifted evaluation toward embodied and practical knowledge. This pattern reflects the idea that meaning is developed and stabilized through ongoing interaction rather than immediate interpretation (Berger and

Luckmann, 1966). Through repeated participation in the market, buyers begin to internalize shared standards of quality, enabling them to independently assess authenticity without relying entirely on communicative persuasion.

Participants further demonstrate how experience reshapes the interpretation of market cues, particularly regarding seller claims. Participant B3 highlights a shift from initial acceptance to skepticism, explaining that *“the moment I hear original, I start doubting ... because of my many experiences.”* Here, repeated interaction not only builds confidence but also fosters critical awareness, allowing buyers to reinterpret commonly used authenticity signals. Rather than accepting labels such as “good quality” at face value, experienced participants evaluate them within a broader understanding of market practices.

Beyond product evaluation, repeated interaction also produces social knowledge of the market itself. Participant B3 explains how familiarity with the market environment develops over time, noting that *“you will remember when you passed the last time... remind yourself of landmarks”* and that movement deeper into the market often leads to better pricing. Similarly, participant B1 describes how buyers learn to identify reliable distributors through repeated visits and inquiry. These insights show that authenticity is not only tied to product characteristics but also to knowing where and from whom to buy, reinforcing that market knowledge is relational and cumulative.

At the level of product evaluation, participants repeatedly highlight the role of sensory and embodied learning, particularly through touch and use. Participant B5 provides a detailed account of how prolonged involvement enables fine-grained differentiation, explaining that *“once I touch the material, I can tell you that this one is original and this is copy... because I have been in this business for years.”* Likewise, participant B1 notes that authenticity can be assessed through handling, stating that *“you really have to handle it...twist the leather...see what type of cracks come.”* These examples illustrate that authenticity becomes embedded in practical, bodily knowledge developed over time, rather than abstract or symbolic evaluation.

Importantly, this learning process is not limited to buyers. Sellers also describe how expertise is gradually acquired and continuously refined. Participant S3 acknowledges that even experienced traders are still learning, noting that *“even me that is in the business I am still learning... there are so many cues to look out for.”* Similarly, participant S4 emphasizes apprenticeship and prolonged

exposure as necessary for developing competence explaining that “*you have to go and learn the business... stay for a long time and then master it.*” This reinforces that authenticity is co-constructed through interaction, as both buyers and sellers participate in an ongoing process of learning and adjusting.

Repeated interaction also enables participants to navigate product variation and market complexity, particularly in contexts where identical designs may exist across multiple quality levels. Participant B5 explains that products may share the same design but differ significantly in quality, stating that “*the design will be the same, but the quality will not be the same... that is why you have to learn it.*” Similarly, participant S2 notes that differences in material, finishing, and sizing only become visible through careful inspection and familiarity. These accounts show that authenticity is not immediately visible but must be interpreted through accumulated knowledge. From a communication point of view, this aligns with Carey's (2009) ritual communication of meaning maintained through repeated interaction. Over time, buyers and sellers develop shared interpretive frameworks that allow them to classify products into categories without needing extensive explanation in each encounter. However, the data also reveal that repeated interaction does not eliminate uncertainty but instead equips participants to navigate it more effectively. For example, participant S2 admits that sellers sometimes strategically frame products to encourage purchase, while participant B3 notes that sellers may say “*whatever they have to say*” when the stakes are high. This suggests that experience does not remove ambiguity but enhances the ability to interpret and respond to it.

## **5.6. Economic Pressures and Market Realities Shaping Authenticity Practices**

Authenticity within the Onitsha Main Market is not only constructed through interaction and experience but also significantly shaped by economic pressures, market competition, and profit-oriented strategies. In this context, communicative practices surrounding authenticity are deeply embedded within the realities of pricing, production constraints, and the need to attract customers in a highly competitive environment. Rather than reflecting purely objective product qualities, authenticity claims are strategically shaped by what is economically viable and marketable.

A central pattern emerging from the data is that product differentiation is closely tied to affordability and market segmentation. Participants consistently highlight that the existence of

multiple product grades is not accidental but economically driven. For example, participant B3 explains that sellers deliberately target different income groups, noting that “*some stores don’t want to be only for the rich... some sell different grades of a particular material.*” Similarly, participant B4 emphasized that producers intentionally create varied quality levels to accommodate different consumers, stating that “*maybe some people cannot afford this higher quality... so they can go for this medium grade or this small grade.*” These accounts demonstrate that authenticity is not fixed but structured around economic accessibility and consumer capacity. This aligns with existing literature that positions authenticity as an evaluative judgment shaped by contextual factors rather than inherent product attributes (Napoli et al., 2014). In Onitsha Main Market, economic constraints directly influence how products are produced, categorized, and presented, reinforcing that authenticity is negotiated within market realities rather than determined by origin or legality.

Closely related is the role of production strategies in shaping distinctions in authenticity, particularly through intentional variation in quality. Participant B5 provides a clear account of how imitation is economically structured, explaining that producers replicate designs while deliberately lowering quality to reduce cost, “*they will copy the same design... but reduce the quality... because of the price.*” This highlights that imitation goods are not merely deceptive copies but are part of a broader economic logic aimed at affordability and profit maximization. As further emphasized by participant S4 “*China can manufacture first grade, second grade, third grade... for the rich and the poor.*” Here, authenticity becomes relative rather than absolute, existing along a spectrum defined by production decisions and market demand. Such findings reinforce arguments that authenticity cannot be reduced to binary distinctions between “original” and “fake” but must be understood within systems of value shaped by economic and cultural conditions (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). The presence of multiple grades reflects not only imitation but also adaptation to diverse consumer needs within informal market structures (Meagher, 2010).

Another key dimension through which economic pressures shape authenticity is pricing as a communicative and strategic tool. Across the data, price functions not only as a monetary value but also as a signal that influences how products are interpreted. Participant B5 succinctly captures this relationship, stating, “*If you raise the quality, you raise the price.*” Similarly, participant S3 explains that consumer decisions are often structured by budget constraints, noting that “*your*

*budget... will automatically put you where you belong.*” These insights show that price serves as a mechanism by which authenticity is communicated and inferred, guiding consumer expectations and evaluations. At the same time, pricing is also shaped by market conditions such as supply, demand, and competition. Participant S2 notes that when a product is scarce or trending, sellers may increase the price because *“you will not see it everywhere.”* Conversely, bulk purchasing and lower production costs can also enable sellers to reduce prices and attract customers. This demonstrates that perceptions of authenticity fluctuate in response to changing market dynamics (Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

Beyond pricing and production, the data highlights the significant influence of market competition and persuasive selling practices, particularly through the phenomenon of *“Oso Afia.”* Oso Afia refers to informal intermediaries who actively intercept and direct customers towards sellers, often using persuasive and attention-grabbing tactics. As participant B1 notes, engaging with such actors involves a cost, explaining that *“you are going to pay for that help.”* Similarly, participant B3 describes how these individuals operate at market entrances, approaching customers and redirecting them to specific sellers.

Participants consistently portray Oso Afia as a highly visible and disruptive yet integral part of the market environment. Participant B4 describes the experience as overwhelming and confusing, noting that these actors *“make the market more confusing... they say they have a shop... then you see them again somewhere else.”* This reflects how Oso Afia functions as informal, mobile advertising, in which attention is actively captured and redirected in real time. From a strategic communication perspective, Oso Afia can be understood as a form of situated persuasive practice shaped by competitive pressure, where communication is used deliberately to influence consumer movement and decision-making (Zerfass et al., 2018). Rather than relying on formal advertising channels, sellers utilize human intermediaries who perform promotional work through direct interaction, effectively transforming the marketplace into a dynamic communication environment.

However, the data also reveals that these practices introduce significant tension in how authenticity is constructed and perceived. Participant B4 points out that Oso Afia actors are primarily motivated by personal gain, explaining that *“they are more concerned about the money that enters their pocket... not thinking about quality.”* Similarly, participant S2 criticized their impact, stating that

*“Oso Afia kills the sellers... they don’t care if the customer is coming back.”* These accounts suggest that while Oso Afia facilitates sales and visibility, it can also undermine long-term credibility and distort authenticity claims.

This tension reflects concerns within authenticity research regarding the relationship between strategic intent and perceived credibility. While communication is necessary for constructing authenticity, overly aggressive and misaligned strategies may lead to perceptions of manipulation or deception (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). In the case of Osa Afia, the immediate goal of attracting customers often overrides considerations of consistency and trust, creating a fragmented and sometimes unreliable authenticity landscape. At the same time, Oso Afia practices can be interpreted as a response to structural conditions within informal markets. In highly competitive environments where visibility is limited and customer flow is uncertain, such strategies become necessary for survival. As noted by participant S1, some sellers actively resist these intermediaries because they can damage the market's reputation, while others engage with them as part of everyday business practice. This reflects Oso Afia's dual role as both a marketing resource and a source of instability.

Importantly, these dynamics mirror broader patterns of communication in contemporary marketplaces, where consumers are frequently exposed to persuasive messages competing for attention and influencing decision-making. Just as digital advertising interrupts and redirect user attention, Oso Afia operates as a physical and interpersonal equivalent, embedding promotional communication directly into the flow of market activity. In both cases, consumers must navigate a landscape where information is strategically presented, selectively framed and sometimes misleading.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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This study examines how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated through strategic communicative processes among sellers and buyers in Onitsha Main Market. The findings demonstrate that authenticity in this context cannot be understood as a fixed attribute; rather, it emerges as a socially produced and interactionally negotiated outcome, shaped by communicative practices, interpretive processes, and the material conditions of the market. This shifts attention away from authenticity as a stable property and toward authenticity as something continuously constituted through everyday communication.

From a social constructionist perspective, these findings reinforce the argument that meaning is not inherent in objects but produced through shared interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). However, the study extends this position by showing that such meaning is not merely constructed at a general social level but actively performed within specific market encounters. Sellers and buyers do not rely on pre-existing definitions of authenticity; instead, they continuously negotiate what counts as “quality,” “original,” or “copy” through communicative engagement. In this sense, authenticity is not simply socially constructed in the abstract but communicatively constituted in practice, aligning with Carey (2009) view of communication as a ritual process through which reality is produced and sustained.

At the same time, the findings complicate conventional understandings of strategic communication. Existing literature often conceptualizes strategic communication as planned, organizationally coordinated, and institutionally supported (Zerfass et al., 2018). In contrast, this study shows that in informal market environments, communicative strategy is not pre-designed but enacted in real time through situated interaction. Sellers dynamically adjust their messaging, deploy context-specific signals, and draw on framing, comparison, and persuasive narratives to construct credibility under conditions of uncertainty. Signaling processes are evident in the use of price, product features, and references to certification or origin (Spence, 1973), yet these signals do not operate as fixed indicators of authenticity. Instead, their meaning is continuously shaped and reinterpreted with interaction. Similarly, framing processes extend beyond impression management (Goffman, 1974) to include the active redefinition of evaluative criteria, where sellers

guide buyers toward particular ways of assessing quality, durability, and value. Strategic communication in this context emerges as an adaptive and relational practice rather than a formalized organizational function.

The findings further highlight the central role of interpretation in shaping authenticity. Buyers do not passively receive or accept authenticity-related claims but actively engage in processes of evaluation, comparison, and judgment. This supports an interpretive approach to consumer behavior, which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through interaction and experience rather than unilaterally (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Drawing on accumulated knowledge, sensory engagement, and contextual awareness, buyers develop their own frameworks for assessing sellers' credibility to help determine the product's authenticity. These interpretive practices are not static but evolve over time, reflecting the iterative nature of meaning-making described in symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Authenticity, therefore, is not determined at the point of communication but emerges through the interplay between seller claims and the buyer's interpretation. Importantly, the interaction between sellers and buyers does not produce a singular or stable definition of authenticity. Instead, the findings reveal a process of ongoing negotiation in which multiple, sometimes competing, understandings coexist. Authenticity is not resolved into a fixed consensus but remains flexible, situational, and contingent on practical considerations. This is particularly evident in the emergence of graded product classifications, where distinctions such as “high quality,” “Turkey,” “update,” or “first copy” replace the binary categories of original versus fake. Such classification reflects a shared yet fluid system of meaning that allows market actors to coordinate expectations without relying on formal verification. In this sense, authenticity operates as a negotiated category that is sufficiently stabilized to enable exchange, yet open enough to accommodate variation and reinterpretation.

The role of trust further complicates conventional assumptions linking authenticity to credibility. Rather than being dependent on the verification of authenticity, trust in this context is relational, incremental, and embedded in repeated interaction. Consistent with research on informal economies (Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2010), trust emerges through familiarity, reputation, and demonstrated reliability over time. However, the findings also show that trust does not eliminate skepticism but coexists with it. Buyers remain aware of the possibility of misrepresentation and treat trust as provisional rather than absolute. In this sense, trust functions less as a guarantee of

authenticity and more as a mechanism that enables exchange in the absence of certainty. Authenticity judgments, therefore, are not replaced by trust but are mediated through it.

Finally, the study highlights the extent to which authenticity is shaped by broader economic and structural conditions. Product differentiation, pricing strategies, and communicative practices are closely tied to market realities such as affordability, competition, and production constraints. The presence of multiple product grades, alongside differentiated pricing, reflects both variations in quality and the economic logic of serving diverse consumer segments. Similarly, pricing operates both as an economic mechanism and a communicative signal that involves interpretation and expectation. These findings support arguments that authenticity is not solely a symbolic or cultural construct but is embedded within material and economic contexts (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Napoli et al., 2014). In this environment, authenticity is continually negotiated within the constraints and opportunities shaped by the market itself.

### **6.1. Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes several contributions to research on authenticity, consumer culture, and strategic communication by re-specifying how authenticity operates within informal market contexts. Rather than treating authenticity as a fixed attribute, perceptual judgment, or brand-derived quality, the findings reposition it as an interactional, communicative, and constituted process emerging from everyday market practices.

First, the study contributes to authenticity research by shifting the focus from authenticity as a property of objects to authenticity as a practice enacted through interaction. Much of the existing literature conceptualizes authenticity in relation to origin, indexical linkage, or consumer perception of genuineness (Beverland, 2005; Napoli et al., 2014). While these perspectives acknowledge the interpretive dimension of authenticity, they often retain the underlying assumption that authenticity can be identified, measured, or verified. In contrast, the findings of this study demonstrate that in informal market settings such as Onitsha Main Market, authenticity is not discovered but actively produced through communicative engagement. Sellers and buyers jointly construct what counts as “original,” “copy,” or “quality” through ongoing negotiation, comparison, and interpretation. This extends existing frameworks by conceptualizing authenticity not as an evaluative outcome alone, but as a situated practice embedded in interaction.

Secondly, the study contributes to strategic communication research by extending the concept of strategy beyond formal organizational contexts. Dominant approaches to strategic communication emphasize planned messaging, coordinated campaigns, and institutional structures that guide communication processes (Zerfass et al., 2018). However, the findings suggest that strategic communication does not require formal planning but rather operates as a dynamic and adaptive process embedded in ongoing communicative interactions. Sellers in the Onitsha Main Market engage in strategic communication through improvisation, framing, signaling, and persuasive storytelling, continuously adjusting their approach in response to buyer reactions and situational cues. This suggests that strategic communication should not be understood solely as a top-down organizational activity, but also as a relational and context-sensitive practice embedded in everyday economic exchange. In doing so, the study broadens the scope of strategic communication to include informal and non-institutionalized environments.

Third, the study contributes to research on informal markets by demonstrating that such markets are structured through shared meanings and communicative practices rather than lacking organization. Informal markets are often characterized in literature as unregulated, unpredictable, or loosely structured (Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2010). While these characteristics capture important aspects of informality, the findings of this study reveal a structured system of classification, evaluation, and coordination grounded in a shared understanding. Concepts such as product grading, origin labels, and quality distinctions function as collectively recognized frameworks that guide interaction and decision making. These frameworks are not externally imposed but are continuously reproduced through communication. This suggests that informal markets are not devoid of structure but are organized through socially constructed and interactionally sustained systems of meanings.

Finally, the study contributes to the broader discussions of trust and market exchange by decoupling trust from authenticity. Existing research often assumes that trust is closely tied to the authenticity or genuineness of products. However, the findings demonstrate that trust can operate independently of product authenticity, emerging instead from relational factors such as repeated interactions, the seller's reputation, and perceived honesty. Trust in this context is not a guarantee of authenticity but a mechanism that enables exchange in the presence of uncertainty. This reconceptualization challenges dominant assumptions and highlights the need to understand trust

as a relational and communicative phenomenon rather than a direct function of product characteristics.

## **6.2. Practical Implications**

This study offers several practical insights for actors operating in informal market environments, particularly in contexts where authenticity cannot be formally verified. First, the findings suggest that communication plays a central role in shaping how products are understood, evaluated, and accepted. For sellers, this highlights the importance of developing credible and context-sensitive communication practices that align with buyers' interpretive frameworks. Rather than relying solely on claims of originality, effective communication involves demonstrating quality through comparison, explanation, and observational cues that resonate with buyers' expectations.

Second, the findings indicate that trust is not primarily secured through formal certification but through relational consistency and interactional reliability. For market actors, this underscores the value of long-term relationship-building, transparency, and reputation management as key resources for sustaining their businesses. Sellers who consistently align their communication with product performance are more likely to maintain customer trust and encourage repeat patronage.

Lastly, the findings are relevant for businesses and brands seeking to operate within or alongside informal markets. Understanding that consumers evaluate products based on a combination of price, functionality, and experiential quality, rather than on strict authenticity criteria, can inform more adaptive marketing strategies. This may include recognizing the role of imitation goods not simply as threats but as part of a broader consumption ecosystem shaped by accessibility and demand.

## **6.3. Limitation**

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study relies on interview data rather than direct observation of market interactions. While this means the research does not capture the real-time dynamics of communication as they unfold, interviews provided in-depth insight into how participants interpret, explain, and make sense of authenticity in everyday market interactions. This made it possible to access participants' subjective understandings, experiences, and reflections in ways that observation alone may not

have fully revealed. As such, the findings reflect participants' accounts and interpretations of interaction rather than direct observation of interactions themselves

Secondly, the study is based on a relatively small, context-specific sample of 9 participants, comprising 5 buyers and 4 sellers at the Onitsha Main Market. While this enables in-depth exploration of experiences and perspectives, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond this setting. The study, therefore, prioritizes analytical depth and contextual understanding.

Third, participants were recruited through referral-based access, with initial contacts facilitating connections to other participants. While this approach was necessary given the practical challenges of remotely accessing actors in the market, it may have influenced the sample's composition. However, it did not appear to constrain the diversity of perspectives captured, as participants represented both buyer and seller positions and provided varied accounts of market practices.

Finally, the interviews, conducted in both English and Nigerian Pidgin, raise considerations for transcription and translation. Although care was taken to preserve meaning and context, certain expressions and nuances may not be fully transferable across languages. Given that this study examines authenticity as a communicatively constructed concept, such nuances are analytically significant.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a detailed, contextually grounded account of how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in informal market interactions.

#### **6.4. Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One important direction involves using the observational method to examine the construction of authenticity in real-time market interactions. Such an approach would complement interview-based insights by capturing the immediate dynamics of communication, negotiation, and persuasion.

Further research could also adopt a comparative perspective by examining similar processes across different informal markets, both within Nigeria and in other global contexts. This would allow for

a deeper understanding of how cultural, economic, and institutional differences shape authenticity practices.

In addition, future studies could explore the role of global supply chains in shaping local constructions of authenticity. The use of labels such as “China,” “Turkey,” or “Italy” in the Onitsha Main Market suggests that global production and distribution networks influence how products are classified, valued, and interpreted. Investigating how these global references are locally adapted and re-signified would provide valuable insight into the interaction between global market structures and local meaning-making practices.

## **6.5. Conclusion**

The study set out to examine how authenticity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated within seller and consumer interactions in Onitsha Main Market. Moving beyond conventional understandings of authenticity as a fixed or verifiable attribute, the findings demonstrate that authenticity operates as a communicative and relational accomplishment embedded in everyday market exchange.

By foregrounding interaction, the study shows that sellers do not simply present products but actively construct credibility through strategic communication, while buyers engage in continuous processes of interpretation, evaluation, and adjustment. Authenticity, therefore, does not exist prior to exchange but emerges through the dynamic interplay between communicative claims, interpretive practices, and situational constraints. This process is further shaped by economic realities, where affordability, competition, and production structures influence how products are classified, valued, and understood.

Importantly, the study reveals that it does not depend on the verification of authenticity but is instead built through repeated interaction, reputation, and relational consistency. In this sense, market exchange is sustained not by certainty, but by negotiated understanding and practical judgment. These findings challenge dominant assumptions that position authenticity as a stable property and strategic communication as a formal, structured activity, instead highlighting their situated, adaptive, and interactional nature within informal market environments.

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# APPENDIX 1

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## INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

My name is Martha Kika Ikechukwu-Alimigbe. I am a master's student in strategic communication in the Department of Communication at Lund University. For my master's thesis, I am researching how authenticity is communicated in informal markets where original and imitation products coexist. Through this research, I aim to shed light on a part of Nigeria that is often overlooked by its citizens and unfamiliar to the Western world. I would appreciate your participation in this study.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Authenticity has long been attributed to many things, and today it is often seen as socially constructed, meaning it depends on what people within a community or group agree upon. While that is true, I believe that before a community can agree on a definition of authenticity that resonates with them, there must have been communication, specifically strategic communication, because they will want to set measures and establish benchmarks for what authenticity is based on. My research questions are: 1. How do sellers in Onitsha Main Market strategically communicate and differentiate products when authenticity is questioned? 2. How do consumers interpret, evaluate, and respond to sellers' authenticity-related claims during market exchanges? 3. How do repeated seller-consumer interactions shape shared understandings of authenticity, value, and trust within markets dominated by imitation?

### **PARTICIPATION PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this interview, you agree to be part of a semi-structured interview. This means you can say anything you know about the topic, even if you're not asked directly. The interview will last at least 45 minutes, so feel free to share your thoughts and experiences. It will

be conducted on WhatsApp because it's an application you're familiar with, so you can be comfortable. Finally, with your permission, the interview will be recorded so I can accurately write the report.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose not to answer any specific question, and you can withdraw from the interview at any time without any problem.

## **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

There are no known physical risks. However, if any topic or question during the interview feels personally sensitive, you are free to take a break or stop at any time.

There may be no immediate benefit to you, but your participation will help us understand how authenticity develops through communication, especially from a Nigerian perspective. Often, we accept Western definitions without showing that, while they are correct, we are also right about how we create meaning.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA MANAGEMENT**

Your name will be replaced with a description or character to keep you anonymous (pseudonym). I will also ensure that recordings taken during the interview and transcripts generated are safely stored on my device, which I alone have access to, and are protected by a password. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed or deleted immediately after the completion of my thesis.

## **PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT CHECKBOXES**

☐ Please indicate by ticking the boxes below to show your consent.

☐ I have read and understood the information provided above.

☐ I have agreed to be audio-recorded during the session.

☐ I understand that my words may be quoted anonymously in the thesis

☐ I have volunteered to participate in this study

X

Participant Name and Signature

X

Date

## APPENDIX 2

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### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR BUYERS AND SELLERS AT ONITSHA MAIN MARKET

*Duration: 45-60 Mins*

*Format: Semi-Structured Interview*

*Language: English And Nigerian Pidgin*

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

To gain insight into the experience level of the buyer and seller, as well as their knowledge of the market and reasons for choosing to buy or sell there, this will help understand how authenticity is communicated, evaluated, and decisions are made in the Onitsha Main Market.

#### For Traders

1. Can you tell me about your business? What kinds of products do you sell?
2. How long have you been trading in Onitsha?
3. Who are your typical customers? (Like SME or end users)
4. What was the last thing you sold?

#### For Buyers

1. How often do you shop in the Onitsha main market?
2. What kinds of products do you usually buy there? (Is there a reason you buy these certain products from there?)
3. What brings you to that market instead of other places?
4. What was the last thing you bought?

#### DEFINING AUTHENTICITY (FRAMING AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM)

#### For Both

4. In your opinion, what makes a product authentic in this market?
5. How do you define authenticity? Is it the origin, the price, durability, or usability?
6. When someone says a product is “original,” what does that mean to you?
7. How do you know when something is original?

8. Are there different grades or levels? Can you explain them, and can they still be considered authentic even if they are imitations?

## **EVALUATION AND DECISION-MAKING (SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND SIGNALING)**

### **For Buyers**

9. When you want to buy something, how do you decide which version to choose when looking at two similar-looking products with different stories about them? How do you make your decision?
10. What signs or signals do you look for?
11. Has a seller ever convinced you that something was original? How?

### **For Traders**

9. What do you say or show to convince customers about the quality of both the original and the imitation? When you have two similar-looking products with different qualities, how do you sell the product to them?
10. How do customers usually decide what to buy?
11. Do customers question authenticity? What do you do in that situation?

## **TRUST, REPUTATION, AND EXPERIENCE (SIGNALING)**

### **For Both**

12. How important is trust in buying or selling here?
13. Does the reputation of the seller matter in deciding if something is original?
14. Can someone sell fake goods and still be trusted? How and why?

## **NEGOTIATION AND DISAGREEMENT**

This shows relationships with all theories; what frame was used? Does it have a general social understanding? What interpretations did they get as opposed to what was meant? What signals were looked for that led to disagreement? Was there credibility or trust in the end, or was it left that way?

15. Have you ever disagreed about whether something was original?
16. What happened?

17. How was it resolved?

## **REFLECTION**

This part will summarize key information about their understanding of authenticity.

18. Do you think authenticity matters to everyone in the same way?

19. Is there something more you would like to add to our conversation?