

When consumers search for authenticity: In the eye of the beholder?

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Is McDonald's an authentic brand? What about Marlboro? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers are able to find authenticity in unlikely places.

"Consumer identity goals (or their idealized images of themselves) underpin assessments of whether a brand is authentic (genuine, real, and true) or not," write authors Michael B. Beverland (RMIT University, Melbourne) and Francis J. Farrelly (Monash University).

The researchers identified three primary identity goals: a desire for control, connection, or virtue. "These goals reflect three respective societal norms: the need to be practical, to participate in community, and to be moral," the authors explain. "When seeking to achieve these different goals, consumers choose different brands. When consumers desire to be in control, they may view McDonalds as an inauthentic brand partner because [fast food](#) leads to increases in weight. Alternately, McDonald's may be viewed as a genuine partner when the same consumer is seeking to connect with others."

Consumers tend to project or infer certain motives onto brands or reduce brand claims to a few basic features, the authors found. For example, several consumers viewed driving the original VW Beetle as a highly virtuous act, because the original motive behind producing the car was to provide cheap transport for everyone—despite the fact that it was the Nazi Government that originally commissioned the car.

The authors say they were intrigued by how consumers were able to judge seemingly mundane objects or mass-market brands as authentic. "[Consumers](#) found authenticity in The Simpsons, McDonald's, cigarette manufacturers, and Nike," the authors write. "Another surprise was the way committed environmentalists found authenticity in work-related objects such as SUVs."

"Authenticity is not necessarily an objective feature of an object, or conferred to things by authorities or based on the passing of time," the authors write. "Nor is it applicable only to small or anti-establishment brands, such as Ben and Jerry's or Snapple. Instead, authenticity is generated by the consumer, often in highly creative and unexpected ways."

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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