

How marketing managers can navigate the cultural contradictions of authenticity

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Researchers from University of Wisconsin-Madison and Bucknell University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that derives new insights for managing brand authenticity that

diverges from conventional conceptualizations and recommended best practices.

The article is authored by Craig Thompson and Ankita Kumar.

Corporations increasingly seek to signal that they are conducting their businesses in a value-driven or socially conscious manner. Often referred to as conscious capitalism, or "woke branding," these companies use their brand assets to signal to consumers that they actively engage in furthering important progressive causes such as climate change, workers' rights, and gender equity.

However, these efforts are often met with considerable skepticism by consumers and journalists who believe there is a fundamental contradiction between profit-making and conscious capitalists' pledges to do the "right thing." This branding dilemma has been further exacerbated by social media users who are quick to pounce upon (and denounce) "woke brands" for any marketing missteps that seem to affirm their skepticism. In this contentious environment, establishing the [authenticity](#) of conscious capitalism is a very challenging marketing problem.

When this "woke problem" is viewed within its broader historical context, we can see that it is an amplification of a more general, cultural ambiguity facing the marketing profession. On the positive side, marketing seeks to advocate for the needs (and voices) of customers while it simultaneously functions as a means for companies to enhance their profits and [market share](#).

This juxtaposition readily gives rise to concerns that short-term (and potentially exploitive) profitability goals might take priority over serving customers' best interests. Given this cultural backdrop, consumer skepticism toward the authenticity of conscious capitalism promises is

almost inevitable. However, this skepticism is not just a special case; rather, it is a magnification of a more general authenticity problem facing all [marketing strategies](#).

The marketing literature has defined authenticity as a perceptual quality that consumers attribute to a brand. Following this definition, research has sought to identify the essential features possessed by brands, business, or celebrities that drive these perceptions of authenticity and conversely to identify the contrasting features that generate perceptions of inauthenticity.

Though specific definitions vary, almost all involve some combination of truth-oriented traits, such as honesty, sincerity, originality, integrity, and genuineness. This conventional approach, while making intuitive sense, is unable to effectively grapple with the cultural complexity manifest in the process of "authenticating" a brand or managing challenges and skepticism toward these authenticity claims.

Thompson explains that "The conventional approach seeks to specify an ambiguous cultural category—authenticity—by referring to other semantic terms whose meanings are also contextually contingent and malleable, such as honesty, sincerity, originality, genuineness, and truthfulness. It also fails to address the underlying cultural tension between marketing authenticity and inauthenticity that is latent to any branding claims."

In other words, even if a brand is currently viewed as being authentic by most consumers, that perceptual value is tenuous and can easily be disrupted by any information (or rumor) that invokes meanings related to the category of inauthenticity. Rather than being diametric opposites or even a continuum, authenticity and inauthenticity form a gestalt or figure ground relationship—authenticity/inauthenticity—whereby perceptions of authenticity can quickly shift to the inauthentic.

Furthermore, informing marketing managers that their brand lacks authenticity because consumers see marketing claims as being unoriginal, insincere, or dishonest offers little guidance on how to resolve the deeper cultural tensions that drive these unfavorable perceptions.

Rather than a checklist of definitional attributes, we argue that marketing managers need an [analytical approach](#) that can enable them to answer questions such as: (1) Why is their [brand](#) or business susceptible to certain kinds of authenticity challenges? (2) What cultural meanings and contradictions underlie those challenges? and (3) What responses could they take to mitigate the unfavorable associations that ensue from these tensions?

"Marketing managers can use our framework marketing managers to analyze the cultural contradictions of authenticity that can undermine their authenticity claims. Though we focus on the context of conscious capitalist brands, our analytic framework is designed to be applied across different branding contexts," says Kumar.

By understanding the contextualized meanings through which these tensions between the authentic and inauthentic are manifested, marketing managers can develop appropriate strategies for authenticating their brands and combatting the threats posed by dis-authenticating associations.

More information: Craig J. Thompson et al, EXPRESS: Analyzing the Cultural Contradictions of Authenticity: Theoretical and Managerial Insights from the Market Logic of Conscious Capitalism, *Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429221087987](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221087987)

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