chasing authenticity in a post-truth world

karla vincheva
ba thesis
fashion management

amfi 2018
overall...

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>intro</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>post-truth</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>authenticity</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>purpose</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>case studies</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>sourcelist</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
disclaimer

I hereby declare that this graduation paper is my own and autonomous work. All sources and aids used have been indicated as such. All texts either quoted directly or paraphrased have been indicated by in-text citations. Full bibliographic details are given in the reference list which also contains internet sources containing URL and access date. This work has not been submitted to any other examination authority.

name: Karla Vincheva

place: Amsterdam, The Netherlands

date: 23/05/2018

signature: 

handwritten
In a current media landscape where the notion of truth is rather blemished, there has never been more important time for brands and creatives to own their voice and look into their values. Brands want to get consumers involved with their products, and to get the skeptical consumers of today to engage, brands need to be authentic, to win their trust. Already big players are rethinking their strategy and are trying to understand what role they play in the conversation - how can they add value vs. just adding another blaring sound to the indefinite commercial flow.

To fulfill this, companies are increasingly chasing purpose. Everyone wants a piece of it. It has even become a rather pervasive, overused term in the business environment. Few brands are succeeding and very much winning from it, but many are also failing. For the latter, purpose brings more and more long-lasting damage than good.

So, what is the winning formula? Has purpose become the ‘post-truth’ tool for rendering brand authenticity? And what determines if a brand will be applauded for its efforts, or will be torn to pieces?
why me writing this?

The pages you are about to swipe in fact represent the graduation project to complete my bachelor degree in International Fashion Management at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI).

In those dynamic four years I got the taste of quite few industry aspects - developing brands, product lines, business plans, virtual reality experiences, and so on. But what I got to enjoy utmost is the field of strategic marketing and communications and it is that passion that has led my way through the Brand Strategy and Marketing internship at We Are Muze, through the VR Experience minor and the Marketing Innovation specialisation. They all have thought me how to reflect on what I hear, see and experience and how to then apply that to the diversity of projects coming along the way.

The fashion industry is full of wonders, especially in the area of communications. Making us go mad about brands, images and items, making us belong but also authenticate ourselves. But what I got to learn is that industries can and should exchange learnings and collaborate. Getting the audience to relate, engage and commit is a shared aim. Therefore with this paper I wanted to step aside from the fashion industry alone and peek into the broader picture of marketing and advertising practices.

And there are things bigger than brands, that make them change the way they behave. One of those phenomena is what I refer here as ‘post-truth’. The first time I get to realise its existence is about two years ago, after reading ‘Trust Me, I’m Lying’ by Ryan Holiday, the media strategist behind American Apparel. Then, I visited the ADWEEK conference in London and got fascinated by its impact on society, businesses and advertisers. After that, no one could pull me apart of the topic, until I unriddle its intricacy.

To end this stream of consciousness, I wish to sincerely thank all the people along my studies, teachers and colleagues. To all the ones giving me their feedback and motivational kick. To my mentors, Jos Geurts and Marco Mosinkoff, for giving me the freedom to express myself in such experimental ‘academic’ format and for their invaluable guidance.
Why read this? / Aim

Post-truth, trust, authenticity, purpose. It is a beautiful collection of buzz words that have prevailed the media in the last two years. But while many speak of them separately, no research has been done to my knowledge to understand how they are interconnected and how that can be used for long-term success. The purpose of this interactive publication is to firstly break through the complexity of these terms and examine their relevance in the current times. Then, an evaluation tool, ‘the authenticity of purpose’ graph will bridge the concepts and allow for an easier comprehension of brand communication attempts and their efficiency in rendering authenticity in this post-truth world.

Marketing professionals, folks from the advertising world, executives, curious students and academics, this book is for all. It brings the theory to the real world by real examples, opinions and stories. It gets to the ‘why’ of our actions as practitioners and lets us learn from the mistakes and success of others.

Even if you have nothing to do with communication and brands, keep on reading. The accessible and fun format of the book will get you quickly to the end and make you understand the theatrical landscape of this odd media world we are all exposed to.

Be inspired to recognise real from fake but to also do good.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>which questions will be answered?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the ‘post-truth’ era and how are brands affected by it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is authenticity and in what ways can a brand be authentic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it to stay authentic in a post-truth world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why purpose has become a leading choice for brands?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What determines if a brand’s purpose attempt is to be perceived as authentic or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are brands already employing purpose and for whom does it work?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The topic of post-truth had an explosive momentum in the media, but is actually a relatively new topic for the academics, especially in the direction of brand communication. Due to the lack of scientific research on it and its complexity, an inductive methodology has been applied, more specifically in the form of grounded theory. Only after a substantial amount of broader questions and prime research, patterns have emerged and been put together to form a theory.

Broad literature review complements the research, particularly in the topics of ‘post-truth’ and authenticity, to describe their complexity and relevance. Inductive content analysis has been done too on six podcasts by experts and eight topic-related panels, which I attended during ADWEEK London in March. For the record, ADWEEK is the premier event/conference for marketing, brand, advertising, and technology professionals. These have particularly proved the discussed topics relevant and brought for its practical application.

Following is a qualitative multiple case study research, basing it on the developed plot graph tool. The four main cases chosen are ‘Until We All Belong’ by Airbnb Australia, ‘Daughter’ by Audi, ‘Ode to Lesvos’ by Johnnie Walker and an anti-gun activism by Gucci. These were chosen with the main aim of testing the relationship between authenticity and purpose and applying the graph. They were too chosen to examine cases from each of the four quadrants of the graph, thus, secondarily, they were chosen to ‘fit’. Finally, not only the cases show the broad application of the graph by touching upon various industries, but they also portray rather diverse approaches to purpose, from CEO activism to a single campaign and call-to-action.

Data for each of the cases has been collected majorly via online research, or netnography. Audience reception has been evaluated through social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube. A search of the specific campaign hashtag or post has revealed direct consumer opinions, from which the resulted perception could be approximated. Additional to this, a close reading into the media coverage of the campaigns has been performed, one that already contains some statistical data, press release information or a critical perspective.
Limitations (to keep in mind)

This post-truth - authenticity - purpose ride was truly bumpy, I can even say I went totally off-road with this project. What was started as a thesis came up to be this queer publication that just wants to be useful, inspiring and fun. And it is the experimental nature of both the process and the product that have brought some limitations that deserve to be acknowledged.

First of all, there is the complexity of the chosen topics of authenticity and post-truth. The lack of prior research studies on post-truth and its influence on brand communication got me looking into expert opinions on the topic via panel discussions, podcasts, reports and articles. What misses therefore is a qualitative research of the consumers’ side of the story, which would certainly enrich and test the findings. That could be of course a next step, if this research is to be continued.

With that comes the question of measuring authenticity. Authenticity is something very hard to define and even harder to measure. The matrix developed makes an effort in evaluating the effectiveness of purposeful communication decisions in delivering an authentic brand offering. It works by considering two main criteria but there are also other factors such as different culture background, opposing opinion or preliminary knowledge of the brand that come too as influencers of authenticity perception.

Another limitation comes with the multiple case study method. It is in the nature of case study research that it is often difficult to avoid a potential selection bias. The cases in this paper have been chosen due to their differentiating and phenomenological characteristics. Thus, in order to bring more diversity into the study, and prove the applicability of the developed graph, I decided to add a section with additional ‘purpose’ cases, where everyone is invited to ‘try’ a case themselves and determine its effectiveness in rendering authenticity. In case of a further research though, a certain emphasis could be put into a negative case analysis in order the full complexity of the data to be captured.

With these in mind, I hope the book will inspire, spark curiosity and become a basis for further research into the topic.
The (logical) structure of the report

The exploratory nature of this research has deprived the report of following a strict or ideally chronological structure. Anyways, apparent is the desired appeal of a story - starting with examining the issue of post-truth (chapter one) in order to get to the notions of trust and skepticism, and shape the picture of the ‘environment’ of current business practices. The findings there are needed to lead to the next big theme of authenticity (chapter two), which needs to be closely evaluated as it later on becomes the main object of measurement of the proposed graph. Purpose (chapter 3) is then added to the story as a connection point, or resulting brand communication choice, from rendering authenticity in a post-truth environment. In this same section, purpose and authenticity are entangled together in the ‘authenticity of purpose’ graph, which bridges the way to the four case studies (chapter 4).

The four case studies share similar logic of evaluation - description of the campaign, closer look into its goals and results, examination of audience reception, illustrated with direct examples and a overall analysis on the campaign by using the ‘authenticity of purpose’ graph. At the final, the four cases are plotted together in one graph in order for findings to be clearly communicated. That shapes the way to the conclusion (chapter 5) and the set of additional purpose examples, ready to be evaluated with the proposed method.

With all that in mind, let’s finally start.
post-truth
post-truth? what the heck?

Let’s start with a straightforward fact - Oxford Dictionary announced ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year 2016, making it the first buzz word of this publication. Oxford defines it as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). It took few months only for the term to explode in popularity, following the political episodes of the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum. But why then exactly? Well, both events were stirred into realisation due to the possibilities that social media, and media in general, gave to some political leaders and enabled them to share with loud voice things that were rather untrue, speculative and attention-grabbing. That turned out to be enough to win enough votes from the masses, but also enough to shake the common sense of trust of as much as many.

If a ‘guilty’ finger is to be pointed at someone, the Internet and social media are the two social mega trends deserving the blame. Behind them on the ‘guilty’ side are the increasingly fractioned media landscape, increased polarisation and declining trust in science (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017). It is not the expert’s opinion what matters the most, but rather, it is the ‘curated’, or algorithm-based, flow of opinions people get by every minute in their social media feeds (Ecker, 2017).

what is Slavoj Zizek’s say on this?
It is indeed the digital culture that has enabled anyone to freely post own opinions, to filter the information they get, and so, to self-reinforce their own opinions (Davies, 2016). Think about it, in our news feeds aren’t we surrounded by the information we want to read, by the people we already know, like or someone recommended to us? In this post-truth world powerful are those, who are most vocal and influential on social media - is it celebrities and influencers to big corporations and politicians (Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook, 2017). Even the recent boom of fake online personas, i.e computer-generated influencers and activists such as @lilmiquela, who (or which?) has reached over 1m Instagram followers as this sentence is written (Morency, 2018).

That said, content is mostly judged upon not so much if it is real or based on evidence, but rather upon the number of likes or views and, of course, if that content fits the consumer’s world view, emotions and beliefs. Although the highly democratised nature of the current media landscape today, where anyone from anywhere can create content and share opinions, it is that filter bubble\(^1\) we build around ourselves that might soon erode the democracy of it and thus fortify already existing (mis)conceptions and biases, and reinforce the polarisation of society (Colic-Peisker, 2018; Ecker, 2017).

Vice, too, raises the question - click and try it yourself.

\(^1\) - Techopedia defines filter bubble as the intellectual isolation that can occur when websites make use of algorithms to selectively assume the information a user would want to see, and then give information to the user according to this assumption.
where did our trust go?

When speaking of the post-truth era, it is impossible to not discuss and follow the movement of trust in the past two years.

Here entrusted is Edelman and its specialised annual reporting on the global state of trust - the Trust Barometer. With the increasing difficulty to differentiate fake from real, 2017 has been named by Edelman as the year of ‘trust in crisis’. In their 2017 report, Edelman revealed that ‘general population’s trust in all four key institutions - business, government, NGOs, and media - has declined broadly, a phenomenon not reported since Edelman began tracking trust among this segment in 2012’ (Edelman, 2017).

With only 15% believing that the overall system is working for them, it is evident that the operation model demands restructuring and that consumers are expecting a lot. Out of the four institutions, the one that currently holds the best hopes for positive change is business. Three out of four respondents of the 2017 report agreed that it is a company that can and should take actions to ‘both increase profits and improve economic and social conditions in the community where it operates’ (Edelman, 2017). And while the newest report of January 2018 still shows stagnant levels of mistrust, it is the time where trust is to be battled for, with business holding the highest expectations to be an agent of change (Edelman, 2018). More than ever companies are expected to act, to engage in conversations, to show their positions on the issues of the day. That hope in businesses is reflected by the sharp rise of CEO credibility from 2017 (up by 7pp to 44%).

Nearly two-third of Edelman respondents give more faith to companies than government institutions to lead on policy change, which has made building trust the number one priority for companies, surpassing the production of high-quality products and services (Edelman, 2018).

Relevance is not about product anymore, it is as well about shared values and that is how consumers will choose which business to empower and trust.
Trust holds huge importance for brands. Trust in brand management is said to be one of the key requirements to gain consumer loyalty (Akbar & Parvez, 2009). If trust is gained, that would allow for a long-term benefits for the company - a trusting consumer would use repeatedly the brand’s products, would recommend them further and thus ideally become an advocate for the brand. Edelman has shown us how the current post-truth situation has given some shortcut conditions for brands to win consumer trust. Showing their stand and actions on sociopolitical issues seems to matter way more now for consumers than few years back.

The problem lies with the difficulties in gaining trust in consumers-brands relationships and with the ease it can be lost again (Miranda and Kelemen, 2009).

Consumers are both demanding for actions and skeptical towards what the brands claim to do or do. Especially now with all technology, available information and social media, their bsh*t detector in fully on as it has become easier than ever to follow if certain promises have been avoided or if brands and its members, have been associated with something unethical.

Additional to this, brand communication is generally associated with consumer mistrust, making trust gaining for brands even harder to achieve. The phony reputation of marketing has been led by the undeniable factors of its ´photoshopped reality´, stakeholder´s over consumer or society needs, product recalls, pseudo relationships and too many of undifferentiated choices (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009). Therefore, every brand claim, especially if it is a brand uplifting one, risks to be first met with a certain wave of skepticism before being truthfully accepted. Another spot-on statistics for businesses by MediaCom (2018):

64% agree that brands have a responsibility to give back to society,

43% say they are skeptical of brands which say they do good

63% agree that many brands overstate their environmental credentials

There is a general awareness that socially conscious content can be easily used by companies simply as an advertising opportunity and green/rainbow/pink/purple-washing technique. But when a company is behaving authentically, when it is first of all honest about its foremost important aims of making profit, and when its accountability is met with commitment, consumers are to gain trust and eventually choose and advocate for that brand.

trusting... with the bsh*t detector on
authenticity
authenticity as a prelude to trust

One paragraph ago the next keyword of this paper, ‘authenticity’, was artlessly introduced. Now, to get in the mood to look into this perplexing for everyone term, let’s put the three freshly discussed words in one paragraph:

As post-truth is an inevitable characteristic of the times we live in, how do we, as consumers, are to make informed choices? There must be trust in the brands we choose to believe, buy or work with, with skepticism always remaining close to our choices. We constantly filter if a brand claim/message/action is real or fake, if it is honest and relevant to us. We are onto an ongoing quest for authenticity.

Actually, authenticity has been recognised as one of the five economic offerings long before the term post-truth set its official ground in 2016. Or as Gilmore & Pine has originally put it:

‘Organisations today must learn to understand, manage, excel at rendering authenticity… When consumers want what is real, the management of the customer perception of authenticity becomes the primary new source of competitive advantage - the new business imperative.’ (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p.3)

To understand this statement and see how ‘authenticity’ gained its importance to brands, while at the same time became an unspeakable word for brand communication, let’s dive into its definition and breadth.
It is hard, to almost impossible, to tie down a single all-round definition of authenticity. The perception of what is authentic, or inauthentic, is rather subjective as it is socially or personally constructed (Leigh et al., 2006). Various definitions are given, but since they are often discipline-specific, they miss to grasp the wholeness of the word.

To start broadly, there are three perspectives (objectivist, constructivist and existentialist), proposed by Morhart et al. (2015) that manage to somewhat grasp the concept of authenticity. The objectivists refer to authenticity as being a rather measurable quality, evaluated by experts (Trilling, 1972) [that long time ago when experts were way more trusted]. Their view goes against the constructivist perspective in a way that the latter sees authenticity as a projection of one’s perspective onto an entity (Wang, 1999) [the individual has gotten much more important by that time]. Thus, this view presents the idea that perception of authenticity can be constructed via marketing cues to correspond to consumers’ personal expectations of what authentic is.

Lastly, there is the existentialist one, which rather considers authenticity to be related not to another entity, but to the self (Golomb, 1995). Or as given by Zickmund (2007) ‘authenticity is a process of being true to one’s own self, of living according to one’s own being’ (p. 407). This definition, in terms of brand communication, looks at authenticity as a ‘brand’s ability to serve as a resource for consumers to reveal their true selves or to allow consumers to feel that they are true to themselves by consuming the brand’ (Morhart et al., 2015) [it is all about the common individual and his/her self-identification aims].

The term by and large has been majorly used as a reference to genuineness, reality or truth (Kennick, 1985); sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003); being natural, honest and simple (Boyle, 2003). A more practical explanation of the term comes from Beverland (2005), with which he catches upon its wide scope within business practices - ‘a story that balances industrial (production, distribution and marketing) and rhetorical attributes to project sincerity through the avowal of commitments to traditions (including production methods, product styling, firm values, and/or location), passion for craft and production excellence, and the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations’ (p. 1008).
authenticity... sorry, but it does not exist

Interesting is the appearance of ‘story’ and ‘projection’ in the definition of Beverland. Aren’t they rather contradictory with all those words about sincerity, truth, honesty and originality? Yes, and that points straight to the ‘authenticity paradox’.

Gilmore & Pine (2007) recognised the contradictory nature of authenticity as they peeked into the negative definitions of authenticity given by the theorists Rousseau, Jay Newman and Corey Anton. Combined, it would sound like ‘authenticity is that which is not of man, not mechanical, not monetary’. And the truth is that no business offers that - ‘nothing offered by any business is authentic; it’s all artificial and utterly fake, being manmade, mechanical, and monetary’ (p.89). Does that mean that no business can be called authentic? No, not at all. A business can be called authentic if it successfully manages to render its offerings authentic. That would work then because as soon as the perception of authenticity comes through, then the consumer’s experience with a brand becomes personally authentic. There are various levels of authentic perception, but for now it is important for all (plus businesses) to understand that it is about **rendering, rendering, rendering**. Of course, that is why the weight here falls so much on brand communication, as, at the end of the day, isn’t communication just another form of rendering?
I like **this** because I am like **that**

It is of utmost importance, when speaking of rendering authenticity, to underline the fact that authenticity is individually experienced by consumers, as it is their interest and knowledge of a subject that influences it (Grazian, 2005). It is about correspondence of signals and symbols, or how Molleda (2009) explains, authenticity claims are about both encoders and decoders. Thus, in order the communication of meanings to happen between consumers and brands, the values and beliefs of society must be reflected in those claims.

This becomes even more relevant when it is aligned with postmodernism, where consumers seek to express their authentic self via the consumption of authentic for themselves brands or objects (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In postmodernity, consumers no longer consume products only, they rather consume their symbolic meanings, which allows them to eventually become the ´protagonist in the customisation of [their] world´ (Cova, 1996). It might be said then that the quest for authenticity as a phenomenon grew parallel with the emergence of postmodern communication practices, and that the use of more hypermodern techniques, such as segmentation and direct selling, hinders the potential for authentic image being produced (Fine, 2003).

Consumers use brands to express their social affiliations (Beverland et al., 2006), to display their connection to a culture or neo-tribe (Cova et al., 2007), or as a tool to self-authenticate themselves (Arnould & Price, 2000). The self-authenticating act might as well include choosing for a brand, with which the consumer shares same or similar morals and understandings of how the world is or how it should be (Diller, 2005), or even a brand that brings to a sense of purpose (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p.123). In this sense, authentic objects are ones that express a personal truth, or as Postrel (2003) visualises with ´I like this because I am like that´.

And now that the word identity can be attached to a brand as easily as to a human, does it mean that brands must be humanistic in the way they are and speak to their consumers?
Consumers would more easily identify with a product or a content, which is not ideal. Marketing as a whole has only recently moved on to realising that labels such as ‘the best’, ‘perfect’, ‘100% ...’, etc. do not appeal to people as much as some more honest claims. Not long ago was the shake off from the overly digitally enhanced images and the coming of a general demand for more retouch-free images, whose connection with the quest for authenticity has been studied and proven (Cornelis & Peter, 2017).

The one-way communication between brands and consumers, where companies’ first goal is to target and convince, is something of the hypermodernism [past]. Admittedly, there are still companies that encompass this way of marketing wholly or partly, but it is the postmodernism (and technology) that led to a new normal of multi-way communication between brands and consumers. Brands now are to be more conversational, more colloquial, in order to be perceived as more authentic and responded to (Sherwin, 2013). A communication that is more direct, everyday and even funny can get a brand to be more relatable to the consumer.
But authenticity of imperfection in communication must go further than advertising. It is as well about brands and their leaders admitting mistakes in the organisation, handling them with respect and responsibility. And yes, consumers’ expectations are high, even higher in the post-truth landscape, but these expectations do not mean perfection. Actually consumers now judge more on how companies deal with their mistakes rather than the mistakes alone. With social media it is easier than ever a brand mistake to be spread over for global criticism and consumer backlash. As a matter of fact, handling a mistake in a honest and respectful way can lead to stronger sense of trust. Consumers do not mind when companies show some flawed humanistic traits, as long they are handled with care. The effects on the perception of authenticity and trust then can even be positive.
So no offering is authentic, it is the experience of it that can be perceived as authentic or inauthentic. Therefore the way a brand communicates itself and its offerings corresponds to the brands’ attempts to render its authenticity. Gilmore & Pine (2007, p.97) try to make sense of this complex notion of authenticity in brand communication, and provide a mental model, which helps to classify if a brand saying / doing is to be considered as authentic or not. They introduce the two opposites - real and fake - and use their combinations to indicate the dependence of authenticity perception from the alignment of internal and external brand behaviour.

Looking at the matrix itself, the x-axis describes the ‘self-directed relationship between the company and its own output’, while the Y-axis describes the ‘other-focused relationship between the company and the consumers’. The four possible combinations result in an intriguing interplay between real and fake, which could determine where the brand attempt to render its offerings authentic fits. While the real-real and fake-fake are quite straightforward, the real-fake and fake-real are slightly more complex due to their ‘mixed’ nature. What the authors aim to say with their matrix is that a business should estimate for itself where it fits and to rather accept it and use it to its own good. Therefore they offer the five axioms of authenticity.
purpose
rendering authenticity in this peculiar post-truth world

Trust, oh, trust. Businesses want to gain it, governments want it too. All global institutions want to be trusted in this untrustworthy post-truth world. Consumers, at the same time, are not entirely sure who to trust, while they do experience the need to trust. The strongest combatant in this ongoing battle for trust, according to Edelman, are the business institutions / brands. But they have certainly got a higher weight to carry in order to stay on the ‘trust’ top. The public expects them to be an agent of change and a driver for social good. But what does that mean? Let’s look at another statistics from MediaCom (2018), collected during ADWEEK London ‘18, and see which factors influence consumers’ choice for brands, by comparing 2017 and 2018:

### most important factors when choosing which brands to buy / 2017 vs 2018

- **ethical sourcing**: 40% (2018) vs 31% (2017), +11%
- **sustainable**: 44% (2018) vs 43% (2017), +1%
- **does not test on animals**: 46% (2018) vs 39% (2017), +7%
- **is innovative**: 23% (2018) vs 37% (2017), -14%
- **good value for money**: 82% (2018) vs 87% (2017), -5%
- **good quality**: 80% (2018) vs 88% (2017), -8%
- **gives back to local community 5**: 15% (2018) vs 9% (2017), +6%
- **gives back to wider society 4**: 16% (2018) vs 10% (2017), +6%
- **pays taxes in the UK 6**: 53% (2018) vs 40% (2017), +13%
What happened to product excellence, innovation and cheap price?

Inarguably, they will always be leading to consumer choice, but it is interesting to see how the brand do-good actions have indeed become increasingly more important. Businesses are now expected to contribute and act, to not harm, to perform honestly. The impact on the community has become more appreciated opposed to the impact on the single consumer alone. And certainly, more and more brands come up with conscious campaigns, political statements, virtuous activities, purpose-led strategies. As a matter of fact, ‘purpose’ too, besides ‘trust’, was the most discussed word during the ADWEEK conference I attended. Then a question arises:

**Hasn’t purpose become the post-truth tool for rendering authenticity?**

There are in fact two, amongst the wide diapason of authenticity types, whose definitions could perfectly fit into this presumption and explain why purpose evokes perception of authenticity (if performed correctly, of course). Talking here about moral and influential authenticity:

**Moral authenticity** - a self-referential act, but one that is not connected to history or time and place. Rather, here consumers seek for genuineness of intent and commitment to moral practices, which are to reflect their own moral values. It is about creating a combination of both factual and emotional sense in consumers, for example by commitment to social issues or through the love for the craft. (Beverland et al., 2008)

**Influential authenticity** - People tend to perceive as authentic that which exerts influence on other entities, calling human beings to a higher goal and providing a foretaste of a better way; not inconsequential or without meaning. (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, pp. 49-50)

Purpose has got it all - the factual and emotional sense, aroused by the brand engaging in an actual issue and the consumer feeling good about ‘contributing’ to it; the influence to other entities (the contribution to others than stakeholders and consumers alone); the intent and the moral values.
A practical example for the coupling of purpose and authenticity is the qualification study tool, Brand Alpha, which aims to measure perception of authentic leadership qualities of brands. Based in Australia, the study yearly measures people judgement of authentic character and presents a list of the Australian most authentic brands. It bases its measurements on the four V-factors - Value, Visibility, Vitality and, guess what, Virtue.

See how they define virtue:

‘Brands should aspire to a higher purpose that feels authentic. How does your brand improve the world? Our research shows people are twice as likely to recommend Virtuous brands, and more than three times as likely to pay extra for them.’ (Brandalpha.com.au, 2018)

Yes, reading these definitions makes it all sound so straightforward - as soon as there is purpose, there is authenticity. Well, not at all. Already quite some pages looked into the complex nature of authenticity and how any attempt of rendering authenticity can easily come out as fake(ish) and harder - as real. The same goes for any purpose claim.
So what could go wrong with a purpose claim if it is in its core to ‘do better by doing good’? Well, what happens when a brand, or even a person, say explicitly that they do good, the skeptic bsh*t radar automatically turns on and that makes consumers question the genuineness of the claim (see p.11). That makes purpose quite a tricky business and it takes much more than it being a compelling set of words. So what would help in determining if a company’s purpose claim is to be perceived authentically or not?

Let’s go back to the definition of **moral authenticity** (see p. 22), which states that ‘*consumers seek for genuineness of intent and commitment to moral practices, which are to reflect their own moral values*’. When this definition was given two pages ago, it was much focused on the consumer’s perception of authenticity (demand-side). So in order to predict the success of a purpose claim (supply-side), it is good to evaluate what consumers seek for - *genuineness* and *commitment*. These are two features then, which become criteria for the authenticity of purpose. To look deeper into their essence of the words, genuineness⁴ refers to the core of an action or actor (the brand), while commitment⁵ speaks about the consistency of behaviour. Straightforwardly, it could be then said that what matters in determining the authenticity of company’s purpose claim is the claim’s alignment to the company’s values and behaviour.

So what happens is that now there are these two dimensions of authenticity of purpose, one is quite ‘inner directed’, the other - ‘other-directed’. Indeed, very much relatable to the matrix of Gilmore & Pine and their fake-real game. And it is the logic of their matrix, bridged with *genuineness* and *commitment*, that uniquely leads to a graph to help in identifying the success of a purpose claim in rendering brand authenticity.

⁴ - the fact of being real and exactly what it appears to be; the fact of not being artificial
- the quality of being sincere and honest and able to be trusted
*Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*

⁵ - a promise to do something or to behave in a particular way; a promise to support somebody/something; the fact of committing yourself
*Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*
The ‘Authenticity of Purpose’ graph, is taking the same distinction between inward and outward evaluation. To assess if a brand, with its purpose claim, is ‘true to itself’ (x-axis) we look if the purpose is aligned with the values of the brand. Or, when a brand states its do-good action / stand for something, is that in line with what the brand is and believes in at the first place. For the other criteria - ‘what it says it is’, we rather judge if the brand behaves respectively to its purpose claim, if it holds its promises. From these evaluations we end up with the same real-fake combinations that give a different degree of authenticity perception.
The reason behind it being a plot graph rather than another 2x2 matrix is the uniqueness of the different purpose claims and therefore give it a ‘rating’ feature. Thus this ‘Authenticity of Purpose’ graph could be used as an evaluation tool either for a single purpose attempt or for a multiple ones. In the latter case, the plot graph could serve a comparing function to, for example, explore the competitiveness of a planned or existing purpose activity.

Playing with purpose is risky, as any sign of it being insincere might hold the danger of hurting the authentic image of the brand in action. And with the steadily increasing number of ‘purpose players’ it will become more normal and necessary to look into the positioning of a brand’s or competitors’ purpose actions. Using the graph asks for a deeper evaluation of the brand’s values and behaviour rather than merely spontaneous opinion in order to work. It is crucial though to note that steering clear from own opinion is nearly impossible due to numerous factors such as culture, age, knowledge background, and of course, which information has gotten to the evaluation (post-truth era...).

And now, that this is cleared up, let’s try to use the graph for four interesting cases of purpose attempt. The cases correspond to four different industries and contain different elements of purpose claim. With this selection the aim is to demonstrate the broad application of the ‘Authenticity of Purpose’ graph and the uniqueness of the cases, rather than their competitiveness.

Let’s have a look at what ‘good’ have Airbnb, Audi, Johnnie Walker and Gucci recently done and what will they all score on the plot graph.
Until we all belong.

ODE TO LESVOS
THE TRUE STORY OF A FEW REMARKABLE HEROES
In April 2017, when gay marriage was still not legalised in Australia, Airbnb initiated a highly engaging declaration for marriage equality. The ‘Until We All Belong’ campaign invited people from all backgrounds, gay or not, to show their acceptance of same-sex marriage by committing to wear a uniquely designed matte black metal ring, a ring that is ‘incomplete for a reason’ (Nudd, 2017). The existing gap in something, which is meant to be a symbol of everlasting love, was used as a great visual metaphor for the disconnect and the missing acceptance of LGBTQI+ in the Australian political agenda.
goals and results

Brian Chesky, Airbnb CEO and Head of Community, has expressed his hopes that the campaign will serve as conversation spur and will result in awareness and actions taken (Lotl.com, 2017). Airbnb aimed it to become an instrument for speaking up and uniting people from all walks of life into a common action. What could be added as more internal brand goals are achieving positive brand sentiment and recognition as a change driver.

What the campaign certainly succeeded at is creating awareness and raising the conversation about same-sex marriage. Numerous people have engaged with the movement and have purchased the free-of-charge ‘acceptance ring’. They have all shown their stand on their social media profiles with a tweet, photo or a message to the politicians holding the legalisation back. Only on eBay about 70k have ordered the ring for themselves or to give away to family, friends or simply others. (Dailytelegraph.com.au, 2017) The Airbnb initiative got the support too from some of Australia’s biggest brands - Qantas, Google, ANZ and eBay, as well as publicity in the largest media outlets in Australia and globally. People and brands in Australia have united for the cause against inequality, with a pledge being received every 30s at the peak of the campaign. The overwhelming success brought not only to the consideration of the law, but as well to numerous advertising awards for Clemenger BBDO (the agency behind), including Cannes Lions.
To answer that, we need to go back to 2014 when Airbnb did a major rebranding. The company then performed a study within 480 employees, hosts and guests to answer questions in the like of ‘Why does Airbnb exist?’ (Gallagher, 2016). Something that kept popping into participants’ responses was the fact that people did not want to travel as tourists (passive viewers) anymore, but rather as insiders who engage with people and their culture. The idea of belonging singled out to lead to the brand’s new mission statement: ‘To make people around the world feel like they could ’belong anywhere’” (Taylor, n.d.). Since then, Airbnb has aimed for incorporating the tagline ‘belong anywhere’ into their everyday operations, corporate culture and marketing communications.

Since its rebranding, Airbnb has clearly stated its position and efforts towards inspiring for and achieving equality in all the spectrum. Inclusivity and belonging are integral to the company as the official mission statement says.

It is quite easy to see the ‘Until we all belong’ campaign just as smart marketing stunt for publicity and positive perception. But what we can see until now is that Airbnb has had quite few actions towards bridging the world such as the ‘Community Commitment’ policy of Airbnb, which came in as reaction to some discriminative actions on its platform, or its in-house application, Open Homes, that lets hosts offer their homes for refugees free of charge (B., 2017).

But behaviour must be reflected as well, even more importantly, from within. Following the public criticism for the few discriminative host denials in 2016, Airbnb reached out to lawmakers and civil rights organisations to perform deep and honest review of the company’s performance on discrimination and inclusivity. In result to that, the company initiated internal trainings in fighting bias and too released a non-discrimination policy, or the ‘Community Commitment’, to be signed by hosts and guests, which would allow for cancelling the accounts of anyone demonstrating any form of prejudice (Airbnb.com, n.d.). That said, Airbnb did not provide with many reasons to think it does not live by its claimed purpose, communicated via ‘Until we all belong’.

‘We do believe in an inside-out culture. If we hold our hosts and guests to an expectation of acceptance and belonging, it has to start within our company. Otherwise, how on earth do we have the credibility to hold them accountable, if we’re not doing it to ourselves?’

Joe Gebbia (CPO & co founder)
audi / daughter

For its Super Bowl appearance in February 2017, Audi aired its 60sec politically minded ‘Daughter’ ad. The brand decided to tell a father-daughter story to compel the cause for gender pay equality, a topic strongly active in US as well as globally. In it the father reflects whether his daughter is not being judged by her gender while she competes in a cart race against boys. As she wins, the tagline ‘Progress is for everyone’ appears to present the Audi’s commitment to equal pay as a progress both for the company and society.
Instead of laying a focus on its products, Audi aimed at speaking up about its internal ‘progress’ in corporate responsibility and at sparking up reaction to help driving pay equality in the US (O’Railey, 2017). With ‘Daughter’ Audi wished to demonstrate its values to the public, hoping that many consumers, especially women, will resonate with them and buy on that, or as Loren Angelo, VP of marketing for Audi America put it - ‘Millennials very much associate with this value and 40 percent of our buying group currently is made up of women’ (Buss, 2017).

Both support and fury have followed the release of the campaign. It quickly became a flashpoint for discussions, most of which very much disapproving the purposeful Audi move. And for real, the ad made 5 million views two days after its release, but with almost 40,000 dislikes next to just 4,000 likes (Nudd, 2017). Other stats show that for a day-and-half the ad generated roughly 4,580 comments on Twitter, YouTube, etc., with about 25% of the comments being negative, and 13% positive (Bruell, 2017). And indeed, when such a political issue is raised, it is rather expected to generate polarised reactions.
#Audi would never hire your daughter

Members of the Board
The Board of Management of AUDI AG – portraits of Board of Management members and information about their responsibilities within the Group.

Prof. Rupert Stadler
Dr. Bernd Martin
Prof. h.c. Thomas Sigi
Audi Strittbeck
Dr. Dietmar Voggenreiter
Prof. Dr.-Ing. Hubert Waltl

@Audi that’s misleading. Women also work less hours than men and take more time off. Get your facts right and stick to making cars.

@Audi debunked. And blocked.

@Audi: The research shows otherwise, but nice marketing effort. Advertising clickbait...

@Audi: Stick to cars. We don't need more virtue signalling.

@Audi: Not true. After alimony, child support & 1/2 of everything, 1/2 the women in US get about 50% more than men!

Audi USA: why don't you practice what you preach? You have 14 executives and only 2 are women! https://www.audiusa.com/newsroom/corporate/executive-team

Audi USA: Hi Mark, Audi has diverse hiring practices to ensure equality across our staff and we pledge to put aggressive hiring and development strategies in place to increase the number of women in our workforce, at all levels. Please visit http://audi.usa/2kXCe0D for details on Audi of America's commitment to equality for all of our employees.

Audi Careers: Audi USA can't win no matter what you do.

Audi USA: All talk
No action
Herpa darp

Audi Careers: Ouch!!

Do you also give equal opportunity to advance to executive levels? Your website list 2 women and 12 men on the executive team

7:40 PM - Feb 1, 2017

612 123 people are talking about this

Men mad about the prospect of equal pay 

Twitter
alignment with brand values

What happens in this case is that Audi wants to communicate its values of equal pay and with that to resonate with a broader consumer base. That makes a wonder - how a value of equal pay becomes value of progress for a company? Or how Audi puts it in its official statement:

_Not only does it reflect the core values we hold of progress and equality for all, but it also requires that we challenge ourselves, and others, to push the status quo and be better for this generation and those to come. Together, we will drive progress._

This makes it seem rather like a blurred attempt to make corporate social responsibility part of its communication strategy. Let’s peek into the official brand slogan: "Vorsprung durch Technik" or, "Progress through Technology", which is as well the ‘company ethos and is the core belief that drives the development of every Audi vehicle’. Technology and vehicle seem a little out of topic in here, don’t they. And indeed, ‘Daughter’ represents a dramatic twist from its previous brand communications of impressive new models and innovative features. That brings then to the purpose attempt to be perceived as quite plotted and not true to itself. Great purpose try that might have been better executed if Audi had first implemented its initiatives before speaking them out.

alignment with brand behaviour

Much of the turmoil came after critiques on the hypocrisy of the campaign. While Audi speaks loudly of its core commitment to equality and its promises to put up hiring and development strategies to increase the number of women at all levels in Audi, many viewers pointed out the unbalanced consistency of the company’s US executive team - twelve men and two women, and its board of directors - six men and no women (Nudd, 2017). And although Audi must be applauded for its intentions and strive to improve in the direction of corporate equality and diversity, the purpose message comes out as unaligned virtue signaling. It is a great example of how consumer skepticism on purposeful communication can bring out gaps in sayings and doings and made those a main perception point of a campaign or any brand message. Maybe just another post-truth magic...
Johnny Walker’s ‘Ode to Lesvos’ is one of the three short documentaries, part of their Storyline initiative, aiming to inspire people via real stories of progress. All three relate to political events, happenning and affecting many people around the world - Mexico/US border, Colombian conflict, the refugee crisis.

‘Ode to Lesvos’ features interviews with some of the heroes of the Island of Lesvos in Greece, who have been nominated for a Nobel Prize in recognition of the aid they have given to over half a million refugees. The islanders speak about their experiences in rescuing the refugees, opening their hearts and homes for them. Shot by Sundance award-winning director, Talal Derki, ‘Ode to Lesvos’ gives real people a voice to tell their stories of progress and thus shines light on a lesser told story about the refugee crisis.
goals and results

As part of the Storyline initiative by Johnnie Walker, ‘Ode to Lesvos’ aims to bring inspiration, to give another, more positive, angle to an uncomfortable topic and to invite the audience to respond with support and conversations. ‘Ode to Lesvos’, together with ‘Without Walls’ and ‘Keep Walking Colombia’, works by inviting local filmmakers to tell stories of process within turbulent times.

But behind the do-good moves, there is a clear business-oriented goal. According to the global brand chief, Guy Escolme, the Storyline content initiative is part of an attempt to elevate Johnnie Walker’s messaging to culture and by that get the brand in the same league as Apple, Nike and Dove (James, 2016). Johnnie Walker is aiming for cultural significance.

The campaign not only has reached publicity (31 million views in almost a month time), but also managed to spark the conversation and raise about £1,500 for the charity in a month (Cooper, 2016). Unfortunately, other results from the campaign have not been shared, but some primary reactions have been looked at.
39

This is a great story to put together. I'm not sure how so many people can give this a thumbs down.

1 year ago

i really think these guys should just stick to what there good at. there products are great, but these little stories, not much.

1 year ago

Using your advertising revenue to make this, is a great thing. More companies could do with taking a leaf out of your book.

1 year ago

Absolutely fantastic DIAGEO. I've never been more proud of our Scotch industry. This is a real stand up thing to do, knowing that you might take the brunt from any of your consumers who are right wing. Well, this consumer is now more likely to make my next bottle one of yours.

1 year ago

Total propaganda piece. I will never buy Johnny Walker ever again!

1 year ago

ok

1 year ago

I am so glad that a scottish brand is trying to do something like this. Irregardless of the politics of the situation people don't deserve to die by drowning.
alignment with brand values

What does the refugee crisis, or the US-Mexican border, have to do with Johnnie Walker, many might ask. In their communication, Johnnie Walker connects its value of progress to showing the positive stories of real people going through tragic moments. And in the advertising world this works - the campaign has won or been nominated for a number of awards (D&AD, Clio, Drum) and the appraisal of many critiques.

Within audience it turns out reactions are more polarised - consumers show either support, led by compassion or a sense of relativeness to the issue, but many blame the campaign for being pure propaganda or they just disagree with the support offered. That is, of course, the risk of any public stand on such highly political issue. The question here is to what extent such communication strategy leads to a perception of authenticity for Johnnie? The fact that the whiskey brand features three short documentaries on three completely different political topics does dilute the idea of consistency and true engagement to the issues covered. If Johnnie Walker has focused on one issue only and make it ‘its own’, the authentic appeal might have been higher.

alignment with brand behaviour

Johnnie Walker wins some points to bringing the campaign further that just making a good looking video telling a touching story. Johnnie is also supporting the global humanitarian aid organisation Mercy Corps and organising local initiatives to help the Lesvos community. The good intentions are there as it is such stories that the company decides to put its advertising money into.

After further research into most current communication practices of the brand, Johnnie Walker America has picked a more clear focus on the US-Mexican wall issue. If the whiskey giant continues to carve a more consistent story and behaviour on that, its cultural significance could only improve.
gucci / gun control activism

When evaluating purpose claims by brands, it is important to have a closer look at an example of a phenomenon that is gaining a significant momentum within the business / political environment - CEO activism. A CEO stand turns influential for a consumption choice, shown by stats from a Weber Shandwick survey, where ‘40% of respondents said they would be more likely to purchase from a company if they agreed with the CEO’s position, but 45% said they’d be less likely to if they disagreed with the CEO’s view’ (Chatterij and Toffel, 2018). There are great risks to performing CEO activism (Weinzimmer and Esken, 2016) as well as numerous do’s and don’ts that depend on the particular issue or company. But what must be noted is the heightening role of CEO’s as a responsible face for both a company and its employees, as well as the expanding relevance of the phenomenon outside the US (Chatterij and Toffel, 2018).

Thus, the fashion industry unique activism example of Gucci.

In line with the shooting events that shook US and the world, February this year the Italian luxury house of Gucci publicly donated $500,000 to the students organising the March For Our Lives demonstration. The donation was accompanied with a statement from its creative director, Alessandro Michele, whose power as a spokesperson is as strong as of the one of a CEO:

“We stand with March For Our Lives and the fearless students across the country who demand that their lives and safety become a priority. We have all been directly or indirectly impacted by these senseless tragedies, and Gucci is proud to join this movement with a donation of $500,000.”  (WWD, 2018)

With that, Gucci continues the gun control chord played by other fashion houses such as Tom Ford, Zac Posen and Kenneth Cole. The bigger difference is that the latter have decided to do it less vocally, without the element of public activism. Fashion, in this line of thought, is still an industry that is trying to steer clear from public political stands (t-shirt slogans do not count). Gucci is one of the first to take the lead and we will surely see more fashion brands joining the movement, as it becoming increasingly unacceptable for companies to not interfere on such controversial and salient for the society issues (BoF, 2018).
goals and results

Next to helping the student organisation ‘from heart’, the Gucci house has certainly aimed at publicity and positive brand sentiment for speaking up about the issue. Gucci under Michele, too, has shown its clear strategy towards targeting the younger consumers, i.e. the millennials. And by showing its support not to any other cause but March For Our Lives, Gucci cleverly continues its effort to appeal to the socially conscious millennial consumers.

While it is hard to measure the impact the public support had on the image of the brand, the donation act has been certainly taken in majorly by numerous media outlets, such as WWD, GQ, Vogue, BoF, making brand activism part of the fashion industry conversation too. On the consumers’ side, as seen in social media platforms, the act has stirred active debates and both positive and negative responses. An existing skepticism of the genuity of the donation has made some think that it is all a PR stunt.
Replies:

- Replying to @danabole @wwd @gucci
  The moral choice, and let’s face it, not bad marketing either

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Thank you for your donation to #MarchForOurLives!!! - well done

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  @BusyPhilips was commenting recently that the teens LOVE Gucci, and now it’s apparent that Gucci loves the teens too 💖💖💖

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Taehyung would be proud
  #BestFanArmy #BTSARMY #BBiheartAwards #BTS_tw

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Awesome 🙌

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  LOVE, must get me @gucci now #BigRespect #M

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Gonna go buy me a @Gucci wallet. Thanks guys!

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  And this is exactly why they did it. They don’t give a s**t about gun control. It’s about their image. And because their target audience supports the movement of course they wanna show their support. Even if they don’t care about it. This is about money not care.

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  or maybe they want to help

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  I’d want to help too if it resulted in a major ROI.

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Hey @Versace, Want to match the donation, especially in light of Donatello’s murder?

- Replying to @wwd @gucci
  Thank you @gucci I’ll wear your bags, shoes and clothes with even more pride now. Common @Prada @antonioberardi @YSL @dolcegabbana you can do it too
Not many brands can tick the box of aligning an act of CEO / brand activism to its core values, as it includes in itself a quite momentum-driven communication activity. In the Gucci case though, there is some relation of the issue to the brand. It does not go as back as to its core values, but rather to some dramatic shooting events (the massive shooting at the Orlando club in June 2016) that killed a Gucci manager and seriously injured a store employee (Fast Company, 2018).

On another aspect, the activism led by Michele logically fits with the brand’s Pre-Fall 2018 campaign, being heavily influenced by the counterculture spirit of 1968 France, when student marches challenged political and social establishments and rebelled for change (Hypebeast, 2018).

The relation of the gun control issue to the values of Gucci cannot be compared to the activism of Patagonia, and this distance still managed to spark skepticism in the public. But it is also admissible that Gucci has got nothing to lose from its public anti-gun stance, given the strong fan base it has already built with its current positioning strategy.

The existing degree of skepticism to the Gucci donation originates too from the fact that the support the brand gives is an one-off action. Skepticism is hard, to almost impossible to avoid, and one way to avoid it is showing a longer-term commitment to the issue supported. But Gucci, before all, showed their support at the right moment and loudly enough to spark the conversation and the media coverage. Indeed, a good deed for the sake of good PR. Now the anti-gun ball has been passed to other brands (REI) with the ongoing NRA boycott.

Meanwhile, Gucci has been busy with another purpose initiative, founded by the company itself, Chime for Change, aiming to promote education, justice and health for girls and women globally.
While a main aim of looking at the four cases separately is to make sense of the graph, putting them together in one graph gives some room for a broader comparative analysis. There was specifically one campaign, which, to my knowledge, was not met with any negative consumer reaction - Airbnb. And it is indeed the only one that does not contain a ‘fake’ in its quadrant. It is a case that shows how it is not solely about stating the do-good claim, but really aligning it with all values, beliefs and behaviours. In their case even they managed to handle a mistake in a way that only increased their genuineness and thus reliability (talking about the ‘Community Commitment’ policy). With the other examples, all containing a ‘fake’, there were some or loads of backlashing responses. Thus, with any deviation from values and behaviour comes the skepticism of today’s consumers, who can dig and spread any information from the net to prove their point. That said, this graph only proves the point that purpose is very hard to get right and very easy to miss the mark. To hit the real-real with purpose, companies need to evaluate well who they are, what society needs and how to connect those in a compelling and creative way.
Conclusion

It is time to get to the answer of the big question posed in this publication:

**In a post-truth world, why are brands increasingly chasing authenticity with purpose, and what determines the authenticity of purpose?**

The relatively new term of post-truth is seen as a main characteristic of the current media landscape, which entitles everyone with a device and internet to share their opinions and find followers. That gave room for the truthiness to prevail over the truth, and fake news to emerge as a phenomenon. Further, it turns out that post-truth is a term so far predominantly connected to politics and journalism, less to businesses and brand communication. But when the erosion of trust comes in question as a main consequence of the post-truth, brands and consumers inevitably become involved. Research shows that consumers’ trust has shifted from politics and media towards businesses as agents of positive change. Brands are now generally expected to engage in controversial issues and to take a stand. And as skepticism still remains at front, brands need to well evaluate how they can do so in a genuine, or authentic, way.

Authenticity, as a distinguished primary source of competitive advantage, has become the holy grail for marketeers. But what happens is that authenticity is very much notional. It is in the eye of the beholder what is authentic. Thus, when brand communication attempts are employed, they are to render the brand’s offerings authentic. And to appeal authentically to the ‘beholders’ brands become colloquial and relative to their moral values, inviting for a higher self, appealing to emotions. When that moral authenticity is put in a post-truth setting, purpose comes in. But purpose too can be seen as fake or real, and to determine if a brand’s purpose claim is to be perceived as authentic or not, a careful examination of the brand values and behaviour needs to take place. Current research shows how if any of the two turns out even a little unaligned with the purpose claim, the brand sincerity of action and reputation are endangered and open for consumer skepticism and backlash.

Purpose is a risky business. But if taken at heart as opposed to just ticking the box, it could earn solid long-term advantages for the business, its employees and society.
This paper on post-truth, authenticity and purpose is a comprehensive study due to the lack of literature so far. Findings were based largely on literature review, practitioners hands-on experiences, statistics and real case examinations. Since the research focuses primarily on the supply-side of purpose and authenticity, a gap is left for further research into the consumer reception on the authenticity of purpose claims. With that though comes the intriguing challenge of measuring consumer perception of authenticity, due to its individualistic essence.

Since it is a relatively new topic, there is room left for unique case studies to achieve interesting findings. For that more time and inside information are needed to really grasp the effect a purpose claim have had on the brand perception. In the current research such brand related information misses and audience reception has been evaluated primarily via consumers’ reaction on various social media platforms.

Further research could go into focusing on specific consumer groups. The current paper indeed travels around the globe, showing the broader relevance of the topics first. It is clear now that perception of authenticity depends on cultural background too, so what if a research focuses on how a particular tribe, for example, perceives a set of purpose claims as opposed to another. Valuable insights for both researchers and brands might result from that.

The current paper travels across industries, too. So what if a single industry is evaluated and some industry-specific patterns are to be found, concerning purpose claims and authenticity. Little to none has been written about how post-truth affects the fashion industry, for example. Or about the possible reasons why the fashion industry is rarely engaging in issues other than gender and sustainability. Many questions to be asked.

Other interesting continuation might be how small businesses should handle purpose, and if they should in the first place. The brands discussed in this publication have significant weight in society already, as well as large budgets. But what about the small businesses out there, whose voice is not as vocal?

With so many open doors for further research, this paper has come as a great foundation on the post-truth and authenticity of purpose topic. It aimed at bringing an understanding, sparking conversations and being a fuel for further curiosity.

And now a closing call-to-action, please have some fun at exploring few other interesting purpose claims and see for yourself where would you place them on the plot graph.
The President Stole Your Land

In an illegal move, the president just reduced the size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments. This is the largest elimination of protected land in American history.
alignment with brand behaviour

alignment with brand values

REAL-FAKE

REAL-REAL

FAKE-FAKE

FAKE-REAL


PODCASTS:


PANELS / ADWEEK LONDON 2018 / 19-22 March:

Curious Conversations: The Global Crisis of Trust.
   Kerin O'Connor. Chief Executive, The Week
   Bobby Duffy. Managing Director, Ipsos
   Dara Nasr. Managing Director, UK, Twitter
   Carol Potter. President & CEO, Europe, Edelman Europe

Targeting Fake News: Data and Democracy in a Post-truth World.
   Toni Cowan-Brown. Vice President of European Business Development, NationBuilder
   Hossein Derakhshan. Author and Researcher, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University
   Birgitta Jónsdóttir. Poetician & Chair, International Modern Media Initiative
   Dr Maria Rosaria. Taddeo Deputy Director, Digital Ethics Lab, University of Oxford
Brand Innovation: TOPMAN + CALM. A story of how brands and non-profits can work together to evoke a greater purpose.
Andrew Brown. Director of Corporate Partnerships, CALM
Jason Griffiths. Marketing & Communications Director, TOPMAN

From Conquest to Connection. Modern masculinity and the evolution of Axe.
Rik Strubel. Global Vice President, Axe / Lynx

Can Purpose Actively ‘Super-charge’ your Marketing?
Helen Brain. Strategy Director, MediaCom UK Limited
Claire McAlpine. Strategy Director, MediaCom UK Limited
Pauline Robson. Managing Partner, Real World Insight, MediaCom UK Limited

The Big Screen, Brands and Socially Conscious Content.
Mike Burgess. Creative Director, Metfilm Creative
Alistair Campbell. Executive creative director, We Are Social
Colin Kennedy. MD/CCO, Redwood
David Moynihan. Editor in Chief, Lego
Ann Wixley. Executive Creative Director, Wavemaker

The Do’s and Don’ts of Emotive Advertising.
Tifenn Cloarec. Global Strategy Director, VIZEUM
Helen Anglim. Head of Creative Strategists, RYOT Studio
Mark Boyd. Co-Founder, GRAVITY ROAD
Cristina Constandache. VP Global Partnerships, RAKUTEN VIBER
Mark Melling. Head of RYOT Studio UK
Ian James. GM International, VERVE

Designing Stories Without Unconscious Bias.
Jen Heazlewood. Creative Director, R/GA LONDON