Music Authenticity is in the Eye (and Ear) of the Beholder: Perception of Cues and Intentions of Behavior

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INTRODUCTION

Perception of authenticity from a consumer point of view is more important than the origins of any particular piece of music. The fields of sociology and consumer behavior have contributed to the body of knowledge for authenticity in general terms, and as a perceived element of music consumption. Researchers in sociology present evidence that authenticity is a communally and sometimes situationally constructed perception. For example, Uzelac (2010) suggests national ceremonies must be viewed as performance, not ritual, to develop a perception of authenticity. This is a temporary construction, however, because when the audience dissipates at the end of the performance so does the authenticity. The fluidity of perceived authenticity is also seen in how its elements are presented. For example, Scottish folk music can be framed either as banal tradition or contrived spectacle to stage a particular type of authenticity (Knox 2008).

Construction of perceived authenticity can also develop communally over a period of time, as opposed to situationally, such as the development of Mariachi music in the Western United States. According to Sheehy (1997), the Mariachi style developed as a way for Mexican-Americans to relate to their heritage with input from both consumers and producers to fit the social needs of the ethnic group. Furthermore, this long term development promoted standardized instrumentation, contributing to commoditization of the style for mass marketing and consumption. Eason (1999) points out that questions of authenticity is a subject of continuing debate in many circles, in particular the relationship between commercialization of country music and the resulting distance between the genre and the people who claim it as their identity.

Peterson (2005) provides an excellent presentation of the social construction of authenticity in relation to country music, and how authentication is the result of a joint effort between producer and consumer. Artistic effort drives the advance of a creative industry, so the content is always changing along with consumer desires. This changing creativity results in what various stakeholders consider real while the perceived "authentic" evolves. An associated consequence is that the saliency of what is considered authentic also changes with time (Peterson 2005). According to Shusterman (1999), authenticity of country music is emotionally charged and rooted in a belief that the genre is less commercialized than others (Lindholm 2008). This foundation of authenticity is more pronounced in the genre known as alternative country, a blend of grassroots, country, and punk, exemplified by the album No Depression by the band Uncle Tupelo (Smith 2009). To some, its rebellion against the Nashville Sound and exaggerated rejection of the commercialized style is what makes the genre authentic (Peterson and Beal 2001). Although these articles focus on country music, the important issues involved with perceptions of authenticity are not limited to any one genre.

Ethnicity (for example, Barker and Taylor 2007; Lewis 2001; Peterson 2005; Shusterman 1999; Urquia 2004) and Geography (for example, Cheyne and Binder 2010; Gibson and Davidson 2004; Su 2011; Yarwood and Charlton 2009) have been common bases for exploring perceptions of authenticity. Two common themes in these studies are that producers of commercialized content construct elements of artists and their music to be considered by fans as a process of authentication; and that these elements are commonly co-constructed by producers and consumers.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

Taking the perspective that authenticity is constructed by consumers, based upon inputs from individual cultural backgrounds (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008) and cues provided by producers (Grazian 2004; Moeran 2005), the focus of this research is on the relationship between how those cues are perceived and how individuals' perceptions translate to evaluations and behavioral intentions. Authenticity is co-constructed; however producers can only control the cues. Of interest is the combination of constructed elements of music, and subjective perceptions of those elements as cues in the process of authentication by consumers for the purpose of evaluating a piece of music.

The first step in examining co-constructed authenticity was a series of one-on-one qualitative interviews with eleven individuals who responded to outreach efforts to find involved music fans, and one three-person focus group. Of the one-on-one interviews, seven (4 females, 3 males) were semi-structured depth interviews, lasting an average of 67 minutes each; and four (all males) were brief interviews at a music related location that lasted an average of seven minutes each. Depth interview subjects were asked to view three music videos at the beginning of the discussion. As a contextual anchor and point of reference for questioning, the particular clips were chosen because of some connection to what at least some people

associate with Irish music, including music style, instrumentation, lyrics, visual elements, and nationality of band members.

This research focuses on musical elements (rhythm, melody, etc.), lyrics, and visual elements as tools used by consumers to authenticate and music. In addition, the role of authentication and the importance placed on each category of cues are posited to drive evaluation of music and behavioral intentions, particularly willingness to pay for live performance and recorded music. Initial exploratory research indicated musicians were the source upon what consumers base the authentication process. Perceived credibility of a band or solo musician represents authenticity of content, conceptually adapting source credibility as it has been researched in marketing literature to perceptions of authenticity by music consumers. Evidence of this conceptual adaptation is seen in the parallel of the positive influence of source credibility on evaluations and purchase intention of service advertisements (Clow, James, Kranenburg and Berry 2006) with a 20 year old male interviewee's evaluative standard of a band that "I want them to be talented. I want them to have written their own music ... because I think there's a lot more honor in that, and I think the music will be better." Furthermore, the appropriateness of particular cues as a measure of credibility is consistent with findings of Clow, James, Kranenburg and Berry (2006), who found visual elements of service advertisements play a positive role in evaluation of credibility and service quality.

Perceived authenticity is a latent construct developed from subjective evaluations by consumers (music fans) of cues provided by producers (musicians). The authentication process is similar to that of evaluating source credibility in advertising (Ohanian 1990). Therefore, dimensions of authenticity are expected to be similar to those of source credibility. Due to a reliance on varying individual perceptions of cues constructed by producers (in this case musicians), it is important to not only measure the authentication process, but also the relationship among each dimension of perceived authenticity and the cues upon which those dimensions are rooted. In other words, because the focus of what is being studied is the perception of authenticity (because who is to say what is or is not "authentic"), one cannot measure the influence of perceived authenticity or evaluations of the cues upon which those perceptions are based without considering both. A combination of influences by perceived authenticity and the cues used to develop those perceptions will be emphasized by observing different mixtures of dimensions of authenticity and influential cues when comparing evaluations of content and behavioral intentions.

The first goal of this research effort is to test the dimensions of authenticity that emerged from qualitative methods and research on source credibility. Second, the scales will then be used to explore which cues and dimensions of perceived authenticity are significant predictors of evaluation and behavioral intentions. This knowledge is important to both theory and practice because they empirically test the assumption that authenticity is perceived, reflecting not only the product or service of interest, but the individual subjective evaluations of cues associated with those products.

METHODOLOGY

Based on feedback and perceptions of subjects who viewed the three initial videos described in the previous section, two of the original videos were kept, and two more were added for use in a broader data collection effort. Undergraduate and graduate students viewed the four music based videos, and then self-reported their perceptions using a questionnaire after each song. The questionnaire contained scales for credibility of source, as well as single item reports of willingness to pay for recorded music, willingness to pay for live performance, and overall evaluation of the band using seven-point Likert type scales. Scales for Credibility of Source were adapted from previous literature (Lichtenstein and Bearden 1989; Ohanian 1990) for use with the context of music performance. These items contained descriptive anchors for each category, for example sincere / insincere, with six of thirteen items reverse coded. Cues of authenticity were measured by single item questions asking, To what degree did the lyrics / musical elements / visual elements in this video contribute to your decision concerning the above questions, measured on seven point scales anchored by Low/High. Prior familiarity with the band was anchored by Never heard of them and Very familiar. The questionnaire included several areas for respondents to provide explanations of why they chose certain responses. The videos were shown in four classes, each time in a different order to balance which videos were viewed first, second, third and fourth.

The four videos used for data collection were chosen to provide a consistent theme of Irish music; reflect bands that were likely to be unknown to the intended subjects; achieve balanced presentation of national origin (two were from Ireland, two from North America) and setting (two were recorded live performances, two were professionally produced music videos). Focus remained on the cues of perceived authenticity and not a comparison of the clips, however strong attempts were made to balance the choice of videos so that opportunity for viewers to rely on different perceptions of authenticity was maximized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Because the intent of the study is to measure how individuals perceive authenticity, only responses answering "Never heard of them before" when reporting previous knowledge of the band were used. After removing cases that were either incomplete, did not pass the reverse coding check, or were identified as outliers by assessing a combination of multivariate measures, the final data set contained 251 (out of 283 received) cases. Exploratory factor analysis was performed using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation using SPSS software. Three factors explained 81.5% of the variance in the data set, indicating three dimensions of perceived authenticity – Expertise, Dependability, and Sincerity, presented in Table 1. Summated scales for each case were used as independent variables in multiple linear regression analysis.

Multiple linear regression was used to test which indicator variables, including the three dimensions of authenticity and reports of reliance on each category of authenticity cue, were significant predictors of outcome variables overall evaluation; willingness to pay for recorded music; and willingness to pay for live performance. A summary of the results of each regression is presented in Table 2.

The dimensions expertise and dependability (but not sincerity) significantly predicted overall evaluation, and only the cue musical elements significantly contributed to the outcome measure. This finding is consistent with a similar study that found the same significant dimensions of perceived authenticity predicting overall evaluation for previously unknown bands when level of familiarity was a treatment group (Barretta and Minor 2011). Regression of willingness to pay for recorded music also found musical elements as the only significant cue of authenticity. However, expertise and sincerity, but not dependability, were found to significantly predict willingness to pay for recorded music. Finally, regressing willingness to pay for live performance yielded the same two dimensions of perceived authenticity (expertise and sincerity), however the cue upon which respondents relied was visual, not music.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Results of the factor analysis provide evidence that consumers authenticate music by judging the expertise, dependability, and sincerity of a band or artist. This is important from a theoretical standpoint, because adaptability of source credibility as a way of measuring perceived authenticity is a step toward further understanding the complex nature of why different individuals find various content more (or less) real (or fake) than others.

For example, when evaluating a band about which no prior knowledge exists, expertise appears to be a driving force in determining an overall evaluation, as well as willingness to pay for recorded or live music. Although perception of dependability is important to an overall evaluation, there is no evidence that it leads to a willingness to pay for neither recorded nor live music. By contrast, sincerity does not appear to be an important facet of authenticity when forming a holistic judgment of a band; however it does appear to play a role in willingness to pay for both live and recorded music. This finding is consistent with an observation made by Gopal, Sanders, Bhattarcharjee, Agrawal and Wagner (2004) that a sense of altruism may drive consumers to be more likely to pay for music as a way of benefiting the artist. Perceiving a band or artist as sincere may invoke the desire to pay to hear or see them perform.

By identifying a combined approach to the authentication process, including the dimensions of perceived authenticity and interpretations of the cues provided by producers, theory development can also focus on why various combinations yield varying evaluations of outcome variables. This is seen in the results of the regression analyses presented in Table 2. For example, musical elements were an important cue upon which respondents relied when evaluating a band in general, and when determining willingness to pay for recorded music. However, the only cue which had a significant influence on willingness to pay for a live performance was visual elements. This makes practical sense because of the visual nature of a live performance, and is consistent with the observation by Minor, Wagner, Brewrton and Hasman (2004) that a musician or band is the primary focal point of concerts, evaluated not only on sound quality, but on visual aspects as well. This is confirmed by comments on the questionnaires, for example one respondent noted, "Pretty funny… Concert would probably be fun," accompanied by high evaluations for the importance of visual elements and willingness to pay for live performance. Similarly, one of the depth interview respondents evaluated a band by referring to "their image… they seem like fun… like you would want to go to one of their concerts because it would be like an all standing concert like bouncing up and down."

Also of interest is a comparison of the effect sizes for the regressions of overall evaluation and willingness to pay for recorded and live music. 57% of the variance in overall evaluation was explained, but only approximately 25% of the variance in willingness to pay for either live or recorded music, implying there is greater error variance in what drives

consumers to pay for music than how they evaluate the band. This is consistent with a great number of comments on the questionnaires indicating some respondents simply do not purchase music or go to live performances; therefore, their willingness to pay was 1 on a scale of 1 to 7.

As with any study, there are limitations important to note. First, data for the quantitative analysis was gathered in a classroom environment from students who did not self-select themselves as active music listeners. This likely creates some uncontrollable measurement error due to environment and attention of some subjects. Furthermore, three of the four songs selected were fast paced, therefore lyrical cues may have been under-represented, as evidenced in the non-significance of this cue in any of the regressions; and comments on the questionnaires such as "couldn't follow lyrics" found on multiple responses.

With strong scale reliability, there is reason to believe they may serve as a platform for more in-depth use in future research. The findings of this research emphasize the subjectivity of the construct "authenticity," and reason to investigate further the importance of understanding what influences perceived authenticity. From a theoretical standpoint, further research could investigate the authentication process under different circumstances, such as prior knowledge or preference of a musician or band and how one learns about new music. A related subsequent study using these scales found differences in the authentication process based on prior knowledge of a band, tested using both multiple regression and structural equations modeling (Barretta and Minor 2011), strengthening reliability and opportunity for further contribution to knowledge.

Focus on cues of authenticity is another line of future research, especially a qualitative approach to better understand under what circumstances which cues are relied upon. Furthermore, the cues measured here are specific to music. Other product and service areas, especially cultural, can benefit from focus paid to the cues constructed by producers to understand how claims of authenticity are used by consumers. Construction of authenticity perceived has been researched in many products, from wine (Beverland 2006) to potato chips (Freedman and Jurafsky 2012), representing examination of how and why those cues are constructed. How those messages are received before, during, and even after consumption will add knowledge to the co-construction of perceived authenticity. Extension of source credibility findings to research on the authentication of products and services is a potentially beneficial line of inquiry.

Figure 1: Authenticity Factor Analysis Results

	Expertise	Dependability	Sincerity
Well-trained	.869		
Experienced	.868		
Expert	.795		
Knowledgeable	.721		
Trustworthy		.797	
Dependable		.795	
Credible		.684	
Honest			.876
Real			.717
Sincere			.671
Cronbach's Alpha:	0.93	0.89	0.85

Figure 2: Summary of regression analyses

Outcome Variables	Overall Evaluation	Willingness to pay Recorded Music	Willingness to pay Live Performance
Predictor Variables			
Expertise	.313 **	.287 **	.291 **
Dependability	.442 **	*n.s.*	*n.s.*
Sincerity	*n.s.*	.211 **	.257 **
Musical Elements	.159 **	.119 *	*n.s.*
Visual Elements	*n.s*	*n.s.*	.141 **
Lyrics	*n.s.*	*n.s.*	*n.s*
R^2	.574 **	.240 **	.247 **

Chart includes standardized beta coefficients.
** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; R2 = variance explained
All three Models are significant at the .001 level of significance.