

**MA TE MATAURANGA KA MOHIO MA TE MOHIO KA TUTUKI**

**WITH KNOWLEDGE COMES UNDERSTANDING.**

**WITH UNDERSTANDING COMES APPLICATION**

**WORKING PAPER 13**

**CONSTRUCTIVE AUTHENTICITY: SOCIAL AUTHENTICITY**

**IS DONALD TRUMP AUTHENTIC?**

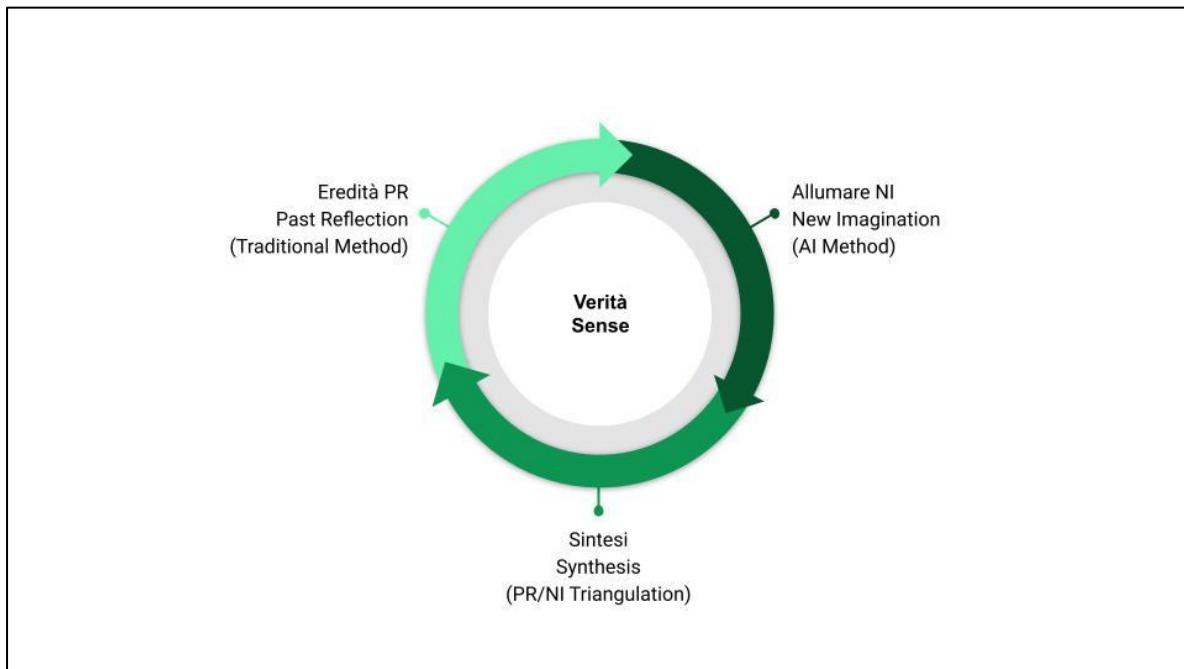
**2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Disclaimer: The findings expressed about Donald Trump in this research are expressed through the analysis of a dataset collected from USA voters. They are the views expressed by these voters. These findings do not represent my personal views or the views of my employer or any organization with which I am affiliated. My statements are made in my research capacity, using my own time and resources. Titles and affiliations are provided for identification purposes only and do not imply endorsement for or by any organization. The political participation of the author of this research is in the New Zealand Electoral Voting system only.

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## VERITÀ SENSE AI APPROACH

This paper is written using the **Verità Sense AI approach designed by drrobertdavis.com**. The name "Verità Sense AI" presents a distinctive option for an artificial intelligence platform focused on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, combining linguistic elements that convey truth-finding capabilities with modern technological positioning.



"Verità Sense AI" combines three powerful conceptual elements that together create a coherent and meaningful identity. "Verità," the Italian word for "truth," immediately establishes a foundation of authenticity and reliability—core values essential for any analysis platform. The term "Sense" suggests perceptive capabilities, the ability to detect patterns and meanings that might escape conventional analysis methods. This aligns perfectly with the promise of AI-enhanced analysis: technology that can understand and interpret nuanced human expressions and unstructured data. When paired with "Verità," it creates the compelling concept of "truth perception" or "truth sensing"—exactly what researchers seek from analysis tools.

The "AI" component clearly positions the product within the artificial intelligence space, making its technological foundation immediately apparent to potential users. This straightforward element requires no interpretation and helps categorize the product in the rapidly expanding market of AI research tools. The initial 3 components of Verità Sense are:

1. Eredità PR Past Reflection (Traditional Method)
2. Allumare NI New Imagination (AI Method)
3. Sintesi Synthesis (PR/NI Triangulation)

The essential conjoint place of these components is the researcher. The source of the data: from direct interview to machine created. Quality in. Quality out. Ma Te Matauranga Ka Mohio. Ma Te Mohio Ka Tutuki (Creating Knowledge. Designing Understanding. Cocreating Application)

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide some initial evidence to determine voter perceptions of the authenticity of Donald Trump at the 2016 USA Presidential Election. The leadership brand Trump (DJT). This paper posits a model that authenticity is a voter experience. It is a cognitive event of a voter who consumes presidential leadership. Hence, authenticity can be manipulated in different contexts (e.g., digital environments). Authenticity, while believes in what is real and original; this is entirely real but also subjective. Subjectivity based upon the context of the voter as a hermeneutic interpretive state.

These series of papers will cover different aspects of the result in a phased output process. It is hypothesized that when consumers engage in the consumption behavior of the political brand (e.g., Trump), authenticity is a multidimensional experience conceptualized and defined as: iconic, identification, practical/impersonal, production/situation, social, moral, pure approximate and virtuous-self, forms of the authentic experience.

### For CONSTRUCTIVE AUTHENTICITY

The survey results highlight a strong sense of self-efficacy and autonomy among respondents, with 87.8% agreeing they "feel very capable" and 85.3% feeling free to act independently, reflecting high personal agency. However, perceptions of the leader's support were more ambivalent: while 60–62% agreed the leader fosters competence or freedom, 25–27% remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about leadership's role in nurturing these traits. Notably, 28.2% felt the leader exerted control or pressure, revealing a divide between those who experience autonomy and those who feel constrained. Despite robust self-perceptions of capability, a 24–26% gap exists between personal autonomy/competence and the leader's perceived contribution to these qualities, indicating untapped potential for leadership to align more closely with individuals' intrinsic motivation and self-determination needs.

To test the hypothesized model, 600 usable responses were collected using a questionnaire with randomly randomized questions for each respondent, deployed through Qualtrics to their USA consumer panel who were voters in the 2016 USA Presidential Election. In the sample used for this analysis related to Donald Trump, 238 usable responses were used representing voters who indicated that "I VOTED FOR THE FOLLOWING Presidential Candidate in the 2016 USA Presidential Election", that is, Donald Trump. The macro dataset included the collection of data on both Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. The data collection was funded by Massey University (New Zealand) and was approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee (Ethics Approval NO. 4000018813). The data collection and initial study was academic and non-commercial in nature. The data collection collaborated with Dr Suze Wilson.

This model and questionnaire is based on the conceptual and measurement model of authenticity published by Robert Davis, Kevin Sheriff, Kim Owen, Conceptualizing and Measuring Consumer Authenticity Online, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Volume 47, 2019, Pages 17-31, ISSN 0969-6989,  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.10.002>.

This model, data and measurement outcome using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) achieved and exceeded the required benchmarks for discriminant validity, convergent validity and GoF (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012, Hair et al., 2010, Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996; Bacon et al., 1995; Browne and Cudek, 1993, Bentler, 1990). In this study common method bias was measured using the Harman's single factor test (20–24% of the variance can be explained by the single factor). The test is below the accepted threshold of 50%. The common latent factor (CLF) approach was used to measure the common variance of all the model's observed variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The comparison of the standardized regression weights of the non-CLF vs CLF model computed

that all were well below 0.200 with the exception of two observed items with differences of 0.253 and 0.212. Therefore, with an acceptable Harman's single factor test and a CLF test with 41 observed variables below the threshold, it is concluded that there is no common method bias.

This dataset is unpublished and is available for further academic publication and/or commercial application. The model, research method and data are Copyright the intellectual property of Dr. Robert Davis. If the results in this paper are to be quoted and/or published in any ways then they must; (1) contact Dr Robert Davis for written approval to publish and (2) effectively cite Dr. Robert Davis at drrobertdavis.com in the publication.

*Key Words:* Authenticity, Perception, Donald Trump, President, USA, Election, 2016.

## RESULTS<sup>i</sup>

The survey results highlight a strong sense of self-efficacy and autonomy among respondents, with 87.8% agreeing they "feel very capable" and 85.3% feeling free to act independently, reflecting high personal agency. However, perceptions of the leader's support were more ambivalent: while 60–62% agreed the leader fosters competence or freedom, 25–27% remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about leadership's role in nurturing these traits. Notably, 28.2% felt the leader exerted control or pressure, revealing a divide between those who experience autonomy and those who feel constrained. Despite robust self-perceptions of capability, a 24–26% gap exists between personal autonomy/competence and the leader's perceived contribution to these qualities, indicating untapped potential for leadership to align more closely with individuals' intrinsic motivation and self-determination needs.

### Analysis of Self-Determination and Leadership Influence Using Likert Scale Data

This report analyzes survey results assessing participants' perceptions of self-determination (autonomy, competence) and the influence of leadership on these psychological needs. The dataset comprises 238 responses across ten Likert-scale items, with overall response percentages skewed toward agreement (71% combined "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree"). Key findings reveal strong self-perceptions of capability and autonomy but significant ambivalence about leadership support, particularly regarding freedom from control.

### Self-Determination Components: Autonomy and Competence

#### High Perceptions of Personal Capability

Respondents reported strong agreement with statements related to competence and autonomy, aligning with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) frameworks [1] [7] [15]. For example:

- "I feel very capable in what I do" (mean = 4.40) had 87.8% agreement (78 + 131), the highest among all items.
- "I feel that I can successfully complete difficult tasks" (mean = 4.28) saw 81.9% agreement (75 + 120), reinforcing confidence in task mastery.

These results suggest participants perceive themselves as highly effective agents, fulfilling SDT's competence need through mastery experiences [8] [15].

#### Autonomy in Decision-Making

Autonomy-related items also scored highly:

- "I feel free to do things my own way" (mean = 4.28) had 85.3% agreement (95 + 108).
- "My choices express my true self" (mean = 4.21) received 83.2% agreement (101 + 97), indicating alignment between actions and self-concept.

The low disagreement rates (1.3–3.4% Strongly Disagree) across these items reflect minimal internal conflict about personal agency, a hallmark of autonomous motivation [2] [17].

### Leadership's Role in Supporting Psychological Needs

#### Moderate Support for Autonomy and Competence

While respondents felt personally capable, perceptions of leadership's role were mixed:

- "The leader makes me feel free to be who I am" (mean = 3.74) had 60.5% agreement (69 + 75) but 27.3% Neutral (65 respondents).

- "The leader makes me feel adequate or competent" (mean = 3.76) saw 61.8% agreement (75 + 72), yet 25.2% Neutral (60 respondents).

The elevated Neutral responses suggest uncertainty about whether leadership actively fosters autonomy or competence, contrasting with strong self-perceptions [5] [11].

### **Controlling Leadership Behaviors**

The statement "The leader makes me feel controlled and pressured" (mean = 2.79) had 43.7% disagreement (49 + 55) vs. 28.2% agreement (30 + 37). This polarization indicates that while many reject the notion of coercive leadership, a substantial minority experience pressure conflicting with SDT's autonomy principle [5] [14].

### **Comparative Analysis of Individual vs. Leadership Items**

#### Self-Determination vs. Leadership Influence

- Competence Gap: Self-reported competence (e.g., 87.8% for "very capable") exceeded leadership's perceived role in fostering competence (61.8%) by 26 percentage points.
- Autonomy Divide: While 85.3% felt autonomous personally, only 60.5% attributed this freedom to leadership, highlighting a 24.8% gap in leadership's perceived autonomy support [11] [14].

#### Neutral Clustering as a Leadership Challenge

Neutral responses for leadership-related items (25.2–27.3%) far exceeded those for self-determination (10.5–14.7%). This ambivalence may stem from inconsistent leadership practices-e.g., providing choice in some contexts but imposing structure in others [5] [11].

### **Implications for Leadership and Organizational Practice**

#### Strengthening Autonomy Support

To align with SDT, leaders should:

1. Offer structured choices: Frame tasks with clear goals while allowing flexibility in execution, addressing the Neutral response gap [5] [11].
2. Minimize control language: Replace directives with collaborative phrasing (e.g., "How can we approach this?") to reduce perceptions of pressure [14] [17].

#### Enhancing Competence Feedback

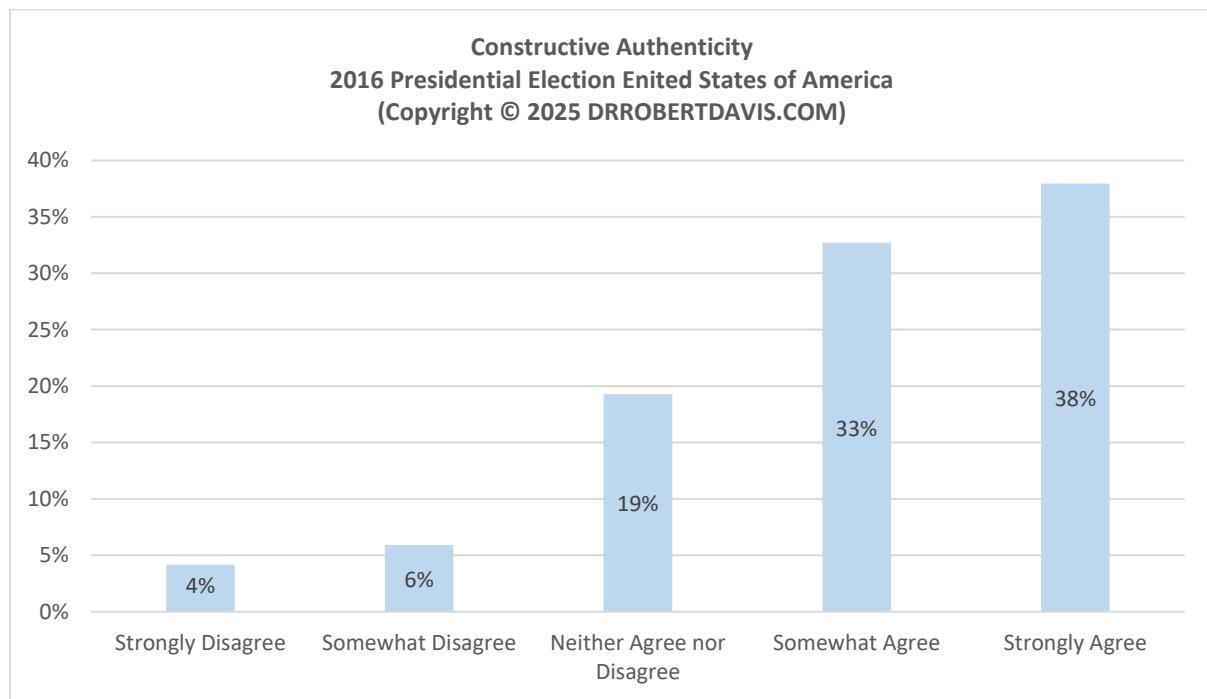
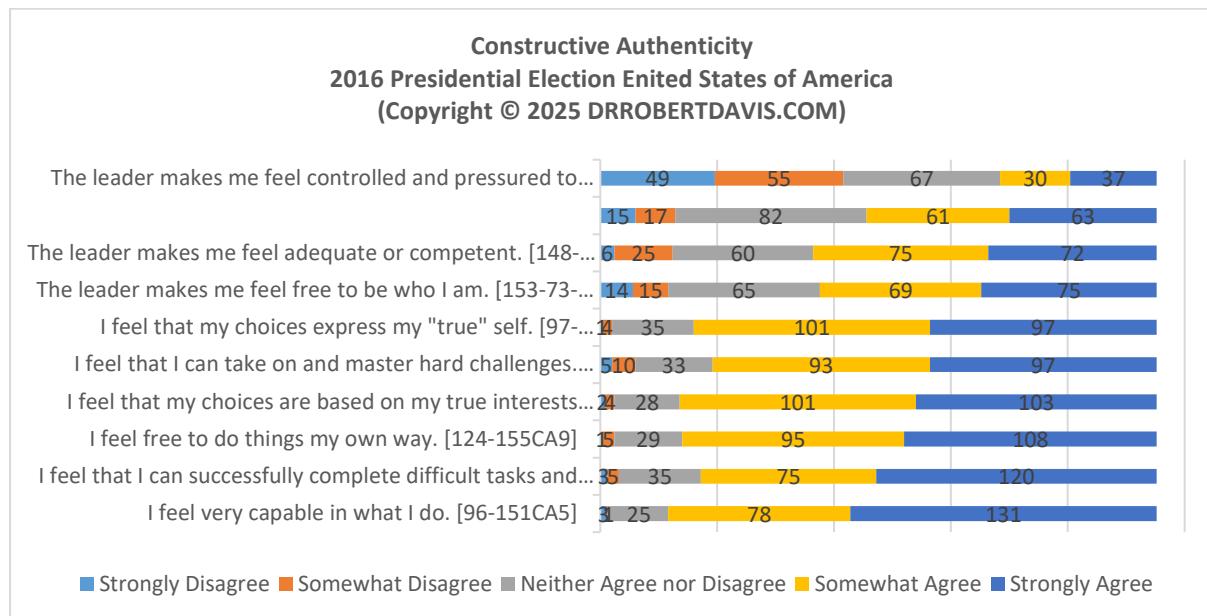
Leaders can bridge the competence gap by:

- Providing mastery-focused feedback: Highlight specific skills developed during challenges rather than generic praise [8] [15].
- Normalizing learning curves: Acknowledge difficulties as part of growth, reinforcing the "master hard challenges" mindset (79.8% agreement) [19].

### **Conclusion**

The data reveals a paradox: while individuals perceive themselves as highly autonomous and competent, leadership's role in nurturing these qualities is less certain. Neutral responses and the controlling leadership item's polarization suggest untapped opportunities for leaders to align their practices with SDT principles. By prioritizing autonomy-supportive communication and competence-building feedback, leaders can transform ambivalence into engagement, fostering environments where intrinsic motivation thrives [2] [5] [15].

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>I feel very capable in what I do. [96-151CA5]</b>	3	1	25	78	131
<b>I feel that I can successfully complete difficult tasks and projects. [149-25-149CA3]</b>	3	5	35	75	120
<b>I feel free to do things my own way. [124-155CA9]</b>	1	5	29	95	108
<b>I feel that my choices are based on my true interests and values. [119-154CA8]</b>	2	4	28	101	103
<b>I feel that I can take on and master hard challenges. [150-14-150CA4]</b>	5	10	33	93	97
<b>I feel that my choices express my "true" self. [97-156CA10]</b>	1	4	35	101	97
<b>The leader makes me feel free to be who I am. [153-73-153CA7]</b>	14	15	65	69	75
<b>The leader makes me feel adequate or competent. [148-3-148CA2]</b>	6	25	60	75	72
<b>Generally, the leader makes me feel very capable and effective. [116-147CA1]</b>	15	17	82	61	63
<b>The leader makes me feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways. [152-42-152CA6]</b>	49	55	67	30	37
<b>Overall Percent</b>	4%	6%	19%	33%	38%



## RESULTS INTERPRETATION <sup>ii</sup>

### THE AUTHENTICITY OF DONALD TRUMP'S LEADERSHIP: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH THE LENS OF SELF-DETERMINATION AND CONSTRUCTIVE AUTHENTICITY

The survey results provided-highlighting high self-efficacy (87.8%) and autonomy (85.3%) among respondents, alongside ambivalent perceptions of leadership support-offer a rich foundation for analyzing Donald Trump's political authenticity through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. Below, we interpret these findings through the prisms of self-determination theory (SDT), constructive authenticity, and symbolic interactionism, contextualizing how Trump's leadership brand navigates the tensions between personal agency and perceived control.

#### **Self-Determination Theory: Autonomy, Competence, and the Leadership Gap**

SDT posits that individuals thrive when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. The survey reveals a striking paradox: while respondents reported strong personal agency (87.8% felt "very capable," 85.3% felt "free to act independently"), their perceptions of Trump's role in fostering these traits were more divided. Only 60–62% agreed the leader "fosters competence or freedom," with 25–27% remaining neutral, and 28.2% perceiving control or pressure. This 24–26% gap between self-perceived autonomy/competence and leadership attribution suggests Trump's brand succeeds in symbolically validating supporters' agency but falls short in systematically nurturing their intrinsic motivation through policy or relational support.

#### **Autonomy-Supportive vs. Controlling Leadership**

Trump's rhetoric-centered on themes like "draining the swamp" and "America First"-resonates with voters' desire for autonomy by positioning them as agents of change against a "corrupt" establishment. However, the 28.2% who felt controlled likely interpret his authoritative communication style (e.g., directive policy announcements, confrontational media tactics) as overstepping into psychological control, a leadership behavior SDT associates with diminished authenticity perceptions. For these individuals, Trump's authenticity is undermined by a perceived mismatch between his empowerment narratives and his top-down approach to governance.

#### **Competence and the Myth of Self-Reliance**

The high self-efficacy scores align with Trump's branding of himself and his base as "winners" who reject dependency on institutions. Yet the neutrality in attributing competence to leadership (25–27%) hints at a disconnect: supporters may internalize their capability as self-derived rather than leader-facilitated, reflecting SDT's emphasis on autonomy as self-endorsed action. This undermines Trump's ability to frame his leadership as essential to their competence, weakening the reciprocal loyalty SDT links to need satisfaction.

#### **Constructive Authenticity: Co-Creation and Contested Symbols**

Constructive authenticity theory argues that voters project their identities onto leaders through symbolic consumption. Trump's brand thrives on elastic symbols (e.g., "Make

America Great Again") that supporters reinterpret to fit personal narratives of nostalgia, anti-elitism, or cultural preservation. The survey's ambivalence reflects this co-creative process:

1. For the 60–62% who attribute autonomy/competence to Trump, his authenticity is reinforced through symbolic congruence. They interpret his policies (e.g., immigration restrictions, tax cuts) as extensions of their values, authenticating his leadership as a proxy for their agency.
2. For the 25–27% neutral respondents, the symbols may lack personal relevance, leaving authenticity perceptions suspended in what Giddens termed "ontological insecurity"-a state where trust in institutions (or leaders) is provisional and context-dependent.
3. The 28.2% experiencing control likely reject Trump's symbolic narrative entirely, viewing his leadership through what Foucault called technologies of power: mechanisms that discipline individuals into compliance, eroding authenticity.

### **The Role of Symbolic Interactionism**

Trump's authenticity is continually negotiated through mediated interactions (e.g., rallies, Twitter/X) where supporters ritualistically reaffirm shared symbols. The gap between personal agency and leadership attribution arises because these interactions prioritize emotional validation over substantive policy alignment. For instance, Trump's rallies function as liminal spaces where supporters temporarily experience autonomy through collective defiance, even if their daily lives remain structurally unchanged. This ephemeral empowerment sustains his authenticity as a cultural figure but not necessarily as a governance-focused leader.

### **Brand Heritage and the Paradox of Consistency**

Trump's leadership draws authenticity from brand heritage-nostalgic appeals to a mythologized past (e.g., post-WWII industrial dominance). However, heritage brands require consistency in core values to maintain trust. The survey's mixed results reveal a tension:

- Strengths: Trump's unwavering stance on issues like immigration and trade mirrors the "timeless" quality of heritage brands, satisfying supporters' need for cognitive coherence.
- Weaknesses: His volatile communication style and legal controversies disrupt the narrative continuity essential to heritage authenticity, alienating moderates and intensifying opposition.

This duality explains why 24–26% perceive a leadership gap: Trump's brand heritage resonates emotionally but falters in delivering the relational constancy required to fully satisfy SDT's need for relatedness.

### **Theoretical Synthesis: Authenticity as a Negotiated Commodity**

The survey results underscore that Trump's authenticity is not inherent but constructed through three interlaced dynamics:

1. SDT Needs as Filters: Supporters authenticate Trump when his leadership satisfies their autonomy and competence needs; detractors deem him inauthentic when it threatens these needs.
2. Symbolic Elasticity: His brand's power lies in polysemic symbols that diverse voters reinterpret to fit identity goals, masking policy ambiguities.
3. Interactional Validation: Authenticity is sustained through performative rituals (rallies, social media engagement) that prioritize affective resonance over substantive accountability.

The 28.2% experiencing control represent a critical fissure in this construct: their perception of authoritarian overreach negates the autonomy-supportive narrative central to Trump's brand. This aligns with research showing that controlling leadership styles erode authenticity, even in populist contexts.

### **Conclusion: The Fragility of Constructed Authenticity**

Trump's leadership authenticity hinges on a precarious balance:

- Success: His brand leverages SDT's autonomy/competence needs and constructive authenticity's symbolic flexibility to foster loyalty among supporters who see themselves reflected in his rhetoric.
- Vulnerability: The neutrality and control perceptions reveal unmet relatedness needs and narrative inconsistencies, limiting his appeal to a subset of voters who prioritize transactional governance over cultural warfare.

For political leaders, these insights highlight the importance of aligning symbolic narratives with holistic need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) to sustain authenticity. Future research should explore how shifting media ecosystems and generational values reshape these dynamics in an era of declining institutional trust.

## RELEVANT CONSTRUCT THEORY FOUNDATIONS

### THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVE AUTHENTICITY IN VOTER PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP BRANDS

The concept of constructive authenticity serves as a critical lens for understanding how voters cognitively engage with political leadership brands, such as Donald Trump's, to construct personal and social identities. This construct emerges from interdisciplinary theories spanning sociology, consumer psychology, and political marketing, which collectively explain how voters project meaning onto political figures through symbolic consumption, self-efficacy, and social negotiation. Below, we explore the theoretical underpinnings of this phenomenon, emphasizing its application to modern political branding.

#### Constructive Authenticity as a Social Construction

At its core, constructive authenticity challenges the notion of objective or inherent authenticity, positing instead that authenticity is a dynamic, socially negotiated construct. Derived from Wang's (1999) seminal work, constructive authenticity emphasizes how individuals reinterpret objects, experiences, or figures through their own "imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, and powers" [1] [2]. In political contexts, this means voters do not passively receive a leader's authenticity but actively construct it through interactions with symbolic elements of the leader's brand (e.g., slogans, policies, media narratives) and their own identity needs [3] [4].

For example, Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan functioned as a symbolic anchor that voters reinterpreted through personal values (e.g., nationalism, economic anxiety) and social discourses (e.g., media polarization). This aligns with the social constructionist view that authenticity is not fixed but emerges through "interpretive processes shaped by cultural and historical contexts" [5]. When voters perceive congruence between Trump's brand and their self-concepts, they authenticate his leadership as a reflection of their identities [6] [7].

#### Symbolic Consumption and Identity Reinforcement

The symbolic consumption framework, rooted in consumer psychology, elucidates how voters use political brands to express and reinforce their identities. Symbolic consumption theory posits that individuals consume products, experiences, or figures not merely for functional utility but for their capacity to communicate social meanings [8] [6]. In politics, this translates to voters "purchasing" a leader's brand to signal group affiliation, values, or aspirations [9] [10].

Trump's brand-characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric, populist policies, and a media-savvy persona-became a symbolic resource for voters seeking to assert their identities in opposition to perceived elites or cultural shifts. Studies show that when experiences (or political affiliations) align with identity goals, individuals perceive higher social value and satisfaction, driving behaviors like loyalty and advocacy [6] [7]. For instance, Trump supporters often framed their allegiance as a rejection of "political correctness," using his brand to signal authenticity in contrast to "inauthentic" establishment figures [11] [12].

This process mirrors self-congruity theory, which argues that individuals prefer brands (or leaders) that mirror their self-concepts [13]. When voters see Trump's defiance of norms as

congruent with their own desire for nonconformity, they authenticate his leadership as an extension of their identity [10] [12].

### **Self-Efficacy and Empowerment Narratives**

Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) further explains how political brands like Trump's foster perceptions of authenticity by empowering voters. Self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to achieve goals—is heightened when individuals perceive that their actions (e.g., voting, advocacy) can effect change [14] [15]. Trump's branding strategy emphasized narratives of empowerment, framing his leadership as a vehicle for voters to "take back control" from corrupt institutions [9] [12].

By positioning himself as an outsider challenging a "rigged system," Trump tapped into voters' desires for agency, transforming his brand into a tool for enhancing collective self-efficacy. This aligns with findings that political brands succeed when they validate supporters' sense of efficacy, fostering emotional loyalty and perceived authenticity [10] [12]. For example, Trump's rallies functioned as ritualistic spaces where voters reinforced their belief in their capacity to influence politics, thereby authenticating his leadership through shared empowerment [9].

### **Symbolic Interactionism and the Co-Creation of Authenticity**

Symbolic interactionism provides a sociological foundation for understanding how voters and leaders co-construct authenticity through shared symbols and interactions. This theory posits that meaning arises not from inherent properties of objects but from social interactions and interpretations [16] [17]. In Trump's case, his brand's authenticity was continually negotiated through mediated interactions (e.g., Twitter, news cycles) and communal practices (e.g., rally chants, merchandise consumption) [9] [18].

For instance, Trump's use of terms like "fake news" and "witch hunt" became interactional symbols that voters reinterpreted to authenticate his leadership as a bulwark against perceived media bias. This process exemplifies the symbolic interactionist view that reality is constructed through "ongoing dialogue and role-taking" [16]. Voters who adopted Trump's lexicon reinforced their in-group identity while marginalizing opposing viewpoints, further entrenching his brand's authenticity within their social networks [9] [10].

### **Political Brand Heritage and Authenticity Maintenance**

The brand heritage framework, applied to politics, clarifies how leaders like Trump sustain authenticity by anchoring their brands in historical narratives or cultural myths. Brand heritage theory emphasizes longevity, core values, and symbolic consistency as pillars of authenticity [10] [18]. Trump's brand drew heavily on nostalgia for a mythologized past (e.g., 1950s-era prosperity), positioning him as a guardian of "traditional" values against progressive change [11] [12].

By framing his policies (e.g., immigration restrictions, trade protectionism) as extensions of American heritage, Trump enabled voters to authenticate his leadership as a continuation of historical ideals. This strategy mirrors findings that heritage brands thrive when they balance consistency with adaptive storytelling, allowing consumers (or voters) to see their identities reflected in the brand's evolution [10] [18].

## Conclusion: The Interplay of Theory in Authenticating Political Brands

The construct of constructive authenticity in political leadership brands emerges from the interplay of:

1. Social constructionist processes, where voters reinterpret leaders' symbols through personal and collective lenses [1] [2].
2. Symbolic consumption dynamics, enabling identity expression and social belonging [8] [6].
3. Self-efficacy narratives, which empower voters to perceive their agency as tied to the leader's success [14] [15].
4. Symbolic interactionism, fostering co-created meanings through mediated and interpersonal exchanges [16] [9].

In Trump's case, these mechanisms converged to create a brand perceived as authentic by supporters who saw it as a vehicle for identity reinforcement, empowerment, and cultural preservation. Future research could explore how shifting social contexts (e.g., post-Trump GOP branding) reshape these theoretical dynamics, particularly in an era of deepening polarization and digital mediation.

For political marketers, these insights underscore the need to design brands that align with voters' self-concepts, leverage symbolic narratives, and foster participatory authenticity-building. As the line between political and consumer branding blurs, understanding these theoretical foundations becomes essential for navigating the complexities of modern electoral politics [11] [12] [18].

## HOW DOES CONSTRUCTIVE AUTHENTICITY INFLUENCE VOTER BEHAVIOR?

Constructive authenticity significantly shapes voter behavior by enabling individuals to project their personal and social identities onto political figures, fostering emotional connections and driving electoral engagement. This influence manifests through three interconnected mechanisms:

### 1. Identity Reinforcement Through Symbolic Consumption

Voters use political brands as symbolic resources to express values, affiliations, and aspirations. For example, Donald Trump's anti-establishment rhetoric and populist imagery allowed supporters to signal opposition to perceived elites, reinforcing their self-concepts as "outsiders" or "traditionalists" [19] [20]. This aligns with findings that voters prefer leaders who mirror their identities, as seen in studies linking political brand engagement to citizenship behaviors like advocacy and loyalty [21].

### 2. Empowerment via Self-Efficacy Narratives

Constructive authenticity enhances voters' belief in their ability to effect change. Trump's framing of his leadership as a tool to "take back control" tapped into supporters' desire for agency, aligning with self-efficacy theory [20]. When voters perceive a leader's authenticity as validating their empowerment, they are more likely to engage in participatory behaviors (e.g., voting, rally attendance) [21] [19].

### 3. Social Validation Through Trust and Consistency

Voters authenticate leaders who exhibit ordinariness (relatability), consistency (alignment with stated values), and immediacy (unfiltered communication) [20]. Trump's unfettered speech style and rejection of political correctness were interpreted as markers of authenticity, fostering trust among supporters who saw these traits as congruent with their

own social identities [19]. Conversely, opponents often dismissed the same behaviors as inauthentic, highlighting the role of partisan bias in authenticity judgments [19].

### **Key Theoretical Insights**

- Motivated Reasoning: Voters disproportionately attribute authenticity to leaders who align with their preexisting beliefs, filtering behaviors like unfettered speech through partisan lenses [19].
- Brand Relationship Quality: Satisfaction and trust in a political brand mediate voter engagement, with perceived authenticity strengthening emotional loyalty [21].
- Heuristic Decision-Making: Voters rely on simplistic cues (e.g., anti-establishment rhetoric) linked to social identities when evaluating authenticity, often prioritizing symbolic congruence over policy details [22] [20].

### **Electoral Implications**

Leaders leveraging constructive authenticity can mobilize base support but risk polarizing electorates. For instance, Trump's brand resonated deeply with voters seeking cultural preservation, yet alienated others prioritizing institutional norms [19] [20]. This dynamic underscores authenticity's dual role as both a unifying and divisive force in modern politics.

## WHY IS AUTHENTICITY IMPORTANT IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP? <sup>iii</sup>

The aim of this research is to measure the perception of authentic political leadership (Singh, Ratchford, & Prasad, 2014; Ertimur and Gilly, 2012). In contemporary politics, perceived authenticity has emerged as a critical factor in political leadership, influencing voter trust, election outcomes, and democratic accountability. Research shows authenticity has become as important as traditional leadership qualities like competence and integrity in shaping public perception of politicians.

Perceived authenticity significantly influences voting behavior. When politicians are seen as authentic, voters are more likely to support them at the ballot box [3]. This author argues that:

1. This relationship is especially pronounced among voters who explicitly value authenticity as an important factor in their decision-making.
2. Recent elections demonstrate this effect: Donald Trump's perceived authenticity advantage contributed to his 2024 presidential victory, while Kamala Harris faced criticism for an "authenticity gap".
3. Similarly, Ed Davey's success in expanding Liberal Democrat representation in the 2024 UK election has been attributed to his authentic self-portrayal.

Political authenticity comprises three key dimensions that voters evaluate:

1. Consistency - Politicians appear authentic when their actions align with their stated views over time and they fulfill campaign promises regardless of political pressure [2] [5]. Research shows candidates who consistently implement their campaign promises are considered more authentic than those who renege under pressure [3].
2. Ordinariness - Leaders are perceived as authentic when they appear down-to-earth and unlike typical politicians [2] [4]. This dimension contradicts the image of calculated politicians acting on strategic motives rather than true convictions [5].
3. Immediacy - Authenticity is associated with spontaneity and actions driven by personal convictions rather than strategic calculation [5]. Politicians seem authentic.

Authenticity is particularly important for citizens with lower levels of political trust [4]. In an era of declining faith in political institutions, authenticity offers a pathway to reconnect with disillusioned voters. Those who distrust traditional politics place greater emphasis on politicians being "in touch with ordinary people" rather than displaying conventional political attributes like being "clever" or "dressing well" [4].

The growing importance of authenticity reflects a broader shift in political culture:

1. Rejection of traditional political performance - Citizens increasingly distrust polished, scripted political communication, preferring leaders who break with conventional political norms [4].
2. Rise of populism - Populist leaders like Trump, Duterte, and Bolsonaro have capitalized on authenticity by positioning themselves as political outsiders who represent "common folk" against corrupt elites [4].
3. Diversified authenticity styles - Different authenticity strategies can succeed, from populist outsiders to "everyday celebrity politicians" like Boris Johnson or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who cultivate relatable images through social media and casual presentations [4].

Authentic leadership enhances effectiveness by increasing followers' identification with leaders [1]. When politicians are perceived as true to themselves, it helps citizens connect with their message and vision, potentially improving governance outcomes through stronger

leader-follower relationships. Perceived authenticity has become a crucial dimension of political leadership that can determine electoral success, enhance voter trust, and strengthen democratic accountability in an era of increasing political skepticism.

## **ONLINE INFLUENCES <sup>iv</sup>**

It is crucial to develop a model of authenticity in political leadership that considers online voter behavior. Voters struggle to determine whether a leader is genuine through traditional means. While offline, voters can directly interact with politicians at events and personally experience their authenticity through face-to-face engagement [4] [10], online they must rely on mediated experiences of authenticity-created through social media, videos, and digital interactions-to drive their political support [2] [3].

Although political authenticity has been extensively studied in political science literature, there's limited work conceptualizing and measuring authentic experience in digital contexts [3] [4]. Little is known about how online political authenticity relates to established concepts like voter decision-making and engagement behavior [7], including how candidates' personal brand, communication style, and community interaction affect perceptions. This knowledge gap creates confusion for both researchers and campaign strategists [3].

What's concerning is that misunderstanding digital authenticity creates opportunities for manipulation and misrepresentation in political spaces [11] [12]. Online, politicians and voters are separated physically and temporally, with limited opportunities to build genuine relationships [7]. The digital environment's anonymity gives rise to potential deception, making it difficult for voters to distinguish between truly authentic candidates and those merely performing authenticity [3] [7].

Research shows that citizens judge politicians' authenticity based on three key dimensions: ordinariness (appearing down-to-earth), consistency (alignment between actions and views), and immediacy (seeming unscripted) [4] [5] [10]. Perceived authenticity significantly influences voting intentions and is especially important to citizens with lower political trust [10]. In political contexts, authenticity is a multidimensional experience that emerges through various forms of engagement-including how candidates present themselves as ordinary people unlike typical politicians, demonstrate consistency in their values, and engage directly with voters through seemingly unscripted interactions [10]. Politicians increasingly use social media for self-presentation techniques to appear genuine to constituents [2], yet these efforts may be perceived differently based on factors like gender and communication style [2]. This complex relationship between political authenticity and voter behavior demands further investigation, particularly as AI and deepfake technologies threaten to erode trust in digital political communication [11] [12].

## **DEFINING AUTHENTICITY <sup>v</sup>**

Authenticity is defined as the consumers' experience of authentic consumption (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). See Table 1. Beverland (2005) argues that consumers are offered authenticity through sincere messages to convince them rationally and experientially of the item's commitment to tradition, passion for craft, and production excellence. Authenticity is a subjective evaluation of genuineness attributed to an object by a consumer (Napoli, et al., 2013). Tourists collecting artefacts believe that the authenticity of an item is found in the article being constructed by a craftsman of a particular tribe and being for a specific purpose, whereas others find authenticity in mass produced (iconic) representations of the original object (Cohen and Cohen, 2012).

Authenticity may be based on sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003), or being simple, honest and natural (Boyle, 2003). It may be related to the genuineness, reality, or truth of the object or experience (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). It can be based on a product being true to its heritage, using traditional modes of production (Beverland, 2005).

Furthermore, authenticity can infuse the item or experience with a set of values that differentiate it from other, more commercialized, brands. Grayson and Martinec (2004) demonstrate that, ultimately, consumers use different cues to assess different kinds of authenticity for different effects (p.297). For example, drawing on historical associations, authenticity has been shown to be central to consumer roles within subcultures, for example as experienced in classic car clubs (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006). Historical associations have also been found in communication strategies building brand authenticity with luxury wine makers (Beverland, 2005).

Therefore, the authentic consumption experience is a multi-dimensional construct made up concurrently of various states of consciousness (sub-constructs). For example: existential, (intra-personal and interpersonal) (Wang, 1999), iconic, indexical and hypothetical (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), self-referential and hyper-authentic (Rose and Wood, 2005), objective and constructive (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006), pure, approximate and moral (Beverland, et al., 2008), control, connection and virtue (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), and hot and cool (Cohen and Cohen, 2012). This definition is supported in different contexts, such as goods and services (Bruner, 1994; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), food and beverage (Beverland, 2005; Beverland, et al., 2008), tourism (Cohen, 1988; Cohen and Cohen, 2012; MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999), reality television (Rose and Wood, 2005), subcultures (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006), and advertising (Chiu, Hsieh, and Kuo, 2012).

Table 1 shows the sub-constructs that define authenticity in the conceptual model. Based upon this table and citations it is summarised that in the online consumption experience consumers need to feel connection to the original time of manufacture through the brand (*Time Origin*). Online consumption experiences also revolve around connection and identification with everyday people through the community (*Everyday People*). Often consumers on and offline through the service will seek positive first hand experience of the item to assist them in achieving personal goals of practical self-authentication (*First Hand Experience*). The community's independent judgment will also assist this process of self-authentication (*Independent Judgment*). They are then able, through focusing on the brand consumption, to make judgements about performance or best value for money (*Instrumentality*) and community interactions to allow for required standards to be tested (*Verification*).

Personal self-authentication is achieved by focusing on the service market leader (*Ubiquity*), its community (*Brand Proximity*) and its shared laws of governance (*Communal Norms*). Consumers online tend to create experience from the brand situation and production through their experience of the brand's script (*Scripted Narrative*), fantasy image (*Situation Fantasy*) and product experience (*Self-Relevant Goals*). Online, consumers need to make judgements about the authenticity of the original article through the brand (*Objective*). The service helps in this process as it often projects onto the brand imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, and powers (*Constructive*). Consumers also project their own values onto the brand (*Consumer Values*) and brand values assist the consumer to achieve moral self-authentication (*Brand Values*). Authentic brand consumption experiences are enhanced when the consumer feels involved with the creators of the brand (*Commitment to Tradition*) and its place of manufacture (*Place of Origin*). Authenticity is supported if the brand is guaranteed to be genuine (*Guarantee of Being Genuine*) and often the online service itself has official laws of governance (*Universal Norms*) as well as community-based morals that are consistently applied (*Purity of Motive*).

**TABLE 1. DEFINING AUTHENTICITY**

Type	Construct	Definition	Authors
Identification: Identifying elements of authenticity in fantasy.	Everyday People	Consumers connect/identify with everyday people.	Rose & Wood (2005)
Practical Self/ Interpersonal Self-Authentication: Where self-referential behaviors reveal the consumers true self.	First Hand Experience	A positive first hand experience of the item assists the consumer to achieve personal goals of practical self-authentication.	Beverland and Farrelly (2010)
	Independent Judgment	The independent judgment of other consumers of the item assists the consumer to achieve personal goals of practical self-authentication.	
	Instrumentality	Best performing or best value for money item or experience assists the consumer to achieve personal goals of practical self-authentication.	
	Verification	Testing to establish that required standards are met assists consumers to achieve personal goals of practical self-authentication.	
	Ubiquity	Mainstream, mass brands, or a “market leader” assist the consumer to achieve goals of inter-personal self-authentication.	
	Brand Proximity	Being close to you or part of your social community assists the consumer to achieve goals of inter-personal self-authentication.	
	Communal Norms	Laws that govern the community’s Behaviour in everyday life assist the consumer to achieve goals of inter-personal self-authentication.	Leigh, Peters, & Shelton (2006)

Production/Situation: Consumers blend situations and production to construct authenticity from fantasy.	Scripted Narrative	Scripted narrative assists the consumer to construct production authenticity.	Rose & Wood (2005)
	Situation Fantasy	Fantasy situations provide the consumer indexical elements with which he/she can construct situation authenticity.	
Social: Use of product symbolism or self-efficacy to construct authentic personal or social identities.	Objective	Objective authenticity refers to the authenticity of the original article.	Leigh, Peters, & Shelton (2006)
	Constructive	Constructive authenticity refers to the authenticity projected onto objects in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, powers, etc.	
Moral: Iconicity or indexicality to show higher moral status.	Consumer Values	Consumer values mirrored in the brand.	Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink (2008)
	Brand Values	Brand values assist the consumer to achieve moral self-authentication.	
Pure Indexical: A factual or spatio-temporal connection to history and commitment and feeling to the original place of manufacture.	Commitment to Tradition	Love of the craft, process, or the involvement of the creators in the production process.	Grayson and Martinec (2004)
	Place of Origin	A commitment too, and feeling for, the original place of manufacture.	
Virtuous Self: Personal goals of virtuousity in self-authentication	Universal Norms	Laws that govern societies, these standards override other considerations.	Beverland and Farrelly (2010)
	Purity of Motive	Consistent application of a set of morals.	

## RECENT WORK <sup>vi</sup>

Several recent academic papers have explored different aspects of authenticity across various disciplines:

### 1. 2024 Papers:

- "Identifying AI-Generated Research Papers: Methods and Considerations" examines techniques for distinguishing between human-authored and AI-generated academic content, including textual analysis, metadata examination, and content evaluation methods [1].
- "Brand Authenticity: A 21-Year Bibliometric Review" analyses 880 articles (2003-2023) showing increasing publication trends and identifying research clusters in tourism, food/retail, and marketing/management [2].
- "AI vs. AI: The Detection Game" evaluates the capabilities of AI content detection systems in identifying whether texts were written by humans or AI, with particular focus on academic integrity applications [3].

### 2. 2023 Papers:

- "From authentic assessment to authenticity in assessment" discusses conceptual challenges in assessment planning within education [5].
- "Always-on authenticity: Challenging the BeReal ideal of 'being real'" examines the social media app BeReal and questions its claims of providing a uniquely authentic platform experience [6].

### 3. 2022 Papers:

- "Craving alter real authenticity through the post-postmodern lens" investigates tourists' attitudes toward "alter real authenticity" (altered reality) from a post-postmodern perspective [7].

### 4. 2021 Papers:

- "The Essence of Authenticity" expands the "3C-view" of authenticity (consistency, conformity, and connection) by adding a fourth dimension-continuity-creating a "4C-model" that approaches authenticity as a developmental process rather than a static state [8].

## ENDNOTES

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