MA TE MATAURANGA KA MOHIO MA TE MOHIO KA TUTUKI

WITH KNOWLEDGE COMES UNDERSTANDING.

WITH UNDERSTANDING COMES APPLICATION

WORKING PAPER 14

CONSUMER VALUES: MORAL AUTHENTICITY (ICONICITY OR INDEXICALITY
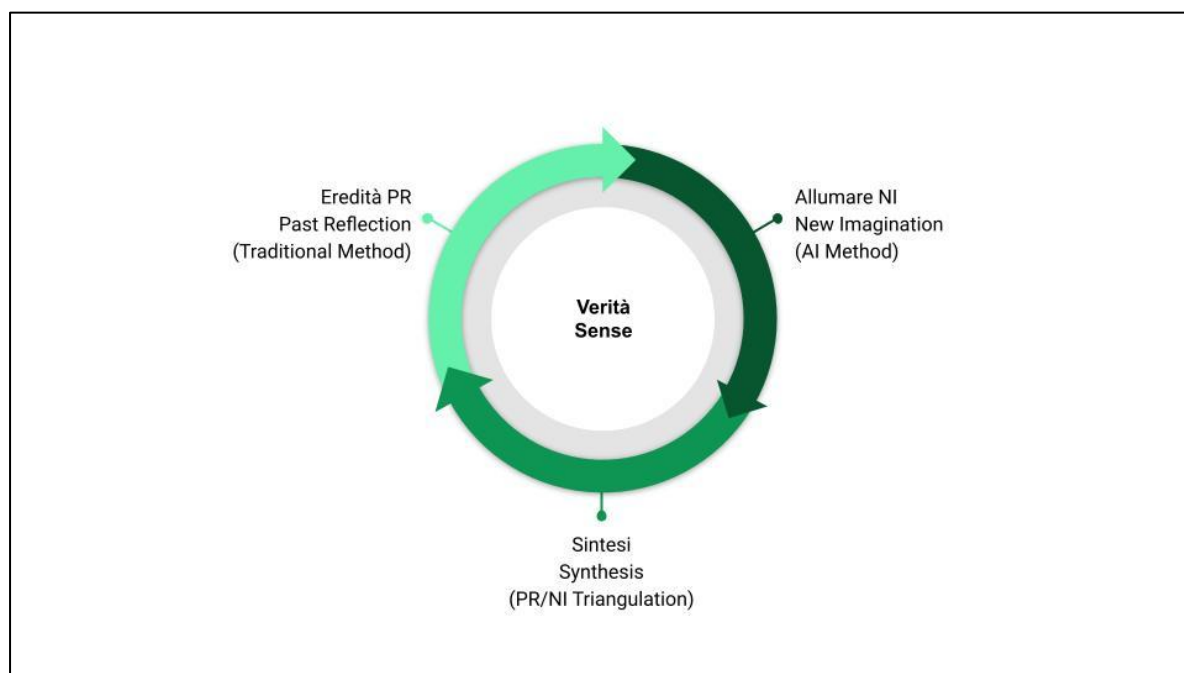
IS DONALD TRUMP AUTHENTIC?

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.

Contact Dr. Robert Davis: drrobertdavis.com, drradavis@gmail.com

VERITÀ SENSE AI APPROACH

This paper is written using the **Verità Sense AI approach designed by drobertdavis.com Verità Sense AI 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 CONSUMER VALUES

The survey results indicate moderate alignment between leadership and self-identity, with 44–46% agreement that the leader "helps me express myself" or "reflects who I see myself to be," while 39% agreement emerged for the leader helping "define" or "communicate self-identity." Neutral responses dominated, exceeding 35% for three statements (peaking at 37.8% for communicating self-identity), signaling widespread ambivalence. Disagreement rates varied: 28.9% disagreed the leader reflects their self-image (highest dissent), compared to 18.5% disagreement on self-expression assistance. Overall, the leader's influence on identity-related dimensions appears inconsistent, with notable uncertainty and variability across specific aspects of self-definition and communication.

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.

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

RESULTS

The survey results indicate moderate alignment between leadership and self-identity, with 44–46% agreement that the leader "helps me express myself" or "reflects who I see myself to be," while 39% agreement emerged for the leader helping "define" or "communicate self-identity." Neutral responses dominated, exceeding 35% for three statements (peaking at 37.8% for communicating self-identity), signaling widespread ambivalence. Disagreement rates varied: 28.9% disagreed the leader reflects their self-image (highest dissent), compared to 18.5% disagreement on self-expression assistance. Overall, the leader's influence on identity-related dimensions appears inconsistent, with notable uncertainty and variability across specific aspects of self-definition and communication.

Analysis of Leader's Role in Self-Identity Expression

Response Distribution Overview

The survey evaluated perceptions of a leader's influence on self-identity across four statements (238 respondents per item). Below are the results for each statement, with percentages calculated from raw counts:

1. "The leader reflects the kind of person I see myself to be."

- Strongly Disagree: 12.18% (29)

- Somewhat Disagree: 16.81% (40)

- Neutral: 26.89% (64)

- Somewhat Agree: 20.59% (49)

- Strongly Agree: 23.53% (56)

Total Agreement: 44.12% (105 respondents).

2. "The leader helps me express myself."

- Strongly Disagree: 8.40% (20)

- Somewhat Disagree: 10.08% (24)

- Neutral: 35.71% (85)

- Somewhat Agree: 22.69% (54)

- Strongly Agree: 23.11% (55)

Total Agreement: 45.80% (109 respondents).

3. "The leader helps me communicate my self-identity."

- Strongly Disagree: 9.24% (22)

- Somewhat Disagree: 13.87% (33)

- Neutral: 37.82% (90)

- Somewhat Agree: 16.81% (40)

- Strongly Agree: 22.27% (53)

Total Agreement: 39.08% (93 respondents).

4. "The leader helps me define myself."

- Strongly Disagree: 10.92% (26)

- Somewhat Disagree: 13.03% (31)

- Neutral: 36.97% (88)

- Somewhat Agree: 21.01% (50)
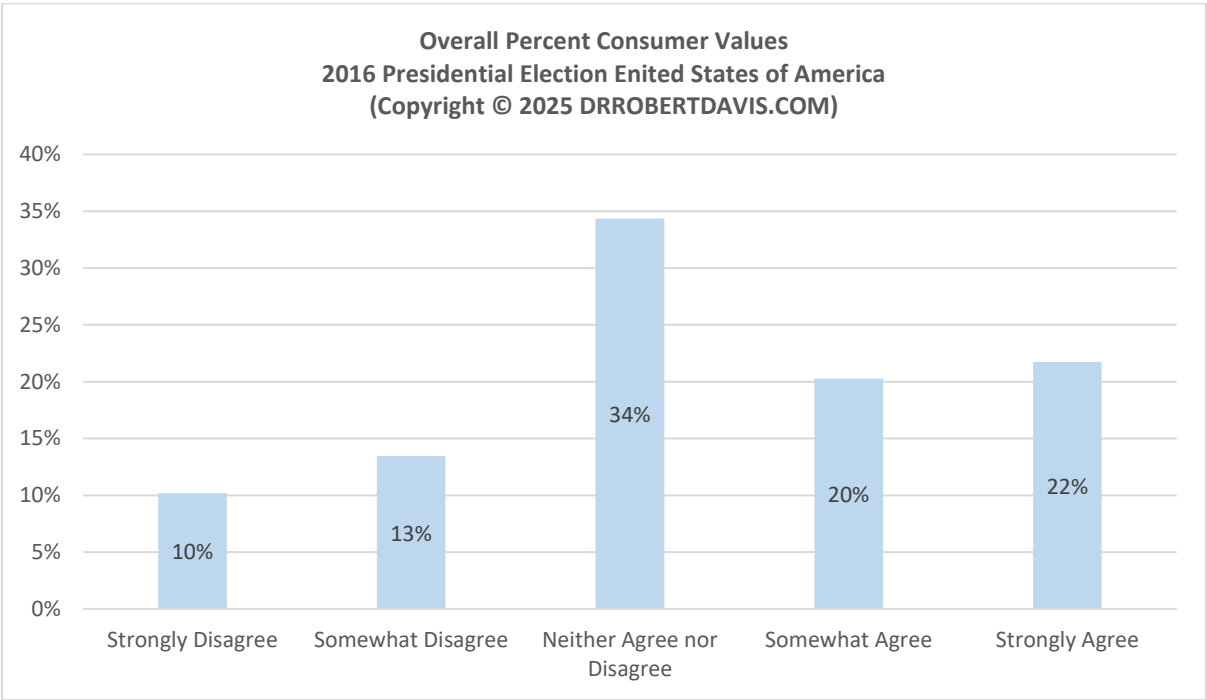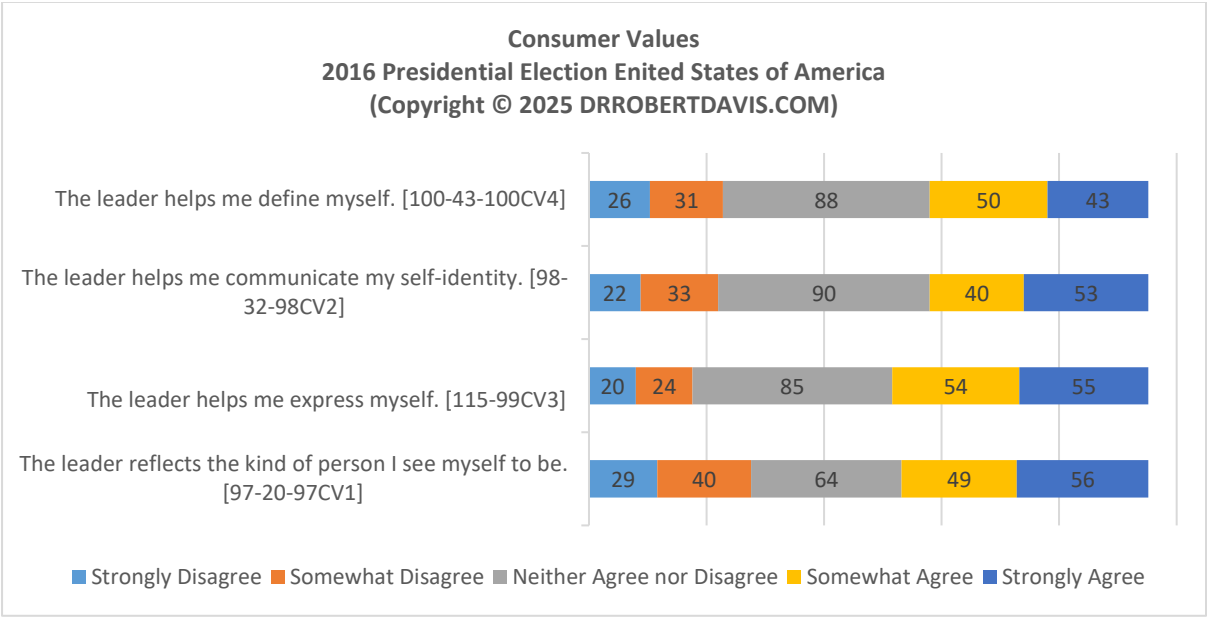
- Strongly Agree: 18.07% (43)

Total Agreement: 39.08% (93 respondents).

Key Observations

1. Highest Agreement: "The leader helps me express myself" (45.80% agreement) and "The leader reflects who I see myself to be" (44.12%).

2. Lowest Agreement: "Helps define myself" and "Communicate self-identity" both had 39.08% agreement.

3. Neutral Dominance: Neutral responses exceeded 35% for three statements, peaking at 37.82% for "Communicate self-identity."

4. Disagreement Rates: "Reflects who I see myself to be" had the highest disagreement (28.99%), while "Helps express myself" had the lowest (18.48%).

Data indicates moderate alignment between leadership and self-identity expression, with significant ambivalence (neutral responses) and variability across specific dimensions.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
The leader reflects the kind of person I see myself to be. [97-20-97CV1]	29	40	64	49	56
The leader helps me express myself. [115-99CV3]	20	24	85	54	55
The leader helps me communicate my self-identity. [98-32-98CV2]	22	33	90	40	53
The leader helps me define myself. [100-43-100CV4]	26	31	88	50	43
Overall Percent	10%	13%	34%	20%	22%

Consumer Values
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Question	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
The leader helps me define myself. [100-43-100CV4]	26	31	88	50	43
The leader helps me communicate my self-identity. [98-32-98CV2]	22	33	90	40	53
The leader helps me express myself. [115-99CV3]	20	24	85	54	55
The leader reflects the kind of person I see myself to be. [97-20-97CV1]	29	40	64	49	56

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Somewhat Disagree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Overall Percent Consumer Values
2016 Presidential Election Enited States of America
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	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Percent	10%	13%	34%	20%	22%

RESULTS INTERPRETATION [i]

THE AMBIVALENT NEXUS OF AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-IDENTITY IN TRUMP'S LEADERSHIP BRAND

Theoretical Framework: Authenticity as a Multidimensional Construct

The survey results-showing moderate alignment (44–46%) between Donald Trump's leadership and voters' self-identity, alongside significant ambivalence (neutral responses exceeding 35%)-reflect the inherent complexity of political authenticity as theorized in semiotic and consumer value frameworks. Drawing on Peirce's semiotics (iconicity/indexicality) [20][21], Holbrook's consumer values (ethics, status) [22][23], and Luebke's perceived political authenticity scale (consistency, ordinariness, immediacy) [24][25][26], Trump's brand exemplifies how authenticity operates as a contested, context-dependent construct.

Iconic Alignment vs. Indexical Fragmentation

Trump's leadership leverages iconic symbols (e.g., MAGA hats, religious imagery) to evoke emotional resonance with voters prioritizing conservation values (tradition, security) [27][28]. The 44–46% agreement that he "helps me express myself" or "reflects who I see myself to be" aligns with existential authenticity, where supporters project their moral identity onto his brand [21][23]. For these voters, Trump's defiance of political correctness and performative nationalism serve as iconic cues that validate their self-concept as "authentic Americans" resisting progressive norms [28][29].

However, the lower alignment on defining/communicating self-identity (39%) and high neutrality (37.8%) reveals indexical dissonance. While Trump's policies (e.g., tax cuts, border security) provide indexical proof of commitment to self-enhancement (power, achievement) [30][31], their tangible outcomes-economic inequality, legislative gridlock-fail to uniformly translate into coherent self-identity reinforcement. This gap mirrors Beverland's observation that authenticity requires balancing industrial attributes (policy results) with rhetorical sincerity [30][32]. When indexical cues (e.g., job growth) conflict with voters' lived experiences, ambivalence emerges.

The Role of Moral Identity Centrality

The survey's variability-28.9% disagreement on Trump reflecting their self-image vs. 18.5% on self-expression assistance-underscores the role of moral identity centrality. For voters with high moral self-concept alignment (e.g., evangelical conservatives), Trump's apophatic ethic ("draining the swamp") provides a moral schema to rationalize support as virtuous resistance [33][28]. Conversely, dissenters perceive a semiotic contradiction: Trump's iconicity (e.g., "fighter" persona) clashes with their ethical values (e.g., inclusivity), creating cognitive dissonance [25][34].

Neutral responses signal existential ambivalence, where voters neither fully embrace nor reject Trump's authenticity. This aligns with Morhart's three-dimensional authenticity model [21][23]:

1. Indexical authenticity (policy outcomes) is insufficient to overcome skepticism.

2. Iconic authenticity (symbolic resonance) is polarizing, not universal.

3. Existential authenticity (self-identity alignment) is contextually mediated by partisan filters [26][35].

Case Study: Trump's Brand as a Mirror of Fragmented Authenticity

Trump's leadership exemplifies strategic authenticity-a curated performance blending consistency (defiance of norms), ordinariness (populist rhetoric), and immediacy (Twitter spontaneity) [28][29]. Yet, the survey's ambivalence reflects three theoretical tensions:

1.   Consistency vs. Hypocrisy: While Trump's unwavering rhetoric satisfies conservation values [27], his policy reversals (e.g., healthcare, trade) undermine indexical credibility, fostering neutrality among pragmatists [36].

2.   Ordinariness vs. Elitism: Trump's "blue-collar billionaire" persona resonates as iconic ordinariness [28], but his wealth and legal scandals index elitism, alienating working-class voters [29][36].

3.   Immediacy vs. Calculation: His unfiltered communication style signals existential immediacy [24], yet overtly strategic moves (e.g., Supreme Court nominations) appear calculated, diluting authenticity [33][29].

Conclusion: Authenticity as a Polarizing Semiotic Currency

The survey results underscore that Trump's authenticity is not a fixed trait but a semiotic negotiation between iconicity, indexicality, and existential identity. For 44–46% of respondents, his brand successfully mirrors their moral self-concept through symbolic defiance and policy indexing. However, the pervasive neutrality and dissent reveal fractures in this narrative, where conflicting cues (rhetoric vs. results, persona vs. persona) destabilize holistic authenticity.

This aligns with Luebke's tripartite model [25][26]:

•   Consistency (stable messaging) drives alignment.

•   Ordinariness (populist aesthetics) fosters emotional bonds.

•   Immediacy (spontaneous communication) enhances relatability.

Yet, when these dimensions fragment-as seen in Trump's contested policy outcomes and ethical scandals-the result is ambivalence, not adhesion. Ultimately, the data reflects a leadership brand that is authentic for some, inauthentic for others, and existentially ambiguous for the rest-a testament to the subjective, value-laden nature of political authenticity itself.

RELEVANT CONSTRUCT THEORY FOUNDATIONS

THE SEMIOTICS OF MORAL VALUE ALIGNMENT IN POLITICAL BRANDING: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S LEADERSHIP AND VOTER PERCEPTION

Summary of Key Findings

The intersection of consumer values, moral identity, and semiotic theory provides a robust framework for understanding how voters cognitively engage with political leadership brands like Donald Trump's. At its core, this dynamic relies on Holbrook's typology of consumer value (efficiency, excellence, status, play, aesthetics, ethics, spirituality) and Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values (self-enhancement, conservation, self-transcendence, openness to change) to explain how voters project moral status through semiotic cues [1] [2] [3]. Trump's brand leverages iconicity (symbolic resemblance to idealized values) and indexicality (factual associations with policy outcomes) to mirror voters' moral identities, particularly among those prioritizing conservatism, security, and self-enhancement [2] [4] [5]. This alignment activates moral identity centrality-a psychological mechanism where support for the brand reinforces the voter's self-concept as ethically consistent [6] [7]. The result is a feedback loop where political consumption becomes both a reflection of personal morality and a performative act of moral signaling.

Theoretical Foundations of Consumer Values in Political Consumption

Holbrook's Typology and the Moral Dimension

Morris Holbrook's framework identifies ethics as a foundational consumer value, encompassing justice, virtue, and moral principles [1] [7]. In political contexts, ethical value manifests as voters judging leaders based on perceived alignment with their moral compass. For example, Trump's emphasis on "law and order" and nationalism resonates with voters who prioritize conservation values (security, tradition) as defined by Schwartz [2] [3]. Holbrook's model further distinguishes between extrinsic values (e.g., status, efficiency) and intrinsic values (e.g., ethics, spirituality), with Trump's brand strategically blending both: his policies promise tangible outcomes (extrinsic) while framing them as morally righteous (intrinsic) [8] [3]. This duality allows voters to rationalize support as both pragmatic and virtuous.

Schwartz's Motivational Groups and Political Segmentation

Schwartz's four value orientations-self-enhancement, conservation, self-transcendence, and openness to change-explain divergent voter responses to leadership brands [2]. Trump's rhetoric targets self-enhancement (power, achievement) and conservation (security, conformity) segments. For instance, his "America First" policies index economic nationalism (self-enhancement) while invoking nostalgia for traditional social structures (conservation) [4]. Conversely, voters prioritizing self-transcendence (universalism, benevolence) often reject his brand, illustrating how value conflicts drive political polarization [2] [6]. Empirical studies confirm that value-based segmentation predicts policy preferences, with Trump's base disproportionately valuing security and rejecting cosmopolitanism [2] [4].

Moral Identity Centrality and the Psychology of Political Alignment

The Role of Moral Self-Concept

Moral identity centrality-the degree to which morality is central to one's self-concept-moderates how voters engage with political brands [6] [7]. Individuals with high moral identity centrality seek leaders whose perceived virtues align with their own. Trump's brand, framed through slogans like "Make America Great Again," operates as a moral schema that voters adopt to validate their ethical stance [4] [6]. This process is reinforced by emotional brand attachment, where affective bonds amplify the salience of value alignment [6]. For example, voters who emotionally identify with Trump's defiance of political correctness view his transgressions as virtuous resistance rather than ethical lapses [4] [6].

Cause-Related Marketing and Political Analogues

In commercial contexts, cause-related marketing (CRM) links brands to social issues to attract ethically minded consumers [6]. Politically, Trump's alignment with causes like immigration restriction or deregulation functions similarly, appealing to voters who perceive these stances as morally urgent [4] [6]. The apophatic ethic-defining virtue through opposition to perceived vices (e.g., "draining the swamp")-strengthens this bond by positioning the leader as a moral crusader [7] [3]. Studies show that such strategies are particularly effective among voters with high moral identity centrality, as supporting the brand becomes synonymous with upholding personal ethics [6] [7].

Semiotic Theory in Political Branding: Iconicity vs. Indexicality

Peirce's Triadic Model and Political Signs

Charles Peirce's semiotics categorizes signs into icons (resemblance), indices (causal connection), and symbols (cultural convention) [5] [9]. Trump's brand employs all three:

• Icons: The "Make America Great Again" hat visually echoes patriotic imagery, serving as an iconic reminder of idealized American values [5] [10].

• Indices: Policies like border wall construction index a commitment to immigration control, creating a factual link between rhetoric and action [5] [9].

• Symbols: The Republican elephant symbolizes conservative ideals, relying on cultural familiarity to convey meaning [5] [10].

Voters use these signs to cognitively map the leader's moral status. Iconic elements evoke emotional resonance, while indices provide tangible proof of ideological consistency [5] [9].

Moral Signaling Through Iconic and Indexical Cues

Iconicity enables voters to project abstract moral values onto the leader. For example, Trump's use of religious imagery (e.g., holding a Bible outside a church) iconically signals alignment with Christian ethics, regardless of policy specifics [5] [10]. Indexicality, conversely, ties moral claims to verifiable actions. Tax cuts for the wealthy, framed as "economic patriotism," index a pro-business ethos that voters interpret as morally defensible [4] [9]. The interplay between these modes allows voters to justify support through both emotional affinity (iconic) and rationalized outcomes (indexical) [5] [9].

Case Study: Trump's Leadership Brand and Voter Moral Identity

Value Alignment in the Self-Enhancement Segment

Trump's brand thrives among voters prioritizing self-enhancement values (power, achievement). His persona as a dealmaker and disruptor mirrors their aspirational self-concept, while policies like deregulation index a commitment to meritocratic success [2] [4]. These voters cognitively frame support as a moral act-defending capitalism and individual liberty against perceived socialist threats [4] [3].

Conservation Values and Nostalgic Indexicality

For voters emphasizing conservation, Trump's rhetoric indexes a return to idealized past norms. Promises to revive manufacturing jobs or restrict immigration are interpreted as moral imperatives to preserve cultural identity [2] [4]. The iconic use of slogans like "America First" reinforces this narrative, symbolizing resistance to globalization's perceived moral decay [4] [10].

Emotional Attachment and Moral Justification

Emotional bonds amplify value alignment. Voters who perceive Trump as a "fighter" against elites experience moral self-licensing, where support justifies previously held biases [6] [7]. This dynamic mirrors commercial CRM strategies, where emotional attachment mediates ethical consumption [6] [8].

Conclusion: The Morality-Semiotics Nexus in Political Consumption

The construct of consumer values in political branding is underpinned by a triadic theoretical framework:

1. Value Typologies (Holbrook/Schwartz) define the moral dimensions voters prioritize.

2. Moral Identity Centrality explains why alignment with leadership brands reinforces self-concept.

3. Semiotic Mechanisms (iconicity/indexicality) provide the cognitive tools for moral signaling.

Trump's brand exemplifies how leaders can weaponize these elements to cultivate loyalty. By blending iconic nostalgia with indexical policy outcomes, he enables voters to frame political consumption as both morally coherent and pragmatically justified. Future research should explore how shifting value priorities (e.g., climate change) disrupt such alignments and necessitate rebranding.

IN WHAT WAYS DO ICONIC OR INDEXICAL SYMBOLS INFLUENCE VOTER

PERCEPTIONS OF MORAL STATUS

Iconic and indexical symbols shape voter perceptions of moral status by embedding political leadership within frameworks of shared values, emotional resonance, and tangible evidence. Here's how these semiotic mechanisms operate:

1. Iconic Symbols: Emotional Resonance and Moral Ideals

Iconic symbols-those that visually or conceptually resemble idealized values-allow voters to project abstract moral principles onto leaders. For example:

• Religious imagery (e.g., holding a Bible) iconically signals alignment with Christian ethics, even if policy actions diverge [11].

• Slogans like "Make America Great Again" evoke nostalgia for a mythologized past, framing the leader as a guardian of tradition [12] [13].

These icons activate moral identity centrality, where voters perceive support for the leader as congruent with their self-concept as ethically consistent [12]. The emotional appeal of icons bypasses rational scrutiny, enabling voters to interpret the leader's actions through a moral lens [11] [14].

2. Indexical Symbols: Tangible Proof of Moral Commitment

Indexical symbols-factual associations between rhetoric and outcomes-provide voters with evidence to rationalize moral judgments. Examples include:

• Policy results (e.g., tax cuts indexed as "economic patriotism") frame self-interest as collective virtue [12] [13].

• Behavioral cues (e.g., Trump's early-morning tweets) index authenticity and defiance of political norms, interpreted as moral steadfastness [13].

Indexicality bridges the gap between abstract values and concrete actions. Voters use these cues to validate a leader's credibility, as seen in how border wall policies are framed as moral imperatives to protect national identity [12] [15].

3. Semiotic Interplay: Reinforcing Moral Hierarchies

The fusion of iconicity and indexicality creates a self-reinforcing moral narrative:

• Iconic gestures (e.g., ceremonial displays of patriotism) evoke pride and nostalgia, while indexical policies (e.g., deregulation) signal commitment to conservative values [12] [16].

• This duality allows voters to justify support as both emotionally resonant (iconic) and pragmatically defensible (indexical) [11] [13].

Peirce's semiotic triad (icons, indices, symbols) explains how leaders like Trump weaponize these signals: icons appeal to System 1 thinking (emotional), while indices engage System 2 (rational) [12] [14].

Case Study: Trump's Moral Branding

• Iconic: The MAGA hat symbolizes resistance to progressive "moral decay," aligning with voters prioritizing tradition [12] [13].

• Indexical: Tax cuts for corporations are framed as proof of pro-business ethics, appealing to self-enhancement values [12] [15].

This strategy leverages symbolic status politics, where governmental actions signal whose moral codes deserve esteem [12]. Voters internalize these signals, interpreting political consumption as both a moral duty and a performance of identity [14] [13].

Conclusion

Iconic and indexical symbols work synergistically to shape moral perceptions: icons provide emotional anchors, while indices supply rational justifications. Together, they enable voters to reconcile ideological alignment with pragmatic support, reinforcing the leader's moral authority through semiotic coherence [12] [11] [13].

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF INDEXICAL SYMBOLS USED IN POLITICAL

CAMPAIGNS

Indexical symbols in political campaigns create direct, causal links between a leader's actions or traits and voters' perceptions of credibility or moral alignment. These symbols rely on tangible evidence or associations to reinforce ideological commitments. Here are key examples from recent campaigns:

1. Policy Outcomes as Indexical Proof

• Border Wall Construction: Trump's push for a U.S.-Mexico border wall indexed a commitment to immigration control, framed as a moral imperative to protect national security [17]. Voters interpreted the physical structure as proof of ideological follow-through.

• Tax Cuts: Framed as "economic patriotism," tax reductions for corporations and high earners were indexed to a pro-business ethos, appealing to voters prioritizing self-enhancement values [17].

2. Behavioral Cues and Authenticity

• Early-Morning Tweets: Trump's tweets timestamped at 6:35 AM were seen as indexical of his personal involvement and unfiltered communication style. The timing and typographical errors (e.g., hyphens, erratic capitalization) signaled authenticity, differentiating his voice from staff-written content [18].

• Defiance of Political Norms: Trump's refusal to conform to traditional presidential decorum (e.g., informal language) indexed a "fighter" persona, interpreted by supporters as moral steadfastness against elitism [18] [17].

3. Cultural and Material Symbols

• MAGA Hats: The red "Make America Great Again" hats became indexical of direct affiliation with Trump's movement. Wearing the hat signaled not just support but active participation in his ideological crusade [17].

• Traditional Attire in Indonesian Elections: Candidates like Prabowo Subianto wore peci (traditional caps) and white shirts, indexing nationalist values and cultural continuity. The red eagle symbol in their branding served as an index of patriotic resolve [19].

4. Linguistic and Typographical Markers

• Exclamation Marks and Urgency: In Indonesia's 2014 election, slogans like "Indonesia Bangkit!" ("Indonesia Rise!") used exclamation marks to index urgency and a call to action, framing the candidates as agents of change [19].

• Ballot Position Numbers: Listing candidates as "No.1" on ballots indexed clarity, reducing voter confusion and reinforcing name recognition through direct association [19].

5. Food and Lifestyle Associations

• MAGA-Influenced Consumption: In the U.S., foods like fast food or "basic" meals (e.g., hamburgers) became indexical of anti-elitism and alignment with Trump's populist brand, contrasting with "hipster" foods linked to progressive values [17].

Why Indexicality Matters

Indexical symbols bridge rhetoric and action, allowing voters to rationalize support as both morally coherent and factually justified. For example, Trump's tweets' typographical "flaws" [18] or policy outcomes [17] provided tangible "evidence" of authenticity, while cultural attire [19] or consumption habits [17] reinforced in-group identity. By leveraging these cues, campaigns transform abstract values into perceptible proof, strengthening emotional and ideological bonds.

WHY IS ATHENTICITY IMPORTANT IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP? ii

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 [iii]

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 [iv]

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 assists 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.	Leigh, Peters, & Shelton (2006)
	Communal Norms	Laws that govern the community's Behaviour in everyday life assist the consumer to achieve goals of inter-personal self-authentication.	

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.	
	Place of Origin	A commitment too, and feeling for, the original place of manufacture.	Grayson and Martinec (2004)
Virtuous Self: Personal goals of virtuosity 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 ^v

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].

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