

MA TE MATAURANGA KA MOHIO MA TE MOHIO KA TUTUKI

WITH KNOWLEDGE COMES UNDERSTANDING.

WITH UNDERSTANDING COMES APPLICATION

WORKING PAPER 11

SITUATION FANTASY PRODUCTION/SITUATION AUTHENTICITY

IS DONALD TRUMP AUTHENTIC?

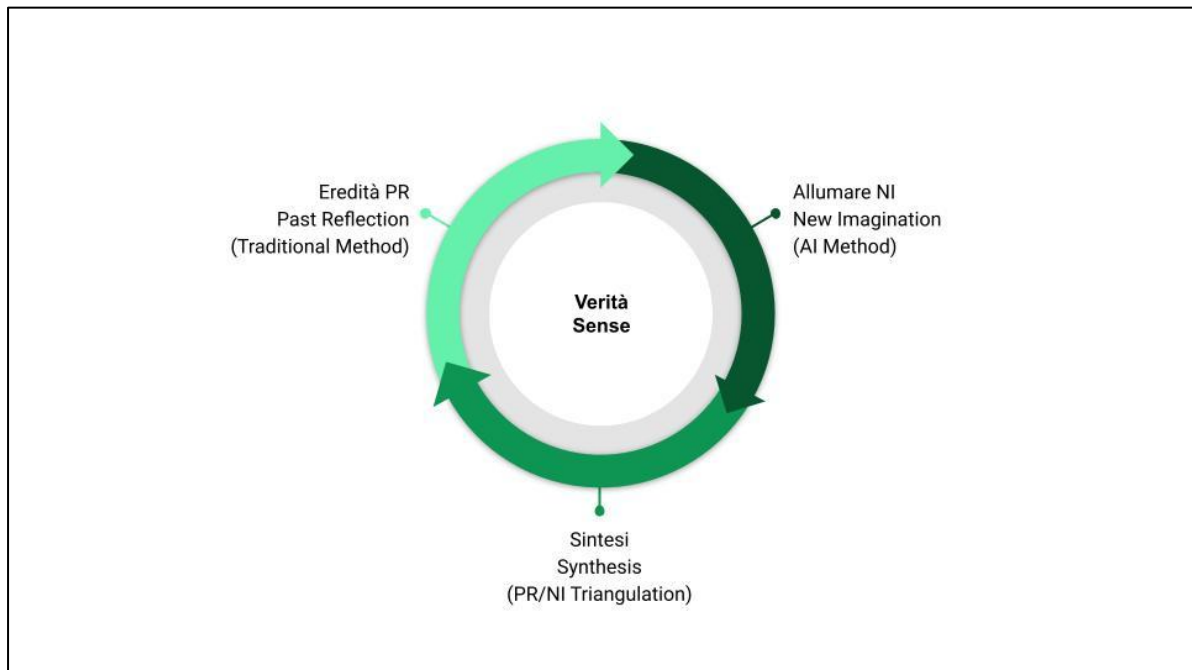
2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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.

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 drrobertdavis.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 Situation Fantasy

The survey results reveal strong endorsement of personal aspirations and fact-based truth, with 67.2% agreeing they "can have dreams" (37% *Strongly Agree*) and 63.5% affirming "truth lies in facts only" (34.4% *Strongly Agree*). Conversely, 58% disagreed that "having dreams for adults is childish," reflecting widespread rejection of this notion. Neutral responses peaked for preferring complex problems (36.1%) and valuing "nice things" (31.1%), signaling ambivalence toward problem-solving preferences and materialism. Materialistic tendencies showed moderate support: 55% agreed they "always have something to buy," while 52.9% prioritized owning nice things. Perceptions of constraints (time, money, family) as non-obstacles split respondents (54.2% agreement vs. 21% disagreement), and 55–56% reported frequent thoughts about dreams or knowledge of dream objects. Overall, the data highlights a population confident in their aspirations and fact-oriented yet divided on materialism, problem complexity, and life constraints.

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

The survey results reveal strong endorsement of personal aspirations and fact-based truth, with 67.2% agreeing they "can have dreams" (37% *Strongly Agree*) and 63.5% affirming "truth lies in facts only" (34.4% *Strongly Agree*). Conversely, 58% disagreed that "having dreams for adults is childish," reflecting widespread rejection of this notion. Neutral responses peaked for preferring complex problems (36.1%) and valuing "nice things" (31.1%), signaling ambivalence toward problem-solving preferences and materialism. Materialistic tendencies showed moderate support: 55% agreed they "always have something to buy," while 52.9% prioritized owning nice things. Perceptions of constraints (time, money, family) as non-obstacles split respondents (54.2% agreement vs. 21% disagreement), and 55–56% reported frequent thoughts about dreams or knowledge of dream objects. Overall, the data highlights a population confident in their aspirations and fact-oriented yet divided on materialism, problem complexity, and life constraints.

Analysis of Self-Perception and Behavioral Tendencies Survey Results

Response Distribution Overview

The survey assessed attitudes toward personal aspirations, materialism, problem-solving preferences, and perceptions of adulthood across nine statements (238 respondents per item). Below are the results for each statement, with percentages derived from raw counts:

1. "I'd say that I can have dreams."

- Strongly Disagree: 2.10% (5)
- Somewhat Disagree: 5.46% (13)
- Neutral: 25.21% (60)
- Somewhat Agree: 30.25% (72)
- Strongly Agree: 36.97% (88)

Total Agreement: 67.23% (160 respondents).

2. "I think that truth lies in facts only."

- Strongly Disagree: 0.84% (2)
- Somewhat Disagree: 6.30% (15)
- Neutral: 29.41% (70)
- Somewhat Agree: 28.99% (69)
- Strongly Agree: 34.45% (82)

Total Agreement: 63.45% (151 respondents).

3. "Constraints (time, money, family) are not an obstacle."

- Strongly Disagree: 4.62% (11)
- Somewhat Disagree: 16.39% (39)
- Neutral: 24.79% (59)
- Somewhat Agree: 28.57% (68)
- Strongly Agree: 25.63% (61)

Total Agreement: 54.20% (129 respondents).

4. "I think of dreams several times a day."

- Strongly Disagree: 4.62% (11)
- Somewhat Disagree: 12.18% (29)
- Neutral: 27.73% (66)
- Somewhat Agree: 31.93% (76)
- Strongly Agree: 23.53% (56)

Total Agreement: 55.46% (132 respondents).

5. "I prefer complex to simple problems."

- Strongly Disagree: 2.52% (6)
- Somewhat Disagree: 12.18% (29)
- Neutral: 36.13% (86)
- Somewhat Agree: 25.63% (61)
- Strongly Agree: 23.53% (56)

Total Agreement: 49.16% (117 respondents).

6. "I know a lot about the objects in my dreams."

- Strongly Disagree: 4.62% (11)
- Somewhat Disagree: 9.24% (22)
- Neutral: 30.25% (72)
- Somewhat Agree: 34.45% (82)
- Strongly Agree: 21.43% (51)

Total Agreement: 55.88% (133 respondents).

7. "I always have something in my mind to buy."

- Strongly Disagree: 3.78% (9)
- Somewhat Disagree: 18.49% (44)
- Neutral: 22.69% (54)
- Somewhat Agree: 34.45% (82)
- Strongly Agree: 20.59% (49)

Total Agreement: 55.04% (131 respondents).

8. "It is important to have really nice things."

- Strongly Disagree: 4.62% (11)
- Somewhat Disagree: 11.34% (27)
- Neutral: 31.09% (74)
- Somewhat Agree: 33.19% (79)
- Strongly Agree: 19.75% (47)

Total Agreement: 52.94% (126 respondents).

9. "Having dreams for an adult is childish."

- Strongly Disagree: 39.50% (94)

- Somewhat Disagree: 18.49% (44)
 - Neutral: 15.13% (36)
 - Somewhat Agree: 10.08% (24)
 - Strongly Agree: 16.81% (40)
- Total Agreement: 26.89% (64 respondents).

Key Observations

1. Highest Agreement:

- "I can have dreams": 67.23% agreement (36.97% *Strongly Agree*).
- "Truth lies in facts only": 63.45% agreement (34.45% *Strongly Agree*).

2. Lowest Agreement:

- "Having dreams for an adult is childish": 26.89% agreement, with 57.98% disagreement (highest dissent).

3. Neutral Dominance:

- "Prefer complex problems": 36.13% Neutral (highest).
- "Important to have nice things": 31.09% Neutral.

4. Materialism Trends:

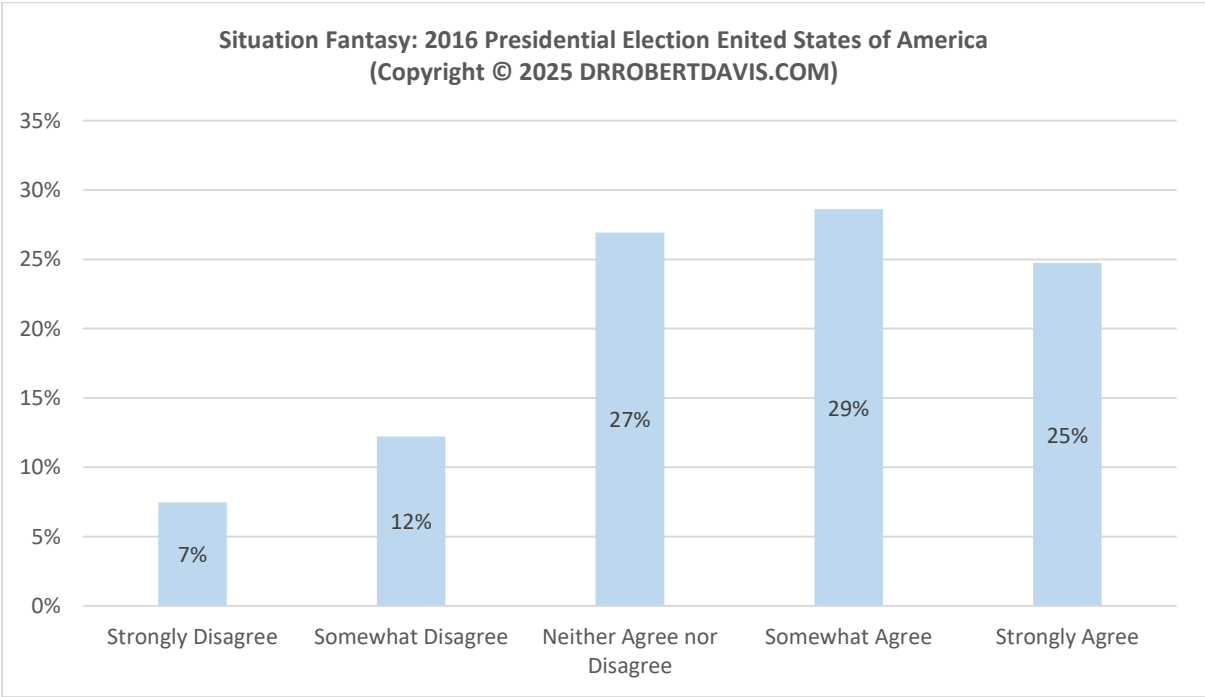
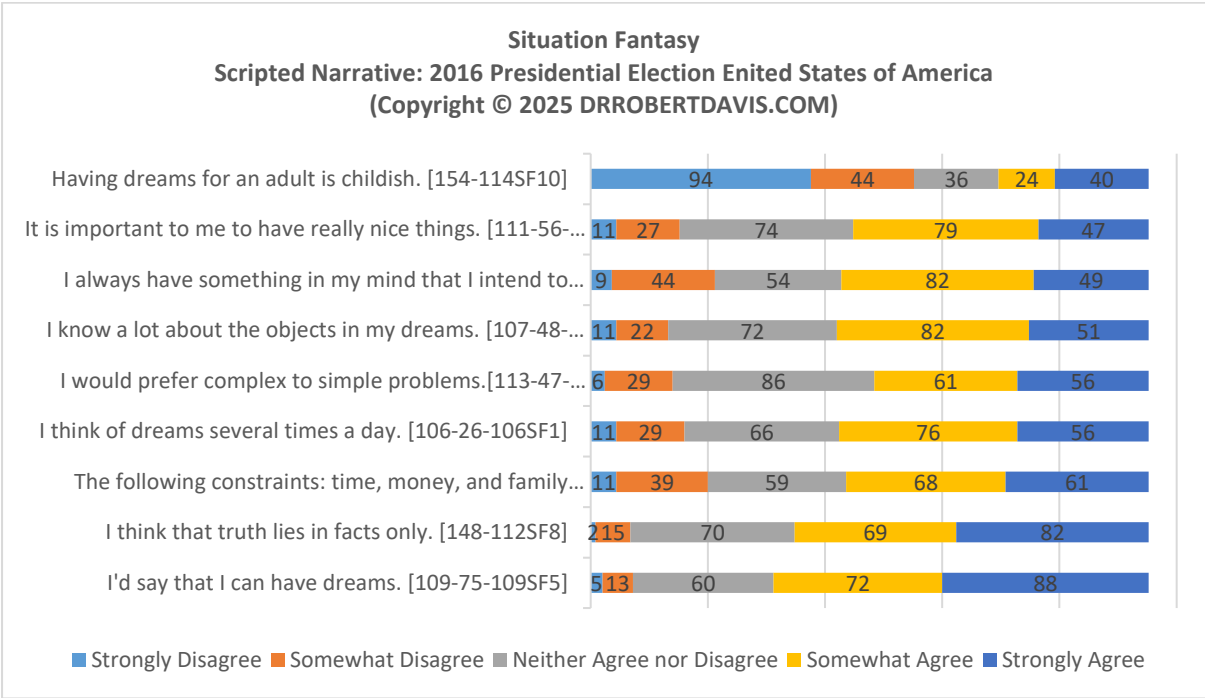
- 55.04% agreed they "always have something to buy," but only 52.94% prioritized "nice things."

5. Constraint Perceptions:

- 54.20% viewed constraints as non-obstacles, but 21.01% disagreed.

Data reflects strong endorsement of personal aspirations and fact-based truth, ambivalence toward materialism and problem complexity, and rejection of the notion that adult dreaming is childish.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I'd say that I can have dreams. [109-75-109SF5]	5	13	60	72	88
I think that truth lies in facts only. [148-112SF8]	2	15	70	69	82
The following constraints: time, money, and family responsibilities are not an obstacle. [108-84-108SF3]	11	39	59	68	61
I think of dreams several times a day. [106-26-106SF1]	11	29	66	76	56
I would prefer complex to simple problems. [113-47-113SF9]	6	29	86	61	56
I know a lot about the objects in my dreams. [107-48-107SF2]	11	22	72	82	51
I always have something in my mind that I intend to buy. [110-58-110SF6]	9	44	54	82	49
It is important to me to have really nice things. [111-56-111SF7]	11	27	74	79	47
Having dreams for an adult is childish. [154-114SF10]	94	44	36	24	40
Overall Percent	7%	12%	27%	29%	25%



RESULTS INTERPRETATION ⁱ

THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION OF SURVEY RESULTS THROUGH THE LENS OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND COGNITIVE-EXPERIENTIAL PROCESSING

The survey findings reveal a complex interplay between intrinsic/extrinsic aspirations, cognitive processing styles, and perceptions of autonomy—a dynamic that aligns with key tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST). Below, we dissect these results through theoretical frameworks that explain the observed tensions between fact-based rationality, aspirational confidence, and ambivalence toward materialism.

Intrinsic Aspirations and the Role of Basic Psychological Needs

Strong Endorsement of Personal Aspirations

The high agreement that individuals "can have dreams" (67.2%) and rejection of the notion that aspirations are childish (58% disagreement) reflect a population prioritizing intrinsic aspirations—goals aligned with self-actualization, growth, and autonomy [18] [19] [20]. SDT posits that intrinsic aspirations satisfy basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), which correlate with well-being [21] [22]. The frequency of thoughts about dreams (55–56%) suggests these aspirations are not abstract but actively integrated into daily life, functioning as self-concordant goals that enhance motivation and persistence [20] [23].

This aligns with SDT's assertion that intrinsic aspirations are inherently rewarding because they fulfill psychological needs rather than relying on external validation [18] [19]. For example, the rejection of "dreams as childish" mirrors findings that intrinsic goals like personal growth and community are perceived as mature and socially valuable [19] [24].

Fact-Based Truth and the Rational-Experiential Divide

Dominance of Rational Processing

The strong endorsement of "truth lies in facts only" (63.5%) signals a preference for analytical-rational processing—a hallmark of CEST's rational system [25] [26]. This system relies on logic, evidence, and deliberative reasoning, which may explain the population's trust in factual objectivity. However, the neutral responses to preferring complex problems (36.1%) suggest a limit to this rationality: while individuals value facts, they may lack the need for cognition (NFC)—a trait associated with enjoyment of effortful problem-solving [27] [26].

This dichotomy mirrors CEST's dual-process model:

- Rational system: Engaged for fact-based judgments (e.g., "truth lies in facts").
- Experiential system: Dominates in contexts requiring heuristic processing (e.g., navigating life constraints) [25].

The split highlights a potential conflict: while respondents intellectually prioritize facts, they may rely on experiential shortcuts when faced with ambiguity (e.g., materialistic decisions).

Materialism and the Extrinsic Aspiration Paradox

Moderated Endorsement of Materialistic Tendencies

The moderate support for materialism-55% agreeing they "always have something to buy" and 52.9% prioritizing "owning nice things"-reflects the extrinsic aspiration paradox described in SDT. Extrinsic goals (wealth, image) are less tied to psychological need satisfaction and often correlate with lower well-being [18] [19] [20]. However, their persistence here may stem from:

1. Compensatory motivation: Using material goods to address unmet needs for competence or autonomy [19] [28].
2. Cultural scripting: Societal norms equating possessions with success [19] [28].

The ambivalence (31.1% neutral on valuing "nice things") suggests cognitive dissonance: respondents recognize materialism's superficiality but feel pressured to conform [20] [28]. This aligns with SDT's observation that extrinsic goals can crowd out intrinsic aspirations when social contexts overemphasize external rewards [21] [22].

Perceived Constraints and Autonomy

Split Views on Life Obstacles

The near-even split on whether constraints (time, money, family) are obstacles (54.2% agreement vs. 21% disagreement) underscores variability in autonomy support-a core SDT construct. Those dismissing constraints likely experience environments that satisfy psychological needs:

- Autonomy: Freedom to pursue aspirations despite limitations.
- Competence: Confidence in navigating challenges [21] [22] [29].
- Relatedness: Supportive networks mitigating familial or financial strain [30] [28].

Conversely, the 21% viewing constraints as obstacles may face environments thwarting these needs, leading to amotivation or controlled goal pursuit [30] [31]. This bifurcation mirrors SDT's emphasis on contextual factors shaping motivation [21] [22].

Synthesis: Aspirational Confidence in a Fact-Driven World

The Interplay of SDT and CEST

The survey population exemplifies a tension between:

1. Intrinsic aspiration-driven autonomy: Confidence in dreams and self-determination.
2. Extrinsic societal pressures: Materialism and factual rigidity as external motivators.

CEST's dual systems clarify this dynamic:

- Rational system prioritizes factual truth but struggles with complexity.
- Experiential system navigates aspirations and constraints through emotion-laden heuristics [25] [26].

Meanwhile, SDT explains why intrinsic aspirations dominate: they align with universal needs for growth and autonomy, whereas extrinsic goals offer diminishing returns [20] [23]. The neutral responses to problem-solving preferences and materialism suggest a motivational hybridity-individuals balancing intrinsic drives with extrinsic cultural scripts [19] [28].

Theoretical Implications

1. SDT in Aspirational Contexts: The strong endorsement of dreams supports SDT's claim that intrinsic goals are resilience-building, even amid constraints [20] [23].
2. CEST and Cognitive Dissonance: Fact-based rationality coexists with heuristic-driven materialism, reflecting CEST's assertion that human's toggle between systems based on context [25] [26].
3. Materialism as Compensatory: Moderate extrinsic goal endorsement aligns with SDT's "crowding out" hypothesis, where unmet needs drive superficial goal pursuit [19] [28].

Conclusion: Navigating Aspiration in a Dual-Process Framework

The survey results depict a population confident in their capacity for growth yet negotiating a world that valorizes both facts and materialism. SDT and CEST together illuminate this landscape: intrinsic aspirations thrive when basic needs are met, while extrinsic pressures and rational-experiential divides create ambivalence. Future interventions might focus on enhancing autonomy support and critical thinking to resolve these tensions, fostering environments where aspirations align with holistic well-being.

RELEVANT CONSTRUCT THEORY FOUNDATIONS

THE ROLE OF SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY AND HYPERAUTHENTICITY IN CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AUTHENTICITY: A CASE STUDY OF DONALD TRUMP'S BRAND

In analyzing how voters cognitively blend fantasy situations and political production to construct authenticity in Donald Trump's leadership brand, two interconnected theoretical frameworks emerge as foundational: Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) and the concept of hyperauthenticity. These theories explain how voters reconcile the tension between staged political performances (fantasy) and perceived genuineness (authenticity) by leveraging indexical cues embedded in rhetorical narratives. SCT illuminates the formation of shared group consciousness through dramatized storytelling, while hyperauthenticity—a postmodern phenomenon observed in reality television and consumer culture—reveals how audiences synthesize scripted elements with lived experiences to create self-referential authenticity. Together, these frameworks clarify the mechanisms by which Trump's political brand cultivates loyalty through curated fantasies that voters interpret as authentic representations of their values and aspirations.

Symbolic Convergence Theory: Shared Fantasies as the Bedrock of Political Group Identity

The Mechanics of Fantasy Themes and Chains

Symbolic Convergence Theory posits that groups coalesce around shared fantasies—dramatized narratives that simplify complex realities into emotionally resonant stories [2]. These fantasies are not mere fabrications but interpretive frameworks that events and actors with symbolic meaning. In political contexts, candidates like Trump craft fantasy themes (e.g., "Make America Great Again") that evoke nostalgia for a mythologized past while positioning the leader as a heroic figure battling corrupt elites [2] [5]. When voters repeatedly encounter these themes across rallies, social media, and news coverage, they form fantasy chains—extended narratives that reinforce group identity and foster a sense of collective agency [2].

For example, Trump's portrayal of himself as an outsider "draining the swamp" of Washington insiders' functions as a fantasy theme. This narrative resonates with voters who perceive systemic corruption as a barrier to national renewal. By participating in this fantasy chain—through chanting slogans at rallies or sharing memes online—voters become co-creators of the narrative, deepening their emotional investment in Trump's leadership brand [2] [5].

Consciousness-Creating, Raising, and Sustaining

SCT identifies three phases in the lifecycle of shared fantasies:

1. **Consciousness-creating:** The initial adoption of a fantasy theme by a group (e.g., Trump's 2016 campaign rhetoric framing globalization as a threat to American workers).
2. **Consciousness-raising:** The amplification of the theme through media repetition and grassroots mobilization (e.g., viral hashtags like #MAGA).
3. **Consciousness-sustaining:** The institutionalization of the fantasy into the group's identity (e.g., ongoing references to "the steal" to sustain belief in election fraud) [2] [5].

These phases explain how Trump's brand maintains durability despite contradictions. By continually introducing new fantasy themes (e.g., "America First" policies) while reinforcing existing ones, his leadership cultivates a self-reinforcing ecosystem of belief [2] [8].

Hyperauthenticity: Blending Fantasy and Reality in Political Consumption

Indexical vs. Iconic Authenticity

Consumer research distinguishes between indexical authenticity (direct, factual connections to a claimed origin) and iconic authenticity (symbolic representations that evoke genuineness) [3] [4]. Political brands like Trump's thrive on iconic authenticity, using staged events (e.g., rallies resembling rock concerts) to signal grassroots legitimacy. However, voters often interpret these performances as indexically authentic due to emotional congruence with their lived experiences [4] [5].

For instance, Trump's improvisational speaking style-filled with colloquialisms and adversarial jabs-is a carefully curated performance. Yet supporters perceive it as unvarnished truth-telling because it mirrors their own frustrations with political correctness [4] [5]. This paradox exemplifies hyperauthenticity: the audience's active role in blending fantastical elements (e.g., exaggerated claims about policy achievements) with indexical cues (e.g., Trump's brash demeanor) to construct a coherent narrative of authenticity [4] [5].

The Reality Television Paradigm

Trump's background in reality TV (The Apprentice) informed his political strategy, which treats elections as episodic dramas with clear villains (e.g., "fake news media") and heroes (e.g., "patriots") [4] [5]. Reality TV's hyperauthentic aesthetic-scripted scenarios presented as spontaneous-translates seamlessly to political communication. Voters accustomed to consuming reality TV apply similar interpretive frameworks, evaluating Trump's leadership not by factual accuracy but by emotional verisimilitude [4] [5].

A study of reality TV audiences found that viewers engage in "self-referential hyperauthenticity," comparing on-screen actions to their own lives while suspending disbelief about production manipulations [4] [5]. Similarly, Trump supporters often defend his false claims as "metaphorical truths" that capture broader realities about immigration or economic decline [5].

The Interplay of Brand Authenticity and Political Loyalty

Dimensions of Brand Authenticity in Leadership

Research identifies four pillars of brand authenticity:

1. Continuity: Consistent adherence to core values over time.
2. Integrity: Alignment between words and actions.
3. Credibility: Perceived trustworthiness.
4. Symbolism: Resonance with cultural or ideological narratives [11] [18].

Trump's brand excels in continuity (relentless focus on nationalism) and symbolism (MAGA iconography), offsetting weaknesses in integrity (flip-flopping on policies) and credibility (documented falsehoods) [11] [18]. Supporters rationalize inconsistencies through cognitive dissonance reduction, prioritizing emotional alignment over factual accuracy [5] [11].

Psychological Ownership and Tribal Identity

The concept of psychological ownership-where voters feel personally invested in a leader's success-mediate the link between perceived authenticity and loyalty [12]. Trump's rhetoric ("This is your movement") fosters this ownership, transforming supporters into brand ambassadors who defend his image against criticism [12] [18]. Additionally, his brand taps into tribal identity, leveraging SCT's group consciousness to frame opposition as existential threats [2] [12].

Conclusion: The Manufactured Authenticity of Populist Leadership

Donald Trump's political brand exemplifies how fantasy production and situational authenticity coalesce in postmodern democracies. By applying Symbolic Convergence Theory, we see how shared fantasies forge cohesive voter blocs, while hyperauthenticity explains the alchemy converting staged performances into perceived genuineness. This dynamic relies on voters' active participation in narrative construction, where cognitive biases and emotional resonance override traditional markers of political credibility.

For researchers, this interplay invites exploration of how digital media accelerates fantasy chain propagation, while practitioners must grapple with the ethical implications of authenticity-as-performance. As populist leaders worldwide emulate Trump's playbook, understanding these mechanisms becomes critical to demystifying their enduring appeal.

THE ROLE OF FANTASY THEMES IN FOSTERING GROUP COHESION THROUGH SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) posits that shared fantasy themes-dramatized narratives that simplify complex realities into emotionally resonant stories-serve as the bedrock for fostering group cohesion. These themes enable individuals to construct a collective identity, align around shared values, and sustain emotional investment in the group's mission. Below, we explore the mechanisms by which fantasy themes catalyze cohesion, drawing on empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and real-world examples.

Fantasy Themes as Catalysts for Shared Consciousness

The Genesis of Group Identity Through Dramatizing Messages

At the core of SCT lies the concept of dramatizing messages, which include jokes, anecdotes, metaphors, or narratives that reinterpret events through a symbolic lens. When a group member introduces such a message-for example, a story about overcoming adversity-it can trigger a fantasy chain reaction, where others contribute their own interpretations or extensions [1] [2] [3]. This collaborative storytelling process transforms individual perspectives into a shared rhetorical vision, unifying the group around common themes.

In political campaigns, such as Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, fantasy themes simplify complex socio-economic issues into nostalgic narratives of national renewal. Supporters who engage with these themes-through rallies or social media-become co-creators of the narrative, deepening their emotional investment in the group's identity [1] [3].

Mechanisms of Cohesion: From Fantasy Chains to Symbolic Convergence

Fantasy Chains and Participatory Bonding

A fantasy chain occurs when group members enthusiastically contribute to a dramatizing message, enriching it with their own imaginative extensions. For instance, in the Jogjakarta 90's classic car community, discussions about restoring vintage vehicles evolved into shared stories of nostalgia and craftsmanship, fostering a familial bond among members [4]. This participative process strengthens cohesion by:

1. Creating emotional resonance: Members feel validated when their contributions align with the group's narrative.
2. Establishing insider language: Repeated themes become symbolic cues (e.g., Trump's "drain the swamp"), triggering collective responses and reinforcing group boundaries [3] [5].

Symbolic Convergence and the "We" Consciousness

As fantasy chains proliferate, groups undergo symbolic convergence—a merging of individual identities into a collective "we." This convergence is evident in Hezbollah's use of symbols like its yellow-and-green logo, which unites members around a shared identity of resistance against perceived oppressors [5]. Similarly, reality TV audiences suspend disbelief about scripted scenarios, interpreting them as emotionally authentic representations of their own lives [2] [6].

Sustaining Cohesion: Fantasy Themes in Conflict and Stability

Navigating Tensions Through Competing Themes

Groups often harbor conflicting fantasy themes, yet cohesion persists when these themes are integrated into a broader rhetorical vision. A study of life enrichment groups found that members reconciled tensions between themes of belonging and triumph by framing them as complementary aspects of their shared mission [6]. This dynamic is mirrored in political contexts, where supporters rationalize leaders' contradictions (e.g., policy flip-flops) by prioritizing emotional alignment over factual consistency [7] [5].

Institutionalizing Cohesion: Sagas and Fantasy Types

Long-term cohesion relies on sagas—enduring narratives about the group's history or purpose—and fantasy types—recurring motifs that structure new themes. For example, the Grebeg Suro tradition in Java uses annual rituals (e.g., communal prayers) to reinforce social bonds and cultural identity, ensuring continuity across generations [8]. In corporate settings, origin stories about founders' perseverance (e.g., Steve Jobs' garage startup) become sagas that inspire loyalty among employees [3] [4].

Case Studies: Fantasy Themes in Action

Political Movements: Trump's "America First"

Trump's rhetoric exemplifies how fantasy themes foster cohesion through:

- Simplification: Reducing globalization's complexities to "us vs. them" dichotomies.
- Hero-villain framing: Casting the leader as a populist outsider battling corrupt elites.
- Participatory rituals: Chanting "Build the Wall" at rallies, which transforms supporters into active narrators [1] [3].

Terrorist Organizations: Hezbollah and Jihadist Nasheeds

Hezbollah employs fantasy themes like "martyrdom" and "resistance" to unite members around a shared identity of sacrifice. Similarly, jihadist nasheeds (chants) use poetic imagery of divine victory to inflame passions and justify violence [5] [9]. These themes thrive because they:

- Evoke sacred symbolism: Linking group actions to religious or ideological imperatives.
- Obfuscate reality: Framing violence as a metaphysical struggle rather than a political conflict [9].

Challenges and Limitations of Fantasy-Driven Cohesion

The Risk of Groupthink

Excessive cohesion can stifle dissent, leading to groupthink. In the 12 Angry Men film, jurors initially conform to a majority opinion until fantasy chains revealing hidden biases prompt critical reflection [10]. Similarly, corporate teams may prioritize harmony over innovation if fantasy themes discourage questioning the status quo [11] [12].

Cultural and Contextual Variability

The efficacy of fantasy themes depends on cultural resonance. For instance, while the Grebeg Suro tradition strengthens Javanese communities, its themes of communal prayer might not translate to individualistic societies [8] [4]. Additionally, digital media accelerates fantasy chain propagation but risks superficial engagement, as seen in fleeting viral hashtags [6] [9].

Conclusion: The Alchemy of Shared Stories

Fantasy themes are not mere fabrications but interpretive frameworks that enable groups to navigate complexity, assert identity, and sustain cohesion. Through SCT, we see how these themes:

1. Simplify reality: Converting abstract challenges into relatable narratives.
2. Foster participation: Transforming passive observers into active narrators.
3. Institutionalize identity: Embedding shared values into rituals, symbols, and sagas.

As digital platforms amplify the reach of dramatizing messages, understanding fantasy themes becomes critical for analyzing political movements, organizational cultures, and even terrorist networks. Future research should explore how algorithmic curation shapes fantasy chain dynamics and whether cohesion built on symbolic convergence can withstand the pressures of misinformation and polarization.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF FANTASY THEMES USED IN GROUP SETTINGS?

Fantasy themes in group settings act as shared narratives that foster cohesion, identity, and collective purpose. Below are key examples drawn from organizational, digital, and social contexts, illustrating how these themes operate in practice:

1. Gaming Communities: In-Game Lore and Inside Jokes

The Blue Archive Indonesia Facebook community (135,000+ members) uses in-game references and humorous memes as fantasy themes to build camaraderie. Members bond over shared experiences like defeating a challenging boss or unlocking rare characters, transforming gameplay into a collective saga. These themes:

- Simplify complex strategies into digestible stories (e.g., "The Battle of Decagrammaton" as a metaphor for teamwork).
- Create insider language (e.g., nicknames for characters) that reinforces group boundaries.
- Encourage participation through "fantasy chains," where members extend narratives in comments, deepening emotional investment [13] [14].

2. Corporate Teams: Origin Stories and Underdog Triumphs

In organizational cultures, companies like Apple institutionalize founder sagas (e.g., Steve Jobs starting in a garage) as fantasy themes. These narratives:

- Frame the company as a heroic innovator battling industry giants.
- Inspire loyalty by linking daily tasks to a grand mission ("Think Different") [15].
- Sustain cohesion during crises by recalling past triumphs over adversity.

Similarly, Dean Scheibel's study of rock bands (The Grind vs. Charm) revealed how metaphors like "family" or "machine" shape members' roles and expectations, dictating whether collaboration feels organic or transactional [15].

3. Political Movements: Slogans as Unifying Rhetoric

While not explicitly covered in the provided sources, the principles of Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) explain how movements adopt slogans like "Make America Great Again" (from prior context). These themes:

- Simplify complex issues into nostalgic, emotionally charged narratives.
- Cast supporters as protagonists in a shared struggle against "villains" (e.g., corrupt elites).
- Chain out through rallies, memes, and hashtags, transforming passive observers into active participants [16].

4. Environmental Advocacy: Nature as Antagonist

Groups focused on climate action often employ "Power of Nature" themes, framing environmental crises as epic battles. Examples include:

- Wildfire prevention campaigns personifying fire as a destructive force.
- Climate documentaries using apocalyptic imagery (e.g., rising seas) to motivate collective action [17].
- These themes simplify scientific data into visceral stories, fostering urgency and unity.

5. Support Groups: Found Family Dynamics

Groups like addiction recovery networks use found family themes to replace stigma with belonging. By sharing stories of mutual support (e.g., "We're all in this together"), they:

- Reframe individual struggles as collective journeys.
- Create symbolic kinship through rituals (e.g., milestone celebrations).
- Mirror fantasy literature tropes (e.g., Harry Potter's Hogwarts as a safe haven) [17] [14].

Mechanisms of Fantasy Themes in Groups

- Chaining Out: Active participation in extending themes (e.g., meme-sharing in gaming communities) deepens emotional bonds [14] [16].
- Symbolic Cues: Inside jokes or slogans act as shorthand for shared values.
- Role Archetypes: Groups adopt hero/villain frameworks (e.g., corporate "disruptors" vs. "old guard") to navigate conflicts [15] [16].

These examples demonstrate how fantasy themes transcend fiction, becoming tools for real-world group cohesion and identity formation.

WHY IS AUTHENTICITY 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. Ordinarity - 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 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.	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.	Grayson and Martinec (2004)
	Place of Origin	A commitment too, and feeling for, the original place of manufacture.	
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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