An Essentialist Account of Authenticity

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Abstract

The concept of authenticity is central to how people value many different types of objects and yet there is considerable disagreement about how individuals evaluate authenticity or how the concept itself should be defined. This paper attempts to reconcile previous approaches by proposing a novel view of authenticity. Specifically, I draw upon past research on psychological essentialism and propose that when people evaluate the authenticity of objects, they do so by evaluating the extent to which the object embodies or reflects a valued essence. I suggest that this explanation of authenticity provides an overarching framework that describes how people evaluate object authenticity across a variety of contexts and I report the results of three experiments that directly test the predictions made by this explanation.

Keywords

authenticity – concepts – consumer behaviour – essentialism – valuation

1 Introduction

Beliefs about authenticity are central to how people value a wide-variety of objects (Frazier et al., 2009). For example, individuals seek authenticity in celebrity and entertainment memorabilia (O’Guinn, 1991; Newman et al., 2011), artworks (Benjamin, 1968; Dutton, 2003; Bullot and Reber, 2012; Newman and Bloom, 2012), historical artifacts (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), museum and travel souvenirs (e.g., Cohen, 1988; Costa and Bamossy, 1995; Wang, 1999), consumer products (Beverland, 2005, 2006; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Newman and Dhar, 2014), and sentimental possessions (Belk, 1988; Grayson...
and Shulman, 2000). And yet, despite the importance of this concept, there is little agreement in the literature about how to define authenticity or interpret its effects on behavior. For example, theoretical approaches to understanding authenticity range from the definition of concrete, objective dimensions (e.g., Dutton, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006), to alternative views, which have argued that the term itself, authenticity, should be abandoned in favor of more specific, contextualized dimensions (e.g., Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

The goal of this paper is to propose and empirically test an overarching psychological framework that describes how people evaluate the authenticity of objects across a variety of contexts. Specifically, I draw on the framework of psychological essentialism (e.g., Keil, 1989; Medin and Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003), which demonstrates a basic tendency for people to think about many types of things as possessing a deep, underlying characteristic (or, “essence”). Essences are frequently discussed as unobservable conceptual placeholders, rather than as actual physical entities (Medin and Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003). Thus, there is an important distinction between metaphysical essentialism, which posits the actual existence of essences, and psychological essentialism, which simply makes claims about people’s tendency to represent concepts in this way (see Medin and Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003).

Psychological essentialism is a descriptive phenomenon, referring to people’s tendency to believe in the existence of essences. However, in certain contexts, essences may also be a source of value when individuals place importance on the essence of certain people, places, or events. For example, a painting that Picasso actually created is believed to contain a contagious aspect of his essence, while a visually identical duplicate does not (Frazier et al., 2009; Newman and Bloom, 2012). Similarly, a product that is manufactured in a company’s original, long-standing factory may be thought of possessing the ‘essence of the brand’ more so than an identical product manufactured elsewhere (Newman and Dhar, 2014). It is in these contexts, I argue, that the concept of authenticity is particularly relevant. Specifically, I suggest that when individuals evaluate authenticity, they are really evaluating the extent to which an item embodies or reflects an unobservable essence that they value.

Importantly, an essentialist explanation of authenticity not only provides a more general framework for how authenticity is evaluated, it also makes testable predictions regarding the types of attributes that are considered as well as the situations in which authenticity may, or may not be a factor in valuation. Therefore, in addition to outlining this view of authenticity, this paper reports the results of three experiments that directly test several of the empirical predictions made by essentialism.
What is Authenticity?

Authenticity is unique in that, unlike attributes such as the resolution of a digital camera or the number of calories in a particular dessert, it is not something that can be objectively defined. For example, even when two objects are identical along all observable dimensions, they may differ substantially in terms of their perceived authenticity. Moreover, when people evaluate the authenticity of an object, those evaluations are made in relation to another item or standard (Howard, 1992; Kivy, 1995; Grayson and Shulman, 2000; Dutton, 2003). In other words, an object’s authenticity depends critically on who is evaluating the item and more importantly, how they define it. For example, Dutton (2003) refers to authenticity as a “dimension word” – a word whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of authenticity is being discussed.

Some researchers have suggested that the term, authenticity, is so broad that it should be abandoned. For example, Reisinger and Steiner write “the term (authenticity) and concept should be abandoned in any research that discusses the genuineness of objects and activities, because the different concepts, values, and perspectives on the authenticity of objects and activities are numerous, contradictory, and irreconcilable (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006, p. 81).” Similarly, Beverland and Farrelly outline the complications in this area when they highlight the multiple (and potentially conflicting) ways in which authenticity has been defined (e.g., original, fabricated, indexical, self-referential, symbolic, existential, literal, legitimate, sincere, etc.; see Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p. 838). At the same time, there is agreement that at its root, authenticity describes a verification process – the evaluation of some truth or fact. As Beverland and Farrelly (2010) write, “despite the multiplicity of terms and interpretations applied to authenticity, ultimately what is consistent across the literature is that authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true (p. 839).”

To date, the most common approach to understanding object authenticity has been to classify different ‘types’ of authenticity and the characteristics that people see as relevant across those contexts. For example, Grayson and Martinec (2004) distinguish between two different forms of authenticity that they refer to as ‘indexical’ and ‘iconic’ authenticity. In short, indexical authenticity refers to one’s ability to draw a direct spatiotemporal link (or, index) between an object and its purported source – e.g., an artwork that was actually touched by Picasso versus an identical duplicate that was not. Iconic authenticity, in contrast, refers to whether or not an item fits with our expectations about how the object should appear, and is often used synonymously with the term verisimilitude (Deighton et al., 1989; Kozinets et al., 2002). As another
example, Beverland (2006) identifies dimensions such as the heritage and pedigree of the company, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, the method of production, and downplaying commercial motives. (For other kinds of authenticity also see Belk et al., 1989; Bruner, 1994; Wang, 1999; Arnould and Price, 2000).

While this approach has provided a number of important insights about object authenticity, there are also certain limitations. For example, there does not appear to be a way of relating one type of authenticity to another. In other words, to date, there is not an underlying concept that appears to link these different types of authenticity judgments across different domains or contexts. As a result, it is unclear whether perceptions of authenticity all reflect the application of the same basic concept, or rather, several different concepts that are each unique to the specific domain that is considered (see Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

Second, this approach has difficulty disentangling authenticity from other types of preferences. It may be that people use ‘authenticity’ as a sort of post-hoc rationalization for their preferences, rather than as an actual dimension that informs subsequent valuation. For example, individuals may conflate authenticity with judgments such as quality. Indeed, several researchers have discussed how authenticity is “socially-constructed” and how individuals may create the expectation of authenticity based on the particulars of the situation (Peterson 1997, 2005; Belk and Costa, 1998; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Therefore, it is important to identify whether authenticity is in fact a unique concept with specific antecedents and consequences.

This paper tries to address these issues by defining object authenticity in terms of an underlying psychological process. Specifically, I propose that evaluations of authenticity can largely be explained in terms of psychological essentialism and the evaluation of “essence.” In the following sections, I outline this explanation of authenticity and report the results of several empirical studies that test whether perceptions of authenticity conform to the predictions made by this view.

3 Psychological Essentialism

Psychological essentialism is the tendency to assume that certain kinds of things possess a deep, underlying essence that is responsible for phenomenal properties and category membership (e.g., Keil, 1989; Medin and Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003; Newman and Keil, 2008). Evidence for psychological essentialism has been found in a diverse range of populations throughout the world.
(Gil-White, 2001; Sousa et al., 2002; Norenzayan and Heine, 2005; Waxman et al., 2007) and in children as young as three or four (Gelman, 2003), leading some researchers to propose that psychological essentialism is a human universal that is rooted in the basic cognitive architecture of the mind (Keil, 1989; Gelman, 2003; Bloom 2004, 2010; Dar-Nimrod and Heine, 2011).

The concept of psychological essentialism has a long intellectual history (see Sober, 1994) and has been defined in diverse, albeit overlapping, ways (see Haslam et al., 2004 for a review). The literature suggests that essentialism is a multi-faceted phenomenon, including elements such as having high inductive potential, sharp category boundaries, and being homogeneous, identity-determining, historically invariant, and immutable (Gelman, 2003; Haslam et al., 2004). According to some theorists, psychological essentialism implies biological causation (Bem, 1993; Haslam and Whelan, 2008). However, according to all conceptualizations, essentialism implies an essence that reflects an underlying reality.

Here I propose that psychological essentialism can provide a more general framework for understanding how people make judgments of object authenticity. Specifically, I suggest that when people evaluate an item's authenticity, they are evaluating the extent to which that object embodies or reflects a particular essence. Therefore, if we start with the premise that evaluating authenticity is the process of verifying “what is genuine, real, and/or true,” (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), then thinking of this process in terms of essentialism offers new insights as it proposes that when people evaluate authenticity they are really verifying (or evaluating the truth of) a valued essence. In turn, an item is deemed “authentic” if it is seen as being true to that essential characteristic. For example, does the product reflect the essence of the brand; does the food embody the essence of that cuisine, etc.?

It is useful to highlight that this proposal implies a certain ‘type’ of essence. Specifically, Gelman (2003) distinguishes between three notions of essence: sortal, causal and ideal. Sortal essences refer to a finite set of necessary and sufficient features that are only shared by members of the category – e.g., for the concept “bachelor,” being an unmarried male (see Rosch and Mervis, 1975; Murphy and Medin, 1985). Causal essences refer to the underlying quality or power that literally causes category membership and surface properties (e.g., H2O and water; Gelman, 2003).

Ideal essences, by contrast, are assumed to have no actual instantiation in the world (Gelman, 2003) and instead represent the “Plantonic ideal” of the thing in question. For example, one might discuss essence of rock music or the essence of being a scientist (Knobe et al., 2013). Thus, rather than the essence
causing surface properties or providing a criterion for categorization, essence in the ideal sense may often be something that emerges from what is observed. I suggest that essences as they pertain to authenticity judgments are probably closest to this ideal notion. For example, the essence of a country music is not something that has an objective reality (Peterson, 1997); it is something that performers try to embody or reflect, rather than something that literally causes phenomenal properties or category membership. Indeed, the way in which essence has been discussed for consumer brands is very much consistent with this ideal notion of essence. For example, Beverland and Farrelly write, “There is widespread agreement that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed rather than properties inherent in an object (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p. 839).”

It is also important to note that people tend to think of essences in terms of an “essence placeholder” (Medin and Ortony, 1989) rather than an actual physical entity. This means that folk-conceptions of essence tend to be relatively “fuzzy,” consisting of only a general hunch that there is an essence. For example, young children readily appeal to essentialist explanations for differences between natural kinds (Newman and Keil, 2008) and socially relevant differences such as gender (Gelman, 2003), well before they possess concrete ideas about what those essences might be. Thus, an essentialist view of authenticity does not require that individuals know what the essence is before evaluating authenticity; it simply requires that they believe that there is some unobservable essence and that the essence, rather than observable properties, is the primary source of value. In this way, an essentialist account of authenticity allows for authenticity to be socially constructed (Belk and Costa, 1988; Peterson, 1997; 2005) as individuals may debate what the ‘true’ essence is as well as the relevant criteria for determining whether or not the item possesses that characteristic.

There is a growing body of research within psychology that is consistent with this essentialist account of authenticity. For example, adults (Frazier et al., 2009) and even young children (Hood and Bloom, 2008; Frazier and Gelman, 2009) recognize that certain objects are valued for their unobservable qualities that cannot be duplicated. Moreover, beliefs about a “contagious” transfer of essence (e.g., Rozin et al., 1986) appear to play an important role in the valuation of celebrity possession (Newman et al., 2011), original artwork (Newman and Bloom, 2012) and certain consumer products (Newman and Dhar, 2014). Thus, adults and children recognize that value may be tied to unobservable qualities and that those qualities may even possess a certain ‘magical’ component (Rozin et al., 1986). At the same time, it is difficult to know what would
constitute direct evidence for or against the proposal that authenticity is an evaluation of essence, given that both psychological essentialism and authenticity describe phenomena that appear to be entirely constructed in the mind.

The approach of the current studies is to test the extent to which evaluations of authenticity conform to a specific set of predictions made by psychological essentialism. Indeed, past research has identified certain unique characteristics or “hallmarks” of essentialist thought. Some of these characteristics are specific to reasoning about natural kind categories. For example, the belief that essentialized categories are “discovered” rather than invented, that essences are immutable, that traits are mutually exclusive, and that category membership is stable across transformation (Haslam et al., 2000).

There are other characteristics of essentialism, however, which seem to apply more broadly, such as a reliance on unobservable features over surface appearances, a belief in sharp category boundaries (Rozin, 2005), and the use of essence for inductive generalizations. In this paper, I examine these latter three hallmarks of essentialism (described in detail below) with the basic notion that if people do evaluate authenticity in terms of psychological essentialism, then authenticity judgments should conform to these unique patterns.

3.1 Unobservable Features

One key aspect of essentialism is the recognition that unobservable attributes may be more important than surface attributes for determining how something will behave, or the kind of thing that it is. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this idea comes from developmental studies demonstrating that this bias emerges well before children acquire specific knowledge about modern science or technology (Keil, 1989; Gelman, 2003). For example, children as young as 2 or 3 will attribute an animal’s actions to inherent internal causes (Gelman and Gottfried, 1996), they recognize that internal (rather than more superficial) features play a central role in making something ‘go’ (Newman et al., 2008), and they will use unobserved features as a basis for categorization, even if those unobservable features conflict with all observable attributes (e.g., Keil, 1989; Hall et al., 2003).

With respect to perceptions of authenticity, this reliance on unobservable features over surface attributes/appearances predicts that authenticity should not be a relevant factor in all situations. Rather, it should be directly related to the extent to which people see unobservable characteristics as central to an item’s value. In other words, the more that individuals place value on unobservable characteristics, the more that authenticity should be seen as relevant. By contrast, in situations in which an item is only valued for its observable
characteristics or function, authenticity may be less relevant (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008). This hypothesis is tested in the current experiment 1.

3.2 Sharp Category Boundaries
A second characteristic of essentialism is a belief in sharp category boundaries. In short, people tend to view members of essentialized categories as either inside or outside of the category, and rarely endorse the idea that a particular object is in between categories or is partially a member (Gelman, 2003; Rozin, 2005). This is not to say that people always view these categories in terms of absolutes; rather, the boundaries of essentialized categories seem to be “intensified” or heightened. As Gelman, puts it, “A ‘fuzzy’ situation in the world is decided in a nonfuzzy manner” (Gelman, 2003, p. 68). This type of reasoning is apparent in classifications of race and gender, as in the case of the so-called “one drop rule.”

Applied to authenticity, this notion of sharp category boundaries predicts that perceptions of authenticity should be more discrete, rather than continuous in nature. For example, changing a product’s purity by even a small amount should lead to a significant reduction in perceptions of authenticity, while subsequent (more dramatic) changes should have a comparatively minimal effect (cf., Rozin, 2005). This hypothesis is tested in experiment 2.

3.3 Inductive Generalization
A third characteristic of essentialism is the use of these deeper unseen properties for inductive generalizations (i.e., the extension of knowledge to novel instances). For example, if we learn that a particular type of snake is poisonous, we will infer that similarly named snakes are also poisonous (even if they appear differently). Indeed, young children are sensitive to this idea and will spontaneously use category labels for inductive generalizations. For example, when children are told about some novel property of leaf insects (e.g., having an omentum) they extend that property to other insects (even if they appear differently), but not to perceptually similar objects from a different category, such as leaves (e.g., Gelman and Markman, 1986, 1987; Gelman and Davidson, 2013). In other words, children generalize new information about one category member to other category members, even if the other category members look quite different. Importantly, this effect holds for categories where children infer deeper essences (e.g., animals, people, other natural kinds), but not for categories that are more superficial in nature.

This feature of essentialism also makes an interesting prediction for perceptions of authenticity. Similar to the developmental study with leaf insects and
leaves, if individuals are taught that an object has a novel characteristic they should infer that other authentic items share that same property, even if they are perceptually dissimilar, while inauthentic items do not. Moreover, this pattern of inferences should hold for items in which people do infer some deeper essence, but not for items where superficial or functional properties are the only relevant criteria. This hypothesis is tested in experiment 3.

In sum, past research on psychological essentialism makes a number of novel empirical predictions about the conditions in which authenticity should be relevant (unobservable features), how perceptions will change in response to various manipulations (sharp category boundaries), and how it may guide subsequent inferences (inductive generalizations). Therefore, the goal of the studies reported below is to test the extent to which evaluations of authenticity conform to the patterns traditionally observed in the literature on essentialism.

3.4 The Current Studies
A second goal is to test these predictions across a number of domains. Traditionally, papers on authenticity have tended to look at a single domain at a time – e.g., consumer products, such as wine (e.g., Beverland, 2005, 2006), sentimental possessions (Grayson and Shulman, 2000), historical artifacts (Belk and Costa, 1998; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), etc. While such analyses may provide important insights in those respective domains, it becomes difficult to extend those conclusions to the topic of object authenticity as a whole. Indeed, this may be one reason why some researchers have suggested that authenticity may be better approached as many different things, rather than a single concept (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Therefore, the present studies also seek to test predictions stemming from essentialism across a wide-variety of items to determine whether essentialism in fact provides a more general framework for understanding how people evaluate object authenticity.

4 Experiment 1: Unobservable Features
Experiment 1 tests the prediction that authenticity should be directly related to the extent to which people see unobservable features as central to an item’s value. In other words, the more that people place value on imperceptible characteristics, the more that authenticity should be seen as relevant.

It may seem that the relationship between unobservable properties and authenticity is a foregone conclusion. However, while it is possible to think of many cases in which authenticity is important and value is unobservable, prior research on authenticity has also found support for the role of observ-
able features. For example, in their work on historical artifacts, Grayson and Martinec report that, “the association between authenticity and iconicity with old things was often equal to or greater than the association between authenticity and indexical cues (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 305).”

One possibility is that this result is unique to historical artifacts. A second is that observable features are weighted equally to unobservable features in authenticity judgments, and the proposal regarding essentialism is incorrect. A third interpretation, which I advocate for here, is that it is simply unknown how ‘observability’ and value are related, since Grayson and Martinec (2004) did not independently manipulate the dimension of observable-unobservable features.

Further ambiguity is due to the fact that previous research has examined evaluations of authenticity in a single domain, rather than multiple domains at once. The limitation here is that while authenticity may be associated with unobservable characteristics in some domains (e.g., celebrity memorabilia, artwork, etc.), it is impossible to know whether across domains, there is a more general relationship between the evaluation of authenticity and the importance placed on unobservable characteristics.

Finally, a number of researchers have noted that authenticity judgments are highly dependent upon the particulars of the situation (Peterson, 2005) and individual differences in consumers’ own knowledge and motivations (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Therefore, it may be that while some individuals associate authenticity with unobservable characteristics, others may associate authenticity with what is observable. For example, one person may believe that authenticity is important because it provides information about a wine’s taste, while others may believe that it is important because it provides information about the wine’s origins (Beverland, 2006).

To test the prediction regarding authenticity and unobservable features, I obtained a list of different types of objects. Given the potential confounds inherent in generating this list myself, I had participants evaluate a list of objects used in past research on authenticity (Frazier at al., 2009). This list contained authentic items (e.g., an original Picasso painting, a moon rock, handwritten Beatles lyrics) and matched inauthentic items (e.g., a poster of a Picasso painting, a rock from the backyard, and a Beatles compact disc), though the terms authentic and inauthentic were never used.

One group of participants was asked to rate the extent to which authenticity was a relevant factor in deciding whether or not to purchase each item. A second group of participants was asked to evaluate the same list and determine the degree to which each item’s value was related to observable versus unobservable features. The central comparison was the extent to which ratings
of authenticity predicted the valuation of unobservable features. Importantly, testing this relationship across different groups of participants provides the most conservative test of this hypothesis since presenting both ratings to the same participants might imply a relationship between them. Additionally, the authentic and inauthentic item lists were divided in half and tested in a between-and-within mixed design, so that a given participant never evaluated both items of the same type (e.g., Picasso painting and Picasso poster).

4.1 Method
Participants were 239 adults (\(M_{age}=36.2; 61\% \text{ female}\)) who were recruited from an online survey pool maintained by a private university. Stimuli were adapted from Frazier et al. (2009) and consisted of a list of 56 items in total: 28 “authentic” items and 28 matched “inauthentic” items. The authentic items spanned a range of different kinds of authenticity (“consumer goods” were added for the present study) and were as follows: (Original Creation: very first light bulb, Picasso painting, handwritten Beatles lyrics, very first Apple computer; Famous Person: Marilyn Monroe’s sunglasses, tuxedo worn by John F. Kennedy, gum chewed by Britney Spears, baseball hit by Babe Ruth; Famous Event: olive wreath from the Olympics, chunk of the Berlin wall, cap from a Civil War uniform, chair pulled from the Titanic wreckage; Distant Space: coral from the bottom of the ocean, moon rock, kimono from Japan, hand-carved bowl from Africa; Distant Time: ancient Egyptian figurine, dinosaur bone, ceramic pot from ancient Greece, antique vase; Personal: favorite blanket from your childhood, book given to you as a prize at school, dried flower from a loved one, robe from your high school graduation; Consumer Goods: fair trade coffee, Louis Vuitton handbag, high-end perfume/cologne, Waterford crystal glass).

The matched “inauthentic” items were as follows: (light bulb purchased at the corner store, poster of a Picasso painting, Beatles compact disc, computer from the Apple store, your neighbor’s sunglasses, tux in tuxedo rental shop, chewed up piece of gum, baseball from a sporting goods store, wreath on the front door of a house, concrete block from Home Depot, New York Yankees baseball cap, piece of patio furniture, seashell you found on the beach, rock from your backyard, bathrobe made in the USA, bowl from Pottery Barn, a troll doll, a toy dinosaur, a lemonade pitcher, a flower vase purchased at the local store, blanket from a home goods store, book purchased from Amazon, dried flower arrangement, unused graduation robe, store brand coffee, a canvas backpack, nail polish remover, coffee mug).

4.2 Procedure
These lists were divided into two blocks so that each participant evaluated 14 “authentic” items and 14 “inauthentic” items. The different kinds of authenticity
(e.g., “Famous Person items”) were equally represented across the two blocks. The order in which each item was presented was randomized across participants. Matched “authentic” and “inauthentic” items were presented between participants, such that each participant only evaluated one item in the pair.

Half of the participants were instructed to rate authenticity of each item. For each item, a sentence with the following structure appeared: “When determining the true value of a [tuxedo worn by John F. Kennedy], authenticity is…” and participants rated the importance of authenticity using a 9-point scale with 1=’not important’ and 9=’extremely important’ as end-points. The other half of participants were instructed to rate the importance of nonobvious features. For each item, a sentence with the following structure appeared: “The true value of a [tuxedo worn by John F. Kennedy] is mostly something that is…” and participants responded on a 9-point scale with 1=’completely unobservable’ and 9=’completely observable’ as end-points. The hypothesized correlation between these scales was negative to avoid any spurious correlations arising from participants responding to one side of the scale.

4.3 Results
I first examined the ratings of the importance of unobservable features across the authentic and inauthentic items. A paired-samples t-test indicated that value was seen as significantly more related to unobservable features for the authentic items ($M=4.50, SD=1.55$) than for the inauthentic items ($M=6.22, SD=1.43$), $t(117)=8.17, p < 0.001$ (note that higher numbers indicate that value was more ‘observable’). Independent t-tests across each item pairs (between-subjects analysis) replicated this pattern for all items except the following (all $p$ values < 0.05): Picasso painting/poster ($p = 0.24$), coral/seashell ($p = 0.46$), Kimono/bathrobe ($p = 0.59$). Ratings of the importance of authenticity followed the expected pattern, which served as a manipulation check.

While these differences confirm the basic predictions of the theory, the central prediction is about the relationship between the importance of authenticity and the extent to which value is unobservable. To determine this, I first averaged the ratings of authenticity across participants to produce one measure of authenticity importance for each type of item. Correspondingly, I also averaged the ratings of value as observable versus unobservable across participants to produce one measure for each item. As seen in Fig. 1, the relationship between these factors was strongly negative $r = -0.51$ and highly significant, $p < 0.001$, such that as the belief that value is related to observable features decreased, the importance of authenticity increased. In other words, the observable-unobservable measure explained roughly 25% of the variance in ratings of the importance of authenticity, which is notable when considering these measures were taken from two different samples of participants.
4.4 Discussion

Results from this study indicated that authenticity is not seen as a relevant in all instances. Rather, consistent with the predictions of essentialism, the importance authenticity was dependent on the extent to which the value is related to unobservable (rather than observable) features. The next section examined another set of predictions made by essentialism – specifically, those stemming from the notion of sharp category boundaries.

5 Experiment 2: Sharp Category Boundaries

Experiment 2 tests the notion of sharp category boundaries. In short, people tend to view members of essentialized categories as either inside or outside of the category, and rarely endorse the idea that a particular object is in between categories or is partially a member (see Dennett, 1995; Gelman, 2003). The notion of sharp category boundaries makes a clear prediction for evaluations of authenticity, which is that judgments about an item’s authenticity should decrease exponentially as the “purity” of the item changes. As a thought experiment, if one imagines a steep cliff (or sharp boundary) defining the essence (see Fig. 2), then a small change to the purity of that essence (even 0.001%) should have a disproportionately large effect on perceptions of authenticity. Correspondingly, further movement away from purity should have diminishing effects. For example, the decrease in ratings of authenticity between wine that is grown from 100% Cote-du-Rhone grapes versus wine that is 99% Cote-du-Rhone, should be greater that the difference between wine that is 99% Cote-du-Rhone versus wine that is 50% Cote-du-Rhone.
The notion of sharp category boundaries generates the following prediction about judgments of authenticity: A small change in the purity of the essence (even 0.001%) should have a disproportionately large effect on perceptions of authenticity, and subsequent changes should have a comparatively minimal effect. In this case, the null hypothesis is that ratings of authenticity should instead correspond to the actual percentages reported. This alternative hypothesis is motivated by Rozin’s (2005, 2006) distinction between instrumental and ideational bases for preferences. Instrumental reasons for preferences refer to specific advantages of a particular product over others. For example, people may prefer authentic products because they are higher quality or better performing. However, past research in this area also suggests an important role of ideational factors. This is the notion that some kinds of products, such as authentic ones, are inherently better. In other words, these judgments are not constrained by assessments of actual quality or tangible benefits.

This distinction is useful because it makes different predictions regarding judgments of authenticity. If consumers naturally interpret authenticity as referring to instrumental benefits, then they should not show the pattern predicted above and should instead show a more or less linear pattern in authenticity judgments as purity decreases. In contrast, if consumers naturally interpret authenticity as referring to the essence, then they should draw important distinctions between products that are pure (100%) and those that are nearly identical (99.99%).

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**FIGURE 2** Visual depiction of ‘sharp category boundaries’ and its effect on perceptions of authenticity.
5.1 **Method**

*Procedure.* Participants were 102 adults (*M* _age_=38.9; 67% female) who were recruited from the same online survey pool as the previous study. All participants were instructed that the purpose of the survey was to examine perceptions of authenticity. Participants then saw a series of 18 products. For each product (e.g., Red wine made from 100% grapes grown in Cotes-du-Rhône, France) participants were asked to rate the authenticity of the item using the following 7-point scale: (0=completely inauthentic, 1=very inauthentic, 2=slightly inauthentic, 3=neither authentic nor inauthentic, 4=slightly authentic, 5=very authentic, 6=completely authentic). The products tested are listed in Table 1 (10 of these items were taken directly from Rozin, 2005). The order in which product appeared was randomized for each participant, with the caveat that no two items of the same “type” appeared on the same page.

**TABLE 1**  
*The mean authenticity ratings (and SDs) for items in Experiment 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louis Vuitton, 100% made in France</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Vuitton, 95% made in France</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Vuitton, 80% made in France</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Vuitton, 50% made in France</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine, 100% Cotes-du-Rhône</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine, 99% Cotes-du-Rhône</td>
<td>4.47</td>
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<td>Wine, 50% Cotes-du-Rhône</td>
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<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fresh-squeezed OJ</td>
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<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh-squeezed OJ, 0.001% concentrate</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJ, 65% fresh-squeezed</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJ, 50% fresh-squeezed</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJ, 0.001% fresh-squeezed</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural spring water</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural spring water w/purified minerals (.001%) added</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural spring water w/purified minerals (.001%) removed</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water, 65% natural spring water</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water, 50% natural spring water</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water, 0.001% natural spring water</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Results

Overall, the results were quite consistent with the notion of sharp category boundaries. Inspecting Fig. 3, one can see that ratings of authenticity were high when the item was 100% pure, but changes in 1% or even 0.001% purity resulted in a substantial drop in authenticity ratings. Further decreases in purity, however, had a comparatively minimal effect.

I then analyzed each set of items independently compare the effect of changes in purity on authenticity judgments. There were four sets of items.

Louis Vuitton bag, red wine, orange juice, and spring water. For simplicity, I refer to these using the abbreviations (LV, RW, OJ, and SP) and the percent purity of the formula (e.g., 100%, 99%, etc.). Paired-sample t-tests indicated a significant difference in authenticity ratings between the 100%LV and the 95%LV, $t(99) = 10.14, p < 0.001$; no difference between the 95%LV and the
80%LV, \( p = 0.21 \); and a significant difference between the 80%LV and 50%LV, \( t(98) = 5.61, p < 0.001 \). A second set of comparisons using the difference scores (e.g., 100%LV–95%LV), indicated that the drop in authenticity ratings between 100% and 95% (\( M\text{diff} = 1.99 \)) was greater than the drop between 95% and 80% (\( M\text{diff} = 0.14 \)), \( t(97) = 7.05, p < 0.001 \), and greater than the drop between 95% and 50% (\( M\text{diff} = 0.61 \)), \( t(98) = 4.97, p < 0.001 \).

Similarly, for the RW items, there was a significant difference between 100%RW and the 99% RW, \( t(100) = 5.64, p < 0.001 \), and a significant difference between the 99%RW and 50%RW, \( t(100) = 3.88, p < 0.001 \). Comparison of the difference scores indicated that the drop in authenticity ratings between 100% and 99% (\( M\text{diff} = 0.89 \)) was marginally greater than the drop between 99% and 50% (\( M\text{diff} = 0.51 \)), \( t(96) = 1.61, p = 0.11 \).

For the OJ items, only the comparisons between 100%OJ and 99.99%OJ and 99.99%OJ and 65%OJ were significant (both \( p \) values < 0.001). All other comparisons (e.g., 50% and 0.001%) were not (all \( p \) values > 0.29). For the OJ items, the drop in authenticity was not significantly greater from 100% to 99.99% (\( M\text{diff} = 1.22 \)) than it was from 99.99% to 65% (\( M\text{diff} = 0.84 \)), \( t(95) = 1.47, p = 0.15 \), though it was directionally consistent. However, the drop from 100% to 99.99% was greater than from 65% to all other values (all \( p \) values < 0.001).

Finally, in the case of the spring water, participants viewed any change to the water (even in the amount of 0.001%) as significantly decreasing authenticity. Specifically, they rated the 100% SP as more authentic (\( M=5.52, SD=1.13 \)), than the natural spring water with 0.001% of minerals removed (99.99% SP; \( M=3.29, SD=1.90; p < 0.001 \)), or the spring water with 0.001% purified minerals added (\( M=4.00, SD=1.66; p < 0.001 \)). However, there was no difference between the 65% SP (\( M=3.23, SD=1.76 \)), and the 50% SP (\( M=3.34, SD=1.60 \)), or even the 0.001% SP (\( M=3.48, SD=2.04 \)).

5.2.1 Between-Subjects Replication
I conducted a follow-up study in which the purity of the essence was manipulated between-subjects. A new sample of 234 participants (\( M_{\text{age}} = 37.1, 58\% \) female) read about a Louis Vuitton bag. The percentage of the bag that was said to have been manufactured in the original factory (in Paris) was manipulated between-subjects to be either 100%, 80%, 20%, 0%. In all cases, the description was clear to highlight that, “this product can be purchased from an authorized Louis Vuitton boutique” in order to avoid any inferences that bags manufactured outside of the original factory were replicas. Using 9-point Likert scales, all participants then rated how authentic the bag was, and how genuine it was. These two items were highly correlated (\( r = 0.94 \)) and were averaged to produce a single measure of authenticity.
A one-way ANOVA comparing authenticity ratings revealed a significant difference between conditions, $F(3, 230) = 8.86, p < 0.001$. Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the 100% bag ($M = 8.16, SD = 1.19$) was rated as significantly more authentic than the 80%, 20%, or 0% bags ($Ms = 6.52, 6.39, 6.55$, respectively), all $p$ values $< 0.001$. However, authenticity ratings of the 80%, 20%, and 0% bags were not different from one another, all $p$ values $> 0.69$.

5.3 Discussion
Results from this study provide additional support for the predictions made the notion of sharp category boundaries. Specifically, ratings of authenticity decreased exponentially (rather than monotonically) as the purity of the substance was manipulated, and even changes of 0.001% had a significant effect on authenticity ratings, which is consistent with the so-called “one drop rule.” Together, these findings provide strong support for the proposal that perceptions of authenticity correspond to evaluations of essence.

6 Experiment 3: Inductive Generalization

Experiment 3 examines the use of deeper unobservable properties for inductive generalizations (i.e., the extension of knowledge to novel instances). This feature of essentialism also makes an interesting prediction for perceptions of authenticity: If individuals are taught that a product has a novel characteristic they should infer that other authentic items share that same property, even if they are perceptually dissimilar, while inauthentic items do not.

To test this prediction, participants were told about an object with a novel characteristic (e.g., a painting with the novel property of “Goudire”). The question was whether participants would infer that other items from the same source share that property (e.g., other paintings by the same artist), even if they are perceptually dissimilar, whereas perceptually similar items from a different source (e.g., a replica of the first painting) do not. As a comparison, a different group of participants examined an identical set of items, but now the information about the item’s source was removed. In this case, I expected that participants should make generalizations on the basis of perceptual similarity.

In addition to a series of essentialized objects (e.g., painting, ancient figurine), I also examined naturally occurring objects (e.g., a dinosaur bone, or moon rock) for which participants definitely should make a similar pattern of inferences (extending to the perceptually dissimilar item), as well as everyday products (e.g., a coffee mug, or a backpack) for which they should not (extending to the perceptually similar item). The idea here was that for natural kinds,
information relevant to authenticity should clearly indicate whether the item possesses a certain novel property (e.g., a certain mineral found in “real” moon rocks). In contrast, for everyday products, authenticity is less relevant because value is tied to observable rather than unobservable features (as seen in Study 1). Therefore, I predicted that the pattern of inductive generalization should hold for items in which people do infer some deeper essence, but not for items where superficial or functional properties are the only relevant criteria.

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Participants
Participants were 99 adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.3$, 65% female) that were recruited from the same online pool as the previous studies. This experiment consisted of two conditions that were presented between participants.

6.1.2 Procedure
Participants were presented with triads of objects. Each triad consisted of a target object (e.g. a painting) and two extension objects. The description of the target item indicated that it had a novel property. For example, participants read, “Experts believe that this [painting] possesses a certain inexplicable quality they call [Goudire]” The properties were all novel words and were different for each object. Below the target object appeared two extension objects, one that was perceptually similar, and one that was perceptually dissimilar (see Fig. 4).

Half of the participants were provided with information about the source of all three objects. For example, in the case of the painting they were told that the same artist created the target painting and the perceptually dissimilar painting, while the perceptually similar painting was created by someone else. It was always the case that the perceptually dissimilar object came from the same source as the original, while the perceptually similar object did not. Participants were then asked which of the two extension objects was more likely to have the novel property (e.g., Goudire). Responses were made using a nine-point scale, coded as -4=perceptually dissimilar object and +4=perceptually similar object.

The other half of participants were presented with an identical set of items, but now, the information about source was removed. Specifically, the target object was described as having the same property (e.g., Goudire) and participants were then asked which of the two extension objects (perceptually dissimilar versus perceptually similar) they thought was more likely to also have that same property.
Participants evaluated 8 triads of objects that included four essentialized objects (a painting, a figurine from ancient Greece, a master violin, and a designer dress), two natural kind objects (a moon rock and a dinosaur bone), and two everyday products (a coffee mug and a canvas backpack). In the case of the everyday products, the manufacturer was the same for the target object and the perceptually dissimilar object (e.g., Pottery Barn), while the perceptually similar object was described as a replica manufactured by a different company. The order in which each item was presented was randomized for each participant.
6.2 Results
The results from this study are depicted in Fig. 5. I first conducted a 3 (object type: authentic, natural kind, product) × 2 (authenticity information present vs. absent) mixed-model ANOVA. This analysis indicated a significant main effect of object type, $F(1, 97)=27.54, p < 0.001$, a main effect of source information present vs. absent, $F(1, 97)=81.79, p < 0.001$, and importantly, a significant two-way interaction, $F(1,97)=4.58, p = 0.035$. To examine the nature of this interaction, I then compared responses across the three types of objects both when source information was present and absent. When source information was present, participants extended the novel property to the perceptually dissimilar natural kinds ($M = -2.06, SD = 2.46$), and the perceptually dissimilar authenticity objects ($M=-0.64, SD =2.03$). In contrast, for the everyday products, participants extended the property to the perceptually similar objects ($M= 0.78, SD =2.51$). All three of these object types were significantly different from one another, all $p$ values < 0.001. Moreover, one-sample comparisons to the midpoint of “0” confirmed that the ratings of the natural kind and essentialized products were significantly closer to perceptually dissimilar object, $p = 0.001$ and 0.03, respectively, while ratings for the everyday products were significantly closer to the perceptually similar object, $p = 0.034$.

When the source information was not provided, however, a very different pattern emerged. In this case, participants always extended the property to the perceptually similar object ($M = 2.13, 2.18, and 2.73$, respectively).

6.3 Discussion
In this study, participants extended novel properties to items that were perceptually dissimilar to the target object over inauthentic items that were perceptually similar. Importantly, such inferences were selective – that is, when no source information was provided, participants always extended the property to the perceptually similar item. Moreover, for everyday artifacts (e.g., a coffee mug or a backpack), participants extended the property to the similar-looking item, even when information about the same/different manufacturer was provided.

An interesting caveat was that participants did not appear to treat the natural kind items and the essentialized products identically. Generalizations to the essentialized artifacts were still less frequent than for the natural kinds. This suggests that the essence for natural kinds and the essence for essentialized artifacts might be thought of as importantly different, which may be an interesting avenue to explore in future work.
General Discussion

The goal of this paper is to provide an overarching framework that describes how people evaluate object authenticity across a variety of contexts. In short, the proposal is that when people evaluate authenticity, they do so by evaluating the extent to which the object embodies or reflects some valued “essence.” To test this theory, I outlined three key hallmarks of essentialist reasoning (unobservable features, sharp category boundaries, and inductive generalizations) and examined the extent to which evaluations of authenticity conformed to these principles. In short, the data overwhelmingly support this proposal.

Specifically, I observed a strong correlation between the extent to which participants viewed an item’s value as principally unobservable and the extent to which they saw authenticity as relevant. This finding is important because it is consistent with an essentialist explanation of authenticity and begins to empirically establish the contexts in which authenticity is a relevant factor. A second study examined the notion of sharp category boundaries. Drawing from past work on essentialism, I predicted an exponential decrease in authenticity judgments as the purity of the item changed. Indeed, I observed that changing the purity by 1%, or even 0.001%, led to a significant reduction in perceptions of authenticity, while subsequent (more dramatic) changes had a comparatively
minimal effect. The final study examined inductive generalizations. With respect to previous research on authenticity, this is perhaps the most novel prediction as it goes beyond judgments of authenticity to empirically demonstrate how authenticity influences subsequent inferences. In this study, participants extended novel properties to authentic items that were perceptually dissimilar over inauthentic items that were perceptually similar.

Importantly, the predictions stemming from essentialism were observed across a number of different kinds of items – i.e., antiques, artworks, celebrity memorabilia, historical artifacts, inventions, musical instruments, naturally occurring items, sentimental possessions, and a vast range of consumer products. From both an empirical and theoretical perspective this is important because it demonstrates that the predictions stemming from essentialism are not unique to a particular domain, but rather appear to hold across a wide variety of contexts.

7.1 **Empirical Benchmarks**

This essentialist account of authenticity also makes a potentially valuable contribution to the existing literature on authenticity as it provides a clear set of empirical predictions to inform future research. Based on the predictions stemming from essentialism, the current studies predict and demonstrate three unique patterns for authenticity judgments that are (to my knowledge) all novel. They are as follows:

- **Unobservable properties:** Authenticity judgments should be more strongly tied to unobservable properties and should be more important in domains where value is "unobservable"
- **Sharp boundaries:** A small change in the purity of the essence (even 0.001%) should have a disproportionately large effect on perceptions of authenticity and subsequent changes should have a comparatively minimal effect
- **Inductive generalizations:** Authentic items of like kind should be perceived as sharing unobservable features, even if their surface features differ dramatically

This list is useful because it provides a benchmark for future work on authenticity. For example, if a researcher is interested in whether authenticity is relevant to a particular domain, one method of assessment may be to compare patterns of judgments in the respective domain to the predictions outlined above. Similarly, there may be cases in which authenticity clearly is a factor and researchers may be interested in the extent to which they conform to the predictions made by essentialism. Moreover, it may be that there are several
other kinds of judgments that also follow these patterns, so it may be interesting to ask higher-level questions about why multiple types of evaluations are based on evaluations of essence.

I suggest that thinking of authenticity in terms of psychological essentialism has the ability unify many of the existing ways in which authenticity is evaluated, and importantly, generate a set of empirical predictions that extend to domains where we know authenticity is a factor. Without such a benchmark, however, it becomes quite difficult (if not impossible) to identify meaningful similarities or differences in evaluations of authenticity across domains or contexts.

7.2 Conclusions

The concept of authenticity has long been recognized as central to valuation. Part of the allure of this topic may be the very fact that evaluations of authenticity are both powerful and in some sense, illusive. For example, the difference between an authentic painting and a replica might be the difference of thousands or millions of dollars, even though the perceptual properties may not differ in any way (Newman and Bloom, 2012). The goal here is to provide a method for describing the concept of authenticity in terms of an underlying psychological process. Perhaps this effort itself is subject to the biases of essentialism in attempting to reduce an incredibly complex, and somewhat fuzzy concept into a single psychological phenomenon. Nevertheless, I suggest that beyond its theoretical components, this paper makes important headway by outlining a number of novel empirical predictions regarding the contexts in which authenticity is relevant, how perceptions will change in response to various manipulations, and how authenticity is used to guide subsequent inferences.

References


