AUTHENTICITY AS BRAND MANAGEMENT TOOL IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Magda CHMIEL[1*], Paweł KORNETA[2]

[1] Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Faculty of Management; magda.chmiel@ujk.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-9058-2291
[2] Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Faculty of Management; pawel.korneta@ujk.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-2141-3109
* Correspondence author

Purpose: The aim of this article is to define how marketing practitioners understand, design and apply an authenticity strategy in brand communications on social media

Design/methodology/approach: The study is exploratory and qualitative in nature and was based on conducting 15 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) with communication and marketing managers representing various industries. The data was subjected to thematic analysis using an inductive approach.

Findings: The survey results indicate that authenticity is perceived as a strategically constructed narrative, the implementation of which is subject to institutional constraints. Respondents point to the need to adapt forms of authenticity to the characteristics of platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. LinkedIn) and to the presence of tensions between the need for sincerity and image control.

Research limitations/implications: The study is exploratory and qualitative in nature and is based on qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with a limited, purposively selected sample of 15 respondents, so the results cannot be generalized. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of social media means that the results must be interpreted in relation to a specific moment in time – changing platform trends or cultural expectations may influence the redefinition of authenticity practices in the coming years.

Practical Social implications: The results of the study provide a number of practical tips for those responsible for communication strategy and brand management in the digital environment. Authenticity requires planning and competence, not improvisation - effective authenticity management is not about spontaneity, but about skillfully constructing a message that meets cultural and platform norms while maintaining credibility.

Originality/value: This article brings a new perspective to authenticity research by focusing on the perceptions of practitioners responsible for social media communication. The research identifies how they understand and implement the authenticity strategy and what practical tensions between strategic communication and the perception of authenticity they manage in this area.

Keywords: brand authenticity, social media, marketing communication, image management, communication strategy, qualitative interviews.

Category of the paper: A research article presenting the empirical results of qualitative research in the area of brand management and communication in social media.

1. Introduction

Modern organizations operate in a communication environment characterized by a high degree of transparency, information redundancy and growing social expectations regarding ethics, coherence and credibility of actions. In conditions of intense information competition and changing cultural norms, brand authenticity becomes not only an ethical postulate, but also an important strategic resource (Beverland, 2006; Napoli et al., 2014). Social media, which are now a key tool for marketing communication, have radically transformed the way of building relationships between a brand and its stakeholders. On the one hand, they enable direct, dialogical and often informal interaction with recipients; on the other hand, they generate risks related to immediate verification of the authenticity of the organization's declarations and actions (Marwick, Boyd, 2011; Enli, 2015). In this context, authenticity ceases to be a clear-cut category, but becomes a negotiated, dynamic phenomenon, dependent on the communication platform, organizational structure, and recipients' expectations.

The purpose of this article is to examine how representatives of the marketing community define, understand, and implement the concept of authenticity in the context of brand communication in social media. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with practitioners from various sectors of the economy. The authors intend to capture both communication strategies and the constraints and tensions that managers encounter in the process of managing authenticity.

The originality of the study lies in shifting the focus from the recipient to the sender, breaking away from the consumer perspective dominant in literature. The article shows brand authenticity as a consciously managed organizational process, not a spontaneous feature of communication.

The article consists of five parts. This introduction is followed by a literature review, which discusses the current approaches to authenticity in marketing and social media. The methodological assumptions of the study and the description of the research procedure are presented. The fourth part presents the results of the empirical analysis, while the final part contains conclusions, practical implications, and suggestions for further research directions.

2. Literature review. Authenticity as a communication category in marketing through the prism of social media

In literature, authenticity is defined as the coherence between the communicated values of a brand and its actual operation, history and the way it functions in the social and cultural context (Beverland, 2006; Napoli et al., 2014). This concept has gained particular importance

in an era of growing distrust towards traditional advertising and corporate communication - consumers increasingly expect brands to be transparent, consistent with their own values and have a human tone of voice (Holt, 2002). Authenticity can be designed and managed (Beverland, Farrelly, 2010) and be implemented as part of the branding strategy. A brand does not have to be objectively true; it is enough to be perceived as credible, which requires a coherent narrative, aesthetics and communication. Authenticity has evolved from being a permanent, inextricably and unequivocally linked to the brand to a constructivist form that requires constant adaptation to the relationship between the brand and the recipient. Authenticity does not exist independently of social context or interpretive intentions, it becomes an effect of the style, tone and rhetoric of communication rather than a state of reality. The advent of social media has changed the nature of the relationship between brand and audience, introducing a new framework of authenticity based on immediacy, speed of interaction, and the possibility of exposing the behind-the-scenes of action. In this context, authenticity is often associated with informality, transparency, emotional truth, and real-time response (Marwick, Boyd, 2011). Social media users are sensitive to any signs of insincerity, artificiality or exaggeration (Lee, Eastin, 2020). The presence of errors, spontaneity and lack of perfection are sometimes assessed as signs of a brand's authentic character (Abidin, 2016; Luoma-aho, 2015). This phenomenon is particularly visible on platforms such as TikTok, where the aesthetics of imperfection and narratives based on a self-deprecating tone constitute a communication norm. Enli (2015) notes that digital authenticity is contextual in nature and is closely linked to the platform on which it is displayed. What is perceived as honest on one platform may be considered unprofessional or inappropriate in another. Authenticity in social media is therefore not a universal category, but requires adaptation to the aesthetic, cultural and technological expectations of a given media community. In this context, Lehman et al. (2019) emphasize the relational nature of authenticity, assuming that its assessment depends not only on the intentions of the sender, but on the construction of meanings in interaction with recipients. The credibility of brands is built not by declarations themselves, but by the continuity of experience - the impression that the brand behaves in a way consistent with what it previously promised and how it presented itself.

There is a growing importance of adaptive brand management models that consider the variability of the platform context, diverse communication norms and the dynamic expectations of social media users. Previous research on authenticity in marketing has focused primarily on consumers' perception of brands and the psychological conditions of receptions (Morhart et al., 2015; Lee, Eastin, 2020). According to the existing literature, there is a lack of empirical studies analyzing how brand authenticity is operationalized from the perspective of communication practitioners, particularly in the context of platform specific strategies.

3. Methods

The aim of this article is to show how marketers define and implement brand authenticity in practice based on activities carried out in social media. The research, the results of which are discussed in this article, was conducted based on an original research procedure. The research procedure used is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Research procedure

Lp.	Task	Methods and tools used
1	Conceptualization of the research area and identification of the research problem	Critical analysis of literature
2	Operationalization of the research process	Critical analysis of literature
3	Selection of the research sample	Purposeful selection of the research sample
4	Implementation of empirical research	Individual interviews with a script
5	Data transcription and coding	Coding of speech transcription
6	Verification and naming of topics	Semantic text analysis, comparative analysis
7	Development of results and conclusions	Synthesis and conclusions

Source: own study.

The first stage was a critical analysis of the literature, based on which the research area was outlined, and the research objective was specified. The research conducted was exploratory and qualitative in nature, which corresponds to the objective defined as an in-depth understanding of the complex and contextual phenomenon of authenticity of maki in social media from the perspective of marketing practitioners. The approach used allowed for capturing the meanings, interpretations and strategies used by respondents in real market conditions.

The study was conducted from January to March 2025. The selection of the research sample was adapted to the qualitative study and its purpose, and was therefore purposeful (Babbie, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Nowak, 2012). The study included 15 participants-practitioners in independent positions in marketing and/or brand communication in social media. All participants of the study had: at least 2 years of experience in brand management, direct participation in conducting communication in social media (FB, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) and represented organizations active in communication in social media. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDI), conducted via remote communication tools (Zoom, MS Teams) or in person – depending on the respondent's preferences. A single interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted based on a previously prepared scenario. The topics of the scenario included:

a) Understanding authenticity in the context of branding and social media.
b) Communication practices that promote authenticity.
c) Challenges and tensions between authenticity and marketing objectives.
d) Differences in perception of authenticity across platforms.

The data collection process was based on quality assurance principles (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2013):

1. Authorization of quotes-selected fragments of statements were sent to respondents for approval.
2. Researcher reflexivity – at each stage a research journal was kept, recording observations, coding decisions and possible changes in the analytical approach.

The principle of theoretical saturation was applied – interviews were conducted until no new threads relevant to the research problem appeared. The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of research ethics. Each participant received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent to participate and to record the interview was obtained. Data was stored in accordance with the requirements of the GDPR and personal data security standards. All interviews were recorded, then transcribed and anonymized.

The collected material (over 120 pages of transcripts) was subjected to thematic analysis using an inductive approach, in accordance with the Braun and Clarke (2006) methodology. As a result of coding, 58 open codes were distinguished, which were then grouped into 12 intermediate categories and 4 main analytical themes, constituting the basis for a discussion of the results. The applied approach made it possible to capture the individual experiences of respondents and capture the diversity of strategies used in brand communication in social media.

4. Results

4.1. Authenticity as a deliberately constructed strategy

Brand authenticity appeared in the literature as a feature accompanying other brand features such as coherence, true origin, and compliance of activities with declared values (Morhart et al., 2015; Sodergren, 2021; Cinelli, Le Boeuf, 2020; Schallehn et al., 2014).

In the era of social media, this approach has evolved. Increasingly, authenticity does not mean "truth" in an objective sense, but the construction of a message that is to be perceived as true by the recipients (Grayson, Martinec, 2004; Sodergren, 2021; Lehman et al., 2019). In the literature covering contemporary approaches to marketing strategies, the concept of strategic authenticity even appears (Sodergren, 2021; Lehman et al., 2019), where brands design narratives based on apparent spontaneity, using emotions, imperfections and personal stories – but within a conscious branding strategy (Beverland, 2009; FischerAppelt, Dernbach, 2022). There is a related phenomenon called staged authenticity, where naturalness is the result of a script, not a coincidence. In the study, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that

authenticity in brand communication is a product of planning. On the one hand, they emphasized the importance of honesty, naturalness, and "being yourself", on the other – they admitted that every element of such a narrative is subject to strict control.

„What we present as 'natural' is often the result of very deliberate work. Authenticity is a branding tool today – but it has to be done skillfully so that it doesn't look fake" (R4, communications manager, FMCG).

Comment: Respondent reveals discrepancy between content and design process – "naturalness" is planned.

„We have a ready strategy for 'being ourselves'. Someone wrote it, approved it and is implementing it. This is not spontaneity, this is conscious impression management" (R12, marketing manager, start up).

Comment: The respondent indicates that 'authenticity' is standardized and embedded in the processes.

„We have a checklist of things that must be included in an 'authentic' post. Authenticity is a bit of a theatre where you have to act really well" (R2, social media manager, advertising agency).

Comment: Respondent reveals authenticity as a game of appearances that requires skill and direction.

The topic of recipients' expectations also emerged – respondents admitted that their activities are designed to respond to the social demand for "honesty", but within the limits set by the brand.

„We operate in a world of filters. People know it's a game anyway - but they want it to be a game they can believe in" (R8, online marketing manager, beauty industry).

Comment: Suggests that authenticity is more of an illusion of belief than a fact.

4.2. Formats and platforms that support authenticity.

As social media platforms evolve, the way brands communicate their identity and authenticity is changing. The literature on the subject notes that different communication formats—such as stories, reels, livestreams, and short videos—affect the perception of message credibility (Safitri, 2022). Social media favors appearing as an "ordinary person", which leads to a model of so-called performed authenticity (Taylor, 2022). Audiences reward rawness and imperfection because they perceive it as more honest and relatable. In the context of brands, authenticity has become closely linked to using formats that emulate the everyday and the immediate, such as unedited photos, backstage, selfies and "hands-on" statements or live broadcasts. At the same time, the impression of authenticity is created by the correspondence between the style of the message, the expectations of the audience and the technological possibilities of the platform.

Survey respondents were very clear in pointing out that certain content formats and social media channels support perceived authenticity better than others. The most frequently mentioned were:

a) TikTok-as a space for natural expression, dynamic content and humor.
b) Instagram Stories-for its informal charakter and the "here and now effect".
c) Livestreamy-as the most difficult to control forms of communication.

„TikTok promotes what looks imperfect. If something is polished, you can immediately see that it's an advertisement. There, it's more important and more profitable to be funny than professional" (R10, digital marketing manager, educational industry).

Comment: The respondent indicates a change in the hierarchy of communication values - professionalism is giving way to naturalness.

„Stories are like backstage - we show work in progress, sometimes something doesn't work out, but that's what builds trust. People like to watch behind the scenes, because then they feel they have access to something real" (R3, social media specialist, beauty industry).

Comment: Pointing out the psychological effect of "intimate access" as an authenticity strategy.

„Live is a bit like improvisation - you can't fully control it, so paradoxically it is live performances that provide the greatest authenticity" (R11, content specialist, advertising agency).

Comment: Live is understood here as a form of exposure without a mask, which translates into greater trust.

At the same time, some respondents noted that authenticity does not always depend on the format itself, but on how the brand uses it:

„You can have reels that are totally inauthentic - if they are too studied. Format is not enough - tone and intention matter" (R7, content manager, fashion industry).

Comment: Authenticity is not only about form, but also about content and presentation - it depends on the coherence of the narrative.

4.3. Tensions Between Authenticity and Image

Authenticity is in literature (Bruhn et al., 2012) indicated as one of the values of contemporary marketing communication that a brand should be guided by. It is a factor influencing the building of trust, loyalty, and engagement of recipients. At the same time, the literature on the subject indicates the existence of significant tensions between authenticity and corporate image, especially in the context of organizations with a high level of formalization of communication. Such a phenomenon is referred to as the paradox of authenticity - the greater the effort of the organization to be perceived as authentic, the more pronounced the constructive nature of the message becomes, which may result in a weakening of credibility. In this context, authenticity ceases to be a spontaneous and emotional characteristic, but becomes an element of strategic calculation, closely linked to image goals.

Brands operating within rigid procedures and complex communication structures often encounter difficulties in implementing an authentic message that simultaneously meets corporate, legal and reputational requirements. As a result, a contradiction arises between the expected freedom of communication and the need to maintain control over content.

The survey respondents emphasized that authenticity, although considered an important value in declarative terms, is sometimes limited in practice by organizational structures for controlling the message. They indicated that freedom of speech in social media is limited by approval procedures, communication policy or fears of potential image crises.

„The board says: show a human face, but only if that face is well-combed and won't say anything controversial. It's a controlled authenticity" (R5, brand manager, IT industry).

Comment: The conditionality of the message has been indicated - acceptable sincerity is defined by image norms.

„We have to consult with the legal department at every step. So even if something looks spontaneous, it's gone through three revisions. That kills some of the truthfulness that's at stake" (R15, marketing manager, banking industry).

Comment: The difficulty of reconciling authenticity with legal constraints and crisis management in the context of PR was pointed out.

„Recently, there was an opportunity where we could show ourselves, we knew how to react - empathetically and humanely, to show the face of the brand that we want, but we were waiting for acceptance. Late, we showed ourselves as imitators, cold and studied, that was not the point at all" (R14, communication specialist, beauty industry).

Comment: The formal nature of the content production process has been pointed out, even those stylized as authentic.

4.4. Authenticity as a Context- and Platform-Dependent Phenomenon

Contemporary research on brand communication in the digital environment emphasizes that authenticity is not a universal category, but rather a relational social construct, dependent on the specificity of the medium, communication style and cultural expectations of the recipients. (Lehman et al., 2019; Luoma-aho, 2015). In the context of social media, authenticity is not permanently assigned to a brand or content, but results from adapting the message to the communication norms characteristic of a given platform (Enli, 2015). What may be perceived as honest and direct on one platform may be perceived as unprofessional or inconsistent with user expectations in another environment. According to Boyd (2014), users of different platforms develop distinct cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic codes that determine acceptable forms of expression. For brands, this means adapting authenticity to the technological and social context of each communication channel, rather than using a single, unified strategy.

„(…) on TikTok there is more ease, humor, imperfection. It works there. But the same material on LinkedIn would look like a joke or amateurism" (R3, social media specialist, beauty industry).

Comment: The importance of platform culture as a factor regulating forms of authenticity is highlighted.

„Instagram still requires aesthetics. We can be "real," but that realness has to be visually coherent and pleasing. We won't post a selfie with bad lighting" (R6, social media manager, beauty industry).

Comment: The conditionality of authenticity was indicated, subordinated to the aesthetics of the medium.

„LinkedIn is a place where authenticity must have substantive value. There, it is not enough to show the backstage, you must have something to say as a professional" (R9, head of PR, FMCG industry).

Comment: The difference between emotional and expert communication was highlighted.

„YouTube content can be more narrative - people expect a story there. But if we are too formal, the audience loses interest. It is an authenticity that is more narrative than impressionistic" (R1; communication specialist, banking industry).

Comment: It has been pointed out that the length and depth of content determine truthfulness.

„(…) we use multiple authenticity strategies: a different set of languages for TokTok, another for Instagram, another for LinkedIn. Each channel has its own version of being yourself" (R7, content manager, fashion industry).

Comment: the need for a differentiated approach depending on the medium was emphasized.

5. Discussion

The results of the conducted qualitative research allow for an in-depth refelction on the ways of understaning and implementing authenticity in brand communication in social media from the perspective of practitioners. The analysis of the empirical material confirms the findings of previous authors, but alsoreveals new aspects and relationships, that bring a new perspective to the literature.

According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010), authenticity is not an objective or spontaneous feature, but the result of a planned communication strategy, stylized as naturalness and consistent with the image goals of the organization. The respondents' statement clearly indicate that messages considered 'natural' are the result of a conscious selection of content, language and format, and not random actions. Thus, our findings confirm the presence of the phenomenon of so-called strategic authenticity-understood as a form of managed impression, balanced between professionalism and freedom of expression. This conclusions are also consistent with the concept of authenticity paradox (Molleda, 2010), which indicates the tension

between the desire for sincerity and the need to maintain image consistency. Respondents-aware of the recipients' expectations of transparency and naturalness operate within institutional constraints that significantly affect the possibility of fulfilling these expectations. In this context, authenticity is not only a function of external communication, but also a phenomenon conditioned by the internalorganizational structure and culture of the company. Especially in large corporate organizations, authenticity often takes the form of simulated naturalness, within the boundaries set by the institution. This mechanism corresponds to the concept of managed transparency (Bernstein, 2016), according to which openess and emotionality are subject to strict managerial control.

The media context plays an equally important role. The study confirms that authenticity is relational and environmental-which is consistent with the findings of Lehman et al. (2019) and Enli (2015), who emphasized that each social media platform imposes its own interpretive framework, defining which forms of communication are perceived as authentic and which as artificial or inadequate. Respondets noted that the same message can built credibility in one medium (e.g. TikTok) and be perceived as inprofessional in another (e.g. LinkedIn). Consequently, implementing an authentic strategy requires a high level of reflexivity and communication flexibility. The respondets' statements also point to the phenomenon of aestheticization of authenticity-a situation in which even imperfection in the message must be aesthetic, consistent with the brand§s visual identification and coherent with its narrative. In this approach, naturalness becomes another convention-a requirement written into the rules of communication (Knaller, 2012; Degalp, Hartman, 2021). Respondents indicated the presence of controlled imperfection as a communication pattern-aestetic austerity, apparent improvisation, or visual roughness – which strenghten the sense of sincerity. At the same time, it was emphasized that effective implementation of the authenticity strategy does not mean giving up control, but rather its transformation: from content control to emotion and form management. This approach corresponds to the concept of perfomative authenticity (Shtern, Hill, Chan, 2019), according to which not only "what" and "why" are important, but also "how" and "where" it is communicated.

The research also cinfirms the observations of authors such as Taiminen (2015) that effective authenticity in the digital space cannot be based on a universal model, but must be adapted to the specificity of a given medium and its community. In this sense, authenticity appears as a construct that is not only relational, but also situational – emerging in the interaction between sender, platform and recipient.

In summary, this study contributes an operational perspective to the literature – showing how authenticity is actually implemented in organizations, what constraints it entails, and how it varies across media. It reveals a new field of tension: between the need to be "real" and the requirement for consistency, between expression and strategy, between imperfection and aestetics. Unlike previous studies focused mainly on audiences (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014), this study focuses on the decision-making logic and everyday practices of brand

communicators. As a result, it provides a new understandng of the phenomenon of authenticity – as a dynamic trade – off that requires both empathy and control, as well as a deep understanding of the culture of digital platforms.

While this study focused on practitioners operating within a relatively homogeneous cultural and national context, future research should investigate how perceptions and strategic constructions of authenticity vary across cultural settings. Given that platforms such as TikTok or Instagram have global reach but host culturally specific norms, the tension between universal strategy and local authenticity expectations represents an important avenue for further study.

6. Conclusions

The results of the conducted qualitative research allow for the formulation of several important conclusions relating to both the theory and practice of brand communication management in the digital environment. The study showed that authenticity in social media is not a permanent or clearly defined feature-it is the effect of conscious communication activities carried out in conditions of organizational, technological and cultural tensions. The respondents clearly indicated that in large organizational structures, authenticity rarely results from bottom-up, spontaneous expression. On the contrary-it is the result of a compromise between emotional freedom and the requirements of institutional cohesion. In theoretical terms, the research shifts focus from the recipients' perspective-dominant in the literature (e.g. Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014) – to the decision-making logic of the sender, i.e. the teams responsible for communication. It thus brings new cognitive value by presenting authenticity as an operational construct, embedded in image management practices and oriented towards adapting to institutional constraints. It also confirms the validity of relational and contextual approaches (Enli, 2015; Lehman et al., 2019), indicating the importance of the platform as an interpretative framework for the "truthfulness" of the message.

In practical terms, the results suggest that authenticity should be managed as consciously as other elements of brand identity. Organizations should develop internal guidelines on the scope and forms of acceptable spontaneity, as well as develop effective models of cooperation between marketing, PR and legal departments that enable rapid and consistent response in situations requiring an authentic tone. It is also important to differentiate messages depending on the specifics of platform-each requires a different tone, aesthetics and dynamics of the message. At the same time, as the respondents' statement show, selectivity in disclosing information is more important than full transparency-recipients value honesty, but recognize redundancy as a strategy, not authenticity.

The research results provide recommendations for practitioners of brand management and communication in the digital environment. In particular, it is worth noting that:

1. Authenticity requires management, not mere declaration. Organizations should include authenticity as a conscious component of their communication strategy, rather than treating it as a default or intentional characteristic. It is advisable to develop internal procedures and guidelines on the scope and forms of acceptable spontaneity in communication.

2. Authenticity management should consider organizational tensions. This requires developing a model of cooperation between marketing, PR and legal departments that will enable a quick and adequate response in situations requiring an authentic tone without excessively slowing down the decision-making process.

3. Communication must be differentiated by platform. Each social media channel requires a different narrative, tone, and aesthetic, while maintaining consistency in the overall brand identity.

4. Selective transparency has value, not full exposure. A brand doesn't have to reveal everything to be perceived as authentic.

The limitations of this study are its exploratory nature and the small, purposefully selected sample. Participants mainly represented the private sector, and their perspective referred to the realities of the Polish market. The research did not include a systematic analysis of recipients' perceptions, which limits the possibility of assessing the effectiveness of the authenticity strategy from the point of view of communication effectiveness.

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