A diamond in the rough: Inauthenticity and Gems TV

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Abstract

This paper explores inauthenticity in the context of the Gems TV shopping channel using existential phenomenology. Objectively, subjectively and performatively Gems TV fails to convincingly stage a sense of authenticity. This is a televisual format featuring clearcut commercialism, obscure gemstones and opaque verification. Insincere screen performances are not only entertaining, but shoddiness and unpredictability of programming provides backstage glimpses that paradoxically stimulate fantasies of authenticity. Moments of intrapersonal and interpersonal connection arise around viewing. Accordingly, research into the neglected side of the authenticity-inauthenticity dialectic demonstrates that the latter may be a miasma of meanings as complex, contradictory and evocative as the former.

Keywords

Authenticity, inauthenticity, staged authenticity, existentialism, shopping channel

Introduction

Associated with evaluations, judgements and assessments of how real, genuine or truthful something is (Beckman et al., 2009; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), authenticity has been characterised in such terms as sincerity, innocence, naturalness, reliability, continuity, trustworthiness and originality (Beverland, 2006; Bruhn et al., 2012; Ram et al., 2016). A complex concept that differs depending upon the position of the individual or group in relation to the object or experience (Goulding and Derbaix (2019), authenticity is a multi-layered polysemous concept (Becker et al., 2019), which is fluidly interpreted by individuals according to specific contexts and requirements (Nunes et al., 2021). Liu et al. (2015) illustrate as much, via consumers' appraising of branded products' authenticity in a proactive negotiation between chosen attributes and criteria, that lead to informed and complex judgements.

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Authenticity formation processes are an important topic in marketing (Fritz et al., 2017) and have been explored in a variety of marketing settings, including marketing communications (i.e. Dwivedi and McDonald, 2018), advertising (i.e. Beverland et al., 2008) and branding (i.e. Napoli et al., 2014). As summarised by Rickly (2022), discussions of authenticity are particularly influential and well-developed within tourism studies. Broadly speaking and across these marketing domains consumer perceptions of authenticity have been found to be useful for predicting consumer attitudes and intentions (Alhouti et al., 2016; Moulard et al., 2016). Castéran and Roederer (2013), for example, conclude that perceptions of authenticity amongst Christmas market attendees will increase loyalty and purchase frequency during the event. Nunes et al. (2021: 16) even suggest that consumers can be 'inclined to buy products and services deemed authentic even if they do not especially "like" them, which underscores the importance of considering authenticity as a semi-autonomous driver of consumer decision-making'.

Nevertheless, whilst the existing marketing literature is very much concerned with consumers actively engaged in the seeking of and creation of authenticity (Alexander, 2009), consumers inevitable experiences of inauthenticity are less well understood (Mkono, 2020). Hede and Thyne (2010), for example, suggest that despite what seems to be an increasing role of the inauthentic in contemporary consumer culture, much of the research in this area has remained focussed on the authentic. Inauthenticity is often alluded to in consumer research as harmful and to be avoided, but the processes of its negotiation are arguably the neglected side of authenticity research (Anthony and Joshi, 2017). Yet, authenticity and inauthenticity are dialectical. Their perception may be simultaneous (Chalmers and Price, 2009), porous (Goulding and Derbaix, 2019), mutually inspiring (Canavan and McCamley, 2021) and unpredictable (Canavan, 2019). This is illustrated by Hietanen et al.'s (2020: 35) review of the ambivalent and seductive interaction of authentic and counterfeit in luxury fashion consumption, where 'instead of operating as fixed notions, the semiotic interplay between authentic and counterfeit products could be rather read as a relationship of an ever-increasing intensification of how the signs of authentic and counterfeit feed on each other and continue to accrue ambiguity in late capitalist markets of signs'.

To develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the overall negotiation of authenticity in relation to consumption, therefore, it is useful to consider the inauthenticity side of this dialectic. This study asks, what does inauthenticity do for consumers and how is inauthenticity negotiated in consumption? Specifically, explored is inauthenticity as a multidimensional construct, involving overlapping existential, contextual, and staged aspects, as well as how these may be interactive with their authenticity counterparts. These are addressed using a phenomenological approach to describe and analyse experiences of inauthenticity of a shopping channel[1]. Findings highlight an unconvincing frontstage of presented products that includes objective, such as gem verification, subjective, invoking emotions and performative, including embodied enthusiasm and orientations. In addition, seemingly genuine and relatable backstage elements are glimpsed via access to camera crews and fourth wall breaking moments. The result is a miasma of meanings (Alexander, 2009) around the channel, insincere and otherwise. These stimulate sense of the intrapersonal (bodily feelings and self-making), and interpersonal (communitas and social ties) connections, outlined by Wang (1999) as dimensions involved in activating an experience of an authentic self. Somewhat surprisingly therefore, existential meaning is supported by interaction with what is interpreted to be a highly inauthentic consumption context. Findings challenge marketers to consider inauthenticity as potentially conducive to consumer experiences of true self, and hence valued as a consumer activity. Nuanced are prevalent assumptions whereby authenticity is idealised, and inauthenticity constructed as problematic, in relation to consumption (Anthony and Joshi, 2017; Caruana et al., 2008).

Precursor to and framing this discussion of inauthenticity as multi-layered, polysemous, and fluid, intertwined with and stimulating its dialectic, this paper begins by outlining (in)authenticity from internal (existential) and external (contextual) standpoints, drawing from Wang's (1999) much used framework to do so. Existential authenticity relates to fully expressing one's individual, natural, spontaneous self (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Contextual authenticity relates to socio-culturally framed interpretations of surroundings, including object interactions, social constructions and enacted performances (Canavan and McCamley, 2021; Wang, 1999). Bringing together the existential-internal and contextual-external dimensions of authenticity, the concept of staged authenticity, which has been used to theorise consumers' search for meaningful encounters via the marketplace (MacCannell, 1973), frames how these intertwined aspects are actively presented and encountered in a specific, often consumption-based, setting, in this case, the television studio.

Existential authenticity

A philosophy of life itself, the difficulties, choices and self-assertion therein (Bakewell, 2016), existentialism emphasises the internal sense of alienation that arises for all humans because of awareness of the contingency, finitude and unconditional freedom of existence (Tillich, 1952). Existentialism articulates human behaviours in terms of the avoidance or confrontation strategies individuals may adopt to alleviate this alienation (Berger, 1973). Hereby, existential avoidance refers to the strategies to evade, postpone or flee from alienation, by becoming distracted via, and lost within, the routine, quotidian, or group (Berger, 1973). For Sartre (2003) , the consequence of such avoidance is a loss of the authentic self, which becomes subsumed before systems, others and ego, and the persistence of an alienated self that is merely disguised or denied. Light and Brown (2021) elaborate the inauthentic way of living as involving self-deception, disregard of the other, compromising and denying individual freedom.

Conversely, taking honesty and courage (Grene, 1952), confrontation of alienation is associated with increased opportunities for self-discovery and expression, social connection and belonging, and as such more fulfilling authentic living. Fritz et al. (2017: 326) summarise 'individuals are said to be authentic if they are sincere, assume responsibility for their actions and make explicit value-based choices concerning those actions and appearances rather than accepting pre-programmed or socially imposed values and actions'. Brown et al. (2003) describe existential authenticity as internal consistency in the sense of remaining true to and maintaining an essential core or self, whilst Moulard et al. (2016) suggest that authenticity involves being true to oneself in terms of behaviours motivated by one's actual thoughts and feelings. For Audrezet et al. (2020), authenticity involves an individual's engagement with intrinsically motivated behaviours that emanate from a person's innate desires and passions, as opposed to inauthentic extrinsically motivated behaviours that may not be inherently satisfying.

Vidon and Rickly (2018: 66) suggest such quests to assuage feelings of existential anxiety, are 'the most human of endeavours, as we each seek to alleviate our alienation through various means – travel, shopping, leisure and so on'. Hence, the existential philosophical articulation of internal (in) authenticity may be associated with consumption as an outlet for navigating these (Canavan, 2018). In terms of existential avoidance, for example, tourism may offer a means for consumers to indulge egos (MacCannell, 2002), limiting any self-transformational potential of travel (Bruner, 1991). Nevertheless, Wang (1999) posits that travel can help tourists access a state of being that transcends everyday social norms and regulations. Illustrating, Kim and Jamal (2007: 196) find attendance at a medieval re-enactment festival, is a means to 'experience relatively unmediated feelings and to

express, regain or reconstruct a sense of self that was suppressed under the regular social roles and norms of everyday life', with participants able to engage in intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences that led them towards an authentic sense of themselves. Hence, tourism can arguably be a catalyst for individual-contextual awareness, pursuit of personal meaning, and transformational change (Brown, 2013).

Existentially inauthentic and authentic strategies for dealing with inherent human alienation are thus conceptualised, and consumption provides opportunities for overlapping and unpredictable pursuit of both avoidance and confrontation (Canavan, 2019). Consumption has an existentially ambiguous role; on the one hand offering escape from angst, on the other inspiration in a search for belonging and facilitator of ambition (Canavan, 2018). Hereby, consumption may provide such things as symbolic meaning to create the self and identity yet may simultaneously enchain us to the illusive sense of self and the endless realm of consumption (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Moreover, within consumerism overlapping ideals of authenticity, personal autonomy and self-actualisation may be co-opted by powerful economic forces (Södergren, 2021). The result is paradoxes, such as that of the self-proclaimed authentic traveller, who pursues and expresses their individuality and freedom via a mass marketplace (Caruana et al., 2008). Consequently, consumption authenticity is not a fixed and static concept, but has fluid and porous boundaries that can be experienced by individuals in different situations (Goulding and Derbaix, 2019).

Contextual authenticity

Tied up with the consumer pursuit of true self, therefore, is external consistency. This is summarised by Brown et al. (2003) as reflecting whether something is what it appears to be, not counterfeit, or exaggerated. Illustrating this association of authentic self and authentic objects in relation to consumption, Abolhasani et al. (2017) find that cultural artefact evaluations are inevitably interconnected in the construction of an authentic identity. Reviewing music in advertising, they find that 'when a piece of music associated with a consumer's sense of self-identity becomes less authentic through commodification, the consumer may feel that their own identity is threatened' (p. 486). Fritz et al. (2017) conclude that to positively influence authenticity perceptions, brand's positioning should be oriented toward the consumers' real self-perception. Conversely, Goor et al. (2020) identify luxury consumption as potentially contributing to inauthenticity, where feelings of imposter syndrome exacerbate perceived gap between consumers' true and projected selves. Consumers may worry that an inauthentic product, service or experience will not contribute to or undermine meaningful connections (Canavan and McCamley, 2021; Wang, 1999). Indeed, Lee et al. (2009) find brand avoidance can develop when brand image is symbolically incongruent with the individual's identity. Meanwhile, Liu and Dalton (2019) find that possessions considered inauthentic are more likely to be disposed of and replaced; something that is particularly the case for possessions that matter most to consumers and their self-concepts.

As such, experiences of existential authenticity take place in context. Surroundings frame, shape, facilitate or may inhibit self-expression. Elliot (1997) notes for instance, that the exercise of existential freedom via consumption takes place in a sociocultural context constrained by economic inequalities and ideological hegemony. In relation to tourism meanwhile, Rickly-Boyd (2013: 684) notes 'existential authenticity is not created in isolation within the individual, but occurs in fleeting moments, informed by social, cultural, and physical encounters'. Thus, Heller (1987) explains subjective determination is inherently intersubjective. Each person is thrown into a unique individual genetic a priori and a particular social a priori by the accident of birth (Heller, 1988). Destiny involves transforming this accident into determination and self-determination under conditions of

growing up in a particular social world. Existential meaning and belonging involve a conscious attempt to think about one's place in the world, relationships with immediate others and shared humanity (Heller, 2015/1984). Authenticity hereby involves a negotiation of both 'whether one's self is authentic' and 'whether something else is authentic' (Grayson and Martinec, 2004: 297).

This duality is reflected in Wang's (1999) influential outlining of existential, objective, constructive and postmodern authenticities. Where existential is more about intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of authenticity, objective, constructive and postmodern are more about sociocultural processes of authenticity. Briefly speaking, an objective orientation supposes authenticity is a characteristic which is inherently found within an object, such as a product, an event or a place, via deterministic verification processes, such as their evaluation by experts (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Wang, 1999). Constructive authenticity captures the socially constructed and individually felt nature of authenticity (Rickly, 2022; Wang, 1999). In this way authenticity is a more emergent subjective process of personal and social cues, feelings, and opinions (Canavan and McCamley, 2021; Cook, 2010). Meanwhile, postmodern refers to prevailing sociocultural attitudes towards interpreting authenticity (Wang, 1999), with this ethos tending towards ambiguous, cynical and deconstructive stances towards the quest for truth (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). Subsequent developments of Wang's typology include performative authenticity, which considers how experiences of authenticity are embodied and enacted, as well as determined or felt (Zhu, 2012), and broadening the notion of postmodern authenticity through an epochal lens that considers modern and post-postmodern stances also (Canavan and McCamley, 2021).

Thus, the authenticity of surroundings, the objects within, emotions aroused via, collaborative performances enacting, and interpretive priorities culturally-temporally emphasised, may be understood through a range of sociocultural processes that change over time. Authenticity in the abstract existential sense of pursuing true self, is hereby translated into consumption in a more pragmatic sense of interpreting and negotiating marketplace mediated activities related to this search, to ensure these are consistent with and complementary towards. Illustrating, Leigh et al. (2006) describe the complex authenticity associated by MG car owners with the brand's products and surrounding consumer subculture. Based on both product symbolism and self-efficacy, numerous intertwining conceptualisations of authenticity in its interpretation of reality, provides a means for consumers to achieve legitimacy via subcultural investment and demonstrations. Essentially, on-going self and community creation-verification-authentication processes are entangled. Thus, Hede et al. (2014: 1406) suggest that 'self-authentication may operate on two levels: initially on the level of the consumption of the market offering, when consumers situate themselves in a specific consumption context, and then at the gestalt level, when they evaluate how a specific consumption activity relates to their own "holistic" authenticity'.

Staged authenticity

As Rickly (2022) notes, the sociocultural nature of authenticity makes this a fluid concept. Due to its ambiguity, consumption authenticity involves coping, resolution and creative approaches (Rose and Wood, 2005), as diverse subjects struggle to negotiate their different views and perspectives on authenticity (Corciolani, 2014), and the various contradictions that occur in doing so (Canavan and McCamley, 2021). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) suggest that consumers ultimately seek the same authenticity in different objects, brands and events, for different reasons, and that same event may be judged authentic, by the same or different consumers, depending on their goal. 'In this sense, authenticity is defined, normalised, perpetuated and/or transformed in an on-going process of socio-discursive negotiation, in which different actors participate, with different interests, scopes of

influence, and positions of power' (Daugstad and Kirchengast, 2013: 173). Consumers actively construct personally useful notions of the authentic (Rose and Wood, 2005), as adept, creative, and capable producers of authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010) and participating in multiple ways in the marketplace construction of authenticity as a negotiated collective act (Chronis and Hampton, 2008). Buchmann et al. (2010: 246) conclude that 'experiences of authenticity are often complex productions of personal history and knowledge, social processes, embodiment and place'. They continue 'complex production of the experience of authenticity does not, however, make it any the less authentic' (p. 246).

Offering a means of framing these complex negotiations-productions, is the concept of staged authenticity. This opens for analysis the idea of authenticity both as a structural feature of societies and as an experience at the individual level (Olsen, 2007). First articulated by MacCannell (1973, 1976) in relation to tourism consumption, staged authenticity proposes front and back stages as poles of a continuum that frame consumer's quests for authenticity (MacCannell, 1973). Hereby, consumers search for cues, such as the pristine, primitive or natural, in the hope of finding something authentic (MacCannell 1976). Such cues are associated with the back region as an imagined realm of truth, reality, and intimacy, whereas the front region is false and superficial (MacCannell, 1973). The behind the scenes can help to create or confirm consumers' perceptions of what authenticity is (Beverland et al., 2008). These front-back poles are linked by a series of front regions decorated to appear as back regions, and back regions set up to accommodate outsiders and to support their quests for and beliefs in the authenticity of their experiences (MacCannell, 1973, 1976). Daugstad and Kirchengast (2013) elaborate for example, the pseudo backstage, which may be fabricated by tourist hosts to enhance their guests' sense of authenticity.

Nevertheless, MacCannell (2008) elaborates the backstage as a quasi-fictional locus of fantasies; those of fulfilment, of real intimacy, or of resolving contradictions. 'The transformation of empirical and functional back regions into staged authenticity has never been anything more than a screen for our unrealizable dreams and desires, an opportunity for make-believe, a chance to enter a myth, a fantasy-land' (p. 337). This insight links with the existential perspective whereby true self is a constant state of becoming, a journey rather than a destination (Heller, 1988). In turn, consumer pursuit of authenticity may be on-going in the sense that this cannot be obtained with certainty or longevity. With tourists, for example, 'the touristic fantasy of authenticity can never be completely satisfied, driving the perpetual desire for more travel and more experiences in pursuit of various manifestations of authenticity' (Knudsen et al., 2016: 43–44). The search for authenticity is an ideal that can only be partially fulfilled at best, necessitating different strategies to avoid a personal crisis of renewed sense of alienation (Cohen, 1979).

Fantasies of authenticity may nonetheless offer possibilities for existentially enriching encounters with self and other. As new articulations and combinations of authenticity emerge in response to its ambiguity and ephemerality, it is this on-going process of individual-collective negotiating that offers possibilities for maintaining the fantasy of authenticity, but also the possibilities for finding meaningful human connections that fantasising holds. This potential for creating meaning and belonging through fantasy may be observed in Belk and Costa's (1998) 'mountain men' for example. These craft a sense of wilderness that is imaginary but holds potential for poignant connections with self, others and nature. Meanwhile, Chronis and Hampton (2006) identify perceived authenticity at a reconstructed heritage tourism site as having a mediating function that triggers consumer imagination that stimulates engagement with a profound cultural narrative. Similarly, Bruner (1994) recognises that such sites can provide imagination stimulating experiences that help to attach those imagining to a mythical collective consciousness that is meaningful. Thus, Rickly (2022) describes how MacCannell's concept of staged authenticity

highlights the role of the imagination in tourist experience. Essentially, where existential authenticity relates to self-understanding, and contextual authenticity to understanding surroundings, staged authenticity considers the settings/events/activities/performances where these intertwined negotiations of authenticity are more actively imagined.

Methodology

Arising from a chance encounter with, this article took a phenomenological approach to describe and analyse experiences of watching the Gems TV shopping channel. This channel has focussed on selling jewellery in the UK since 2004 (Gemporia.com). Television programmes have proven fertile ground for exploring consumer authenticity. Allen and Mendick (2013), for example, explore how young viewers take up, resist and rework discourses of authenticity within reality television programmes. Meanwhile, Canavan (2021) considers the interpretations and negotiations of reality television narrative truths by fans. Elsewhere, McCoy and Scarborough (2014) illustrate viewers' consumption of self-described 'bad' television programmes, as a complex process involving multiple styles of viewing that offer various ways to relate to cultural objects considered to be 'trashy'. Strategies of irony, camp and guilty pleasure help to transgress the symbolic boundary between 'good' and 'bad' television.

The study of the appearance of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1946), phenomenology seeks to explore a phenomenon from the perspective of the experiencing person (Willson et al., 2013). The approach seeks a rigorous description of human life as it is lived, described and reflected upon . Complementing the theoretical background of the author(s) a specifically existential phenomenology was adopted in this study. This approach seeks to describe experience as it emerges in context as it is lived (Thompson et al., 1989). From an existential phenomenological perspective, 'although social context is seen as a fundamental ground from which all meanings emerge, primacy is placed on the perspective of the experiencing individual rather than on the cultural setting as observed from a third-person viewpoint' (Thompson et al., 1990: 347).

Research corresponded to Churchill and Wertz's (1985) characterisation of phenomenological research as consisting of three discernible moments: experiential contact with prescientific psychic life, reflective analysis and psychological description. Thus, inspiration for this research arose serendipitously whilst channel hopping late one evening. Coming across the Gemporia segment, the title for an open-ended series of programming focussed on selling gemstone-related items on the Gems TV channel, interest was seeded. Shopping channels were already familiar to the authors in terms of being widely referenced in surrounding pop culture, albeit never watched directly beforehand. It was interesting to see they were still going in an internet age. Watched for a half hour or so, laughed at, discussed with other household members and turned off, having experienced Gems TV, and initially dismissed, gradually entered was a period of persistent interest in and thinking about. For Merleau-Ponty (2012/1946), the centre of philosophy is found in the perpetual beginning of reflection at that point where an individual life begins to reflect upon itself.

Further casual viewing of the channel took place over several months, before eventually inspiring to develop into a deliberate research study of. Van Maanen (2016) elaborates that a phenomenological question may arise any time that we have a certain experience that brings us to pause and reflect, often beginning with a period of wonder which goes beyond superficial and passing curiosity. Here, initial wonder persisted, developed, and eventually decision was taken to begin a deliberate reflexive analysis involving regularly tuning into the on-screen performances. Eventually many hours of Gems TV were viewed throughout 2021. Usually this would be tuning in for about an hour, 2–3 times per week, to the late evening and night programming around 11 pm–1 am, as

convenient. Notes were made during and immediately after these viewings jotting down on-screen quotes, incidences and activities, as well as initial impressions, interpretations and reactions to these. These collated over time into extensive field notes that could later be revisited, reflected upon and iteratively analysed to draw out recurrent themes, patterns and developing concepts.

Over time a sense emerged of how viewing experiences might complement theory and the process of describing, analysing and writing up experiences began (as per Goulding, 2005). Authenticity was decided as a promising conceptual framework for describing, analysing and writing up research findings, and an abductive-iterative approach for bringing associated theoretical concepts into a relationship with the fieldwork was used (as per Cheetham et al., 2018). Heller's (2015/1984) loosely existential phenomenological perspective, self-described as far closer to critical theory than positivism, was drawn upon, whereby intention was to provide descriptions of experience combined with consciously theming and reflecting upon these. Thus, fieldwork evolved into the three themes presented in the following. The first of these collated around descriptions of the channel itself that sought to capture its overall ethos and record critical incidences as perceived by the researcher(s). Condensed into a paraphrased summary is a 40 min viewing session derived from field notes and reflections. The second theme related to negotiations of the (in)authenticity of onscreen staging. Analysis is of the objective, subjective and performative elements perceived. The third theme relates to the emergence of moments of intrapersonal and interpersonal connection associated with viewing. Here, fantasies of a glimpsed backstage stimulated deeper consciousness.

Research findings

'Imagine if it was a real fabergé': watching Gems TV

The diamond wheel ends at midnight. It spins slowly in the corner of the screen between regular close ups on the rotating costume jewellery glittering beneath the lights. The presenter explains once more that all items must go before then. Furthermore, these are the last of their kind. The old mines have closed and the small gem package that these are made from is about to run out. Number 27 is a lovely clear diamond bracelet. The host finds on the wheel after a few attempts and holds up to their wrist. The camera zooms in close. The small pores and patterns of their skin are large next to the stones. It is a big statement piece that would look nice in the summer, the autumn or winter. You can see the difference it makes to the outfit when they hold it up there. Ready to go for a night out now. 'Shall we go for a night out Luka?' they ask glancing off camera. 'No, you're clocking off now. How are you getting home? I hope you're brightly dressed so passing cars can see you. No, you're going like that skulking in the dark.' The presenter laughs good naturedly and says goodbye to the person who we cannot see.

The sound effect plays for when the price comes up on screen left. No numbers showing yet. The presenter seems surprised and asks whether that is correct. They often ask this as a sales technique, slack jawed, slapped forehead and gasping at the prices. But there does seem to be some confusion here. The tight smile, few seconds delay in chatter, eyes looking off stage, reaching for the earpiece. Jono, another disembodied character we often hear about, is blamed good naturedly. He always gets the sound effects wrong. The banter moves sideways. It is the presenters' last shift on this timeslot, but don't worry, they're not leaving. They will be doing the make hour on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Some viewer messages scroll across the bottom of the screen and the presenter responds good naturedly. No, they are not sure the make hour will be able to control them, what are they letting themselves in for! But their boss, he's upstairs now so they best be on good behaviour, is coming over also, so will be able to keep them in check.

The burble ceases with a look of relief. That's the problem with the price; they're not clear diamonds, are they? They're champagne. They are a champagne colour looking at them. That wasn't right. The presenter is making a note of that to tell their manager. Can you imagine how much it would cost if it were clear diamonds? Thousands. Diamond prices are through the roof right now as an investment. Can we see that email again from the head of Gemporia to all staff saying how hard it is to get diamonds right now? A copy of the email is shown. This just goes to prove how good an investment diamonds are right now. These are gorgeous champagne diamonds, and that price is not going to stay like that. The presenter imagines they will take it under 180. They have just taken it under 150. Incredible! That is a big statement piece for under 150. These diamonds are millions of years old. Formed when everything was Pangea. Under these studio lights they don't look so bright but imagine under yours at home.

> The numbers are counting down fast on the side of the screen now. Fewer and fewer bracelets are available in stock. Once they are gone, they are gone forever, old mine, diamond shortages, small package, Pangea. Get on the phones now or go through the website because the phones are so busy right now. The presenter acknowledges and congratulates successful purchasers by name with a big smile but eyes looking sideways at something we can't see. There are only a few pieces left, so call in quick. Last few. Still glancing over to the side of the screen. Train of thought seems to be wandering. The bracelet is put down. A momentary lapse in enthusiasm. Then firing up again as the next item on the wheel is picked up. A Fabergé inspired blue, green, and yellow diamond, they had struggled for a while because of Covid to get any yellow, third of a carat, set in real gold, cat's eye ring. Imagine what this would be worth if it was a real Fabergé…

Staged authenticity: Objective, subjective and performative elements

Condensing part of a forty-minute segment of viewing Gems TV paraphrases the faintly chaotic stream-of-consciousness vibe that permeates the daily night shifts. These typically feature a single presenter keeping things moving as different products are displayed on screen, discussed and sold to viewers. Sometimes a guest will join to help. Down the left-hand side of the screen is a brief description of the item currently on sale, the price, and the number left in stock. From the initial display value prices fall in a 'reverse auction'. Bidders commit to purchase before the items sell out without knowing the actual cost. Dedicated to presenting and selling onscreen paraphernalia, observed was a combination of authenticity orientations employed in their staging. Objective, subjective and performative orientations can be found, as products, feelings and showmanship are woven together into the overall Gems TV experience.

Thus, from an objective perspective, emphasis is on the heritage and quality of products sold. Enthusiastic discussions are of tanzanite, kunzite, and other semi-precious gemstones. Some names, such as selenite, have been coined to describe a particular type of another gemstone, in this case labradorite, as presenters will explain at length. Elaborated is the geographic provenance of these gems, whilst extensive descriptions cover their rarity and the difficulty of obtaining. Quite extensive details may be provided regards the mining industry and commodity prices. Charts, graphs and excerpts from sources such as the Financial Times are on occasion shared to support these descriptions. In some cases, authenticity certificates are provided to verify the source of gemstones. Proof of a diamond coming from Siberia for example. Beyond the gemstones themselves moreover, there are frequent references to the guarantees of shopping with Gems TV; that each customer is valued, that everyone ends up paying the same low price no matter when they bid on an auction, that all items can be returned.

Subjectively, emotive language is used to create a sense of emotional connection to items on screen and Gems TV as a community. Viewers are often asked to imagine the feelings around owning or gifting an item; what it would look like on them, how they would feel wearing out somewhere. Suggestions for giving as presents are regularly made alongside encouraged imaginings of how the recipient would feel. Presenters describe their own emotions around the gemstones on display and share personal anecdotes about their collections. Guest presenters join at times, and conversations between will often touch upon wellness, with the items on sale discussed as helping to feel good. Here and elsewhere the spiritual properties of different gemstones are brought up. Collectors, as purchasers are called, are regularly thanked, congratulated and have their messages read out. Some of these collectors' feature in pre-recorded clips sharing their feelings of meaning and belonging connected to gems and Gems TV.

Performatively, there is plenty of showmanship on screen. Bright lights, zoomed in cameras, and animated props, are used to highlight products shown. Presenters have their own unique style and emphasis. Some will emphasise gems as a financial investment, others as a spiritual resource, others a fashion item. All meander into geology, history, astrology and other such tangential subjects, using to layer up a multifaceted narrative around the products on show. Adding a sense of urgency items and their prices are heavily dramatised. Graphics and music are used to accentuate when these are being revealed and then when they are being dropped. Presenters will react in an over-the-top fashion. Disbelief, mischief, excitement, are heavily mugged for the audience. They whisper to viewers or the people at the end of earpieces that they are 'going to be naughty' and 'should they' before theatrically announcing a predetermined price drop. A varied but consistent sales hustle plays out continually.

Unconvincing yet emergent: Inauthenticity, consciousness and connection

Investment is therefore in staging authenticity through presentations of front regions. Attempt is to fabricate an aura of authenticity based on the history or the back story of products (Zukin, 2008), feelings stirred by (Firat and Dholakia, 2006) and compelling performances around (Fordahl, 2018). However, much of this is unpersuasive, at least as perceived by these researchers. The objects on sale are, for all the efforts to elaborate, semi-precious at best. Their small size, low quality materials and designs are made more apparent by longwinded attempts to describe to the contrary. Likewise, by the regular invocations to imagine how expensive they would be if made of actual precious stones or crafted by renowned designers. Feelings associated with items frequently seem laughably over the top or inadvertently patronising, as with a description of an upcoming product reveal as 'one of the biggest moments in my life, and certainly in yours'. Meanwhile, performances are clearly commercially motivated, with the mugging around prices and faux urgency of stock levels only seeming to draw further attention to the sales push. Overall, it seems apparent that the channel is sales focussed, with attempts to disguise this via emotional-conversational presentations obvious and unconvincing. Likewise, that the items sold are of questionable value, with implausible efforts to dramatise products and prices raising more uncertainties than they address.

Nevertheless, the unconvincing staging was reason for continuing to watch. Source of individual and shared amusement tuning in became a habitual and anticipated household activity. At one point, looking across to a family member laughing aloud, realisation was of the in-the-moment shared contentment from watching together. Such interactivity extended beyond the immediate bond of us as viewers meanwhile. Favoured presenters soon emerged. Puzzlement over who would buy items led to speculation on their behalf. Consciousness therefore became of others involved in the performance onscreen. Seen and unseen, front and backstage, salesperson and viewer-consumer,

could be understood as collaborating in the performance of Gems TV, akin to Goulding and Derbaix's (2019) description of interpersonal authenticity, albeit with imagined social connections formed around inauthenticity. Furthermore, the implausibility of the channel provoked wider reflections on marketing and consumption. Although watching was initially escapist, intellectual stimulation came from wondering how the show was viable.

Henceforth, there developed around watching Gems TV interpersonal and intrapersonal connections. Cohen (1988) notes that new cultural developments may acquire the patina of authenticity over time in a process of emergent authenticity. Here, an emergent existential authenticity seemed to occur. Supporting this developing sense of individual-collective consciousness and belonging were glimpses of televisual production back regions. These can be partially deliberate. Camerawork at times cuts to interior studio views to highlight the production team, brief exchanges between presenters and other staff, and the sense of offscreen characters over earpieces or in distracted eyes, provide sense of a behind the scenes existing. Elsewhere glimpses seem more spontaneous. Onscreen performances are always faintly chaotic, with graphics frequently not working, cameras cutting too early to unprepared presenters, and regular glitches leading to moments of awkwardness. The need for continual commentary is interrupted or unravelled by such incidences. Presenters lose their train of thought, fluff lines and break down into giggles. In trying to fill blank spaces, presenters make self-deprecating jokes, slip into innuendo, reference life outside work. They talk about the job itself, describing relationships with managers, shift patterns and clocking off.

Hints are thusly of the wider studio in which presentations are filmed and of backgrounds of the presenters. Brief mention of being on the same university course as a fellow presenter during a shift handover for example. These moments are unusual to observe in the typically slickly presented and tightly scripted televisual domain, making interesting. Such incidences also seem spontaneous and genuine; likeably in-the-moment and off-script. The person on screen visibly flagging at the end of a long shift is relatable. These backstage glimpses are made more significant because of their brevity and contrast with the fakery elsewhere. They stand out, are memorable and trigger imaginings of such things as the shared human experience beneath the surface of job roles and screen performances in contemporary surveillance capitalism. As a result, inauthenticity serves as a mediator of fantasies of the authentic backstage and of the deeper existential meaningfulness that this might be imagined reaching towards.

Discussion

Research findings suggest that inauthenticity encountered in the marketplace can engage and entertain consumers, in doing so encourage imaginative thinking that might complement greater consciousness of self in-and-of surroundings, and thus support consumers' on-going search for existential meaning. Existential authenticity, in the sense of experiencing intrapersonal and interpersonal connection, arises around the activity of consuming Gems TV, if not of Gems TV itself. Indeed, having watched over time, the channel remains unconvincingly insincere in terms of inadequately applying marketing recommendations for projecting authenticity, such as disguising commercial imperatives (Beverland, 2006). If devices such as passion and transparency can help to manage tensions around authenticity caused by commercialisation (Audrezet et al., 2020), then the over-the-top and opaque performances onscreen fail to achieve. Indeed, readily evident watching the channel is inauthenticity, as linked by Anthony and Joshi (2017) with mass produced, insincere, escapist and oppositional to high art. Perceived as such across simultaneous and overlapping objective, subjective and performative criteria, the products, claims and presentations are here interpreted as entirely inauthentic.

Nevertheless, if Gems TV presentations were considered disingenuous, they were also found to have some sincere subtext. Imagined glimpses of truth behind fakery supported a sense of emergent depth, despite and even heightened by, the on-going superficiality of the channel. Inverting Lovell and Thurgill (2021), who highlight suspension of disbelief, suspending belief in the myths peddled by Gems TV allow these to seem more unreal. Contrasting with this obvious fakery are hints of a backstage seemingly more relatable and genuine than the unconvincing show. The suspension of disbelief has been associated with the consumption of fictionally oriented marketing activity, such as the Sherlock Holmes Museum, which provides 'evidence' to support authenticity of a fictional character (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Here, the upfront pretence is obvious, limiting ability to suspend disbelief. However, seemingly heightened by this shabby front is the backstage to the production; something more readily hinted at due to low production values and more easily imagined as real amidst the fake. Grayson and Martinec (2004) emphasise blurring of imagination and belief occurs in support of making a presumed fact or fiction seem more real. Here, it is a blurring of imagination (of behind the scenes), and disbelief (of the frontstage), that occurs in support of making a presumed backstage seem more real. The fantasy of the backstage as locus of authenticity (MacCannell, 2008), may thus be complemented by inauthenticity stimulating imaginings as such.

In turn, findings demonstrate that consumption perceived as largely inauthentic may nonetheless be conducive to perceptions of existential authenticity. Incidences of mutual happiness and reflexivity being stimulated around watching a late-night shopping channel, hint at Ram et al's. (2016: 111) summary that 'authenticity as a "state of being" includes a philosophical discussion of the self in context (external world) and a reflection of how true is to oneself balancing two parts of one's being, rational and emotional'. Where Rickly-Boyd (2013) describes the serendipity of existential encounters with self and others brought about through a natural setting, then this study identifies similar, but in an utterly artificial one. It was the inauthenticity on-screen which caught initial interest, stimulated critiques of presentations' insincerity, facilitated emergent backstage fantasies, and through these various individual-collective imaginings, supported moments of intrapersonal and interpersonal connection. Thus, if authenticity can be considered a mediating concept for triggering consumer imagination (Chronis and Hampton, 2006), including around dialectical fantasies of existential alienation and authenticity (Vidon and Rickly, 2018), then research suggests inauthenticity might be similarly inspiring.

Theoretical contribution of this research is henceforth to show that inauthenticity might complement consumers' search for intrapersonal and interpersonal connection. Emotionally and intellectually stimulating aspects of inauthenticity can be conducive to moments of self-other connection, as experienced here through the shared laughter and imaginings that arose around viewing. Where Heitanen et al. (2020) previously problematise the authentic-counterfeit distinction in consumption, then this research problematises the notion of internal-external consistency that associates true self with true surroundings (Brown et al., 2003), and by extension assumptions that inauthenticity is problematic in consumption (Anthony and Joshi, 2017). As with its dialectic (Becker et al., 2019; Nunes et al., 2021), inauthenticity is multi-layered, fluid, and polysemous. Existential, contextual and staged dimensions overlap and interact, and in doing so inspire various imaginings of (in)authenticity, highlighting a dialectic that is mutually inspiring, unpredictable, complementary as well as contradictory. Objects, constructions, performances judged inauthentic, might nonetheless be enjoyed as such, reimagined as having authentic elements, and can stimulate existential meaning.

Previously, Liu and Dalton (2019) have described the unanticipated consequences of encountering inauthenticity for consumers, with this potentially leading to unexpected wellbeing and sustainability benefits. Canavan (2019) has done likewise concerning moments of authenticity, as triggering distressing, even disastrous outcomes. For Canavan and McCamley (2021), authenticity

for consumers is akin to a negotiation process, necessary because of the widely interpretable and fluid nature of truth, reality, genuineness and meaning, as well as their dialectics of untruth, unreality, ingenuine and meaningless. The inevitable frustrations (Tribe and Mkono, 2017), superficiality and transience (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017) of consumer's quests for authenticity, mean these are open-ended (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). This research highlights that inauthentic encounters are as vital a part of this process as authentic ones. Here, fakery associated with a shopping channel nevertheless led to moments of surprising existential depth. It may be that the negotiation of (in) authenticity, activates possibilities for self-other-context connection, regardless of the inspiration for or conclusion of such negotiation. Paradoxically, by staging authenticity so unconvincingly, Gems TV provokes engagement that may contribute towards experiencing existential authenticity.

Practitioner contribution of this research, therefore, is the interesting possibility that consumers might seek out inauthentic experiences because of their potential to complement self-other consciousness and connection. Frake (2017) suggests that attempting to express authenticity might be counterproductive for marketers, as such efforts can be interpreted as commercialised and false. Here, findings indicate that expressing inauthenticity might be counterintuitively productive for marketers, as this can be interpreted as having deeper meaning, stimulate imaginations, and facilitate personal or social connections. With increased pressure on researchers and marketers to understand how to influence perceived authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017), findings point towards the value of exploring inauthenticity also. Beverland et al. (2008), for example, note that claims of authenticity are often stylized and created by marketers, with research attention frequently on how marketing can successfully create or reinforce such claims. Thus, frequent emphasis within marketing has been on subjects such as how brands pursue multiple evolving approaches to authenticity over time (Athwal and Harris, 2018). Such things as congruence between brands and brand communications (Becker et al., 2019) are highlighted as supporting consumer' perceptions of authenticity.

Nonetheless, this study suggests that practitioner attention might similarly be on how inauthenticity is created or reinforced. This not only intimately coexists with authenticity, but as the feelings of meaning and belonging aroused by the incongruence of Gems TV illustrate, inauthenticity might likewise contribute to stimulating overall imaginings of existential meaning, connection, and belonging, much valued by consumers. Just as a sense of brand or product authenticity may heighten imaginings around its opposite, Frake (2017) for example, finds that when authentic organisations behave inauthentically they are punished by audience members who are made aware of their inauthentic behaviour, then so too perceptions of inauthenticity might stimulate feeling its counterpart. Indeed, such a process might explain the paradoxical consumption of authenticity around, for instance, reality television, where dedicated consumer followings are invested in interpreting the truth, reality and authenticity of ostensibly staged and edited outputs (Canavan, 2021; Rose and Wood, 2005). Similarly, with shopping channels, viewers may not be taken in or convinced by televised claims of authenticity but might be intrigued and become involved, nonetheless. Accordingly, inauthenticity might be a useful device for marketers. Creating internal-existential, external-contextual and staged settings that are deceptive, inconsistent or unconvincing, may encourage consumers' search for intrapersonal and interpersonal connection, just as much as or alongside efforts to appear genuine.

Conclusion

Overall, phenomenological research exploring the inauthenticity serendipitously encountered whilst watching a late-night shopping channel, raises several interesting insights that complement and nuance existing discussions of authenticity in relation to consumption. Drawing inspiration

from tourism studies, where authenticity is a juncture of philosophical and practical sides of tourism (Zhu, 2012), the distinction between authenticity-inauthenticity has been articulated as non-binary (Olsen, 2007), and authentic-inauthentic are open to complex interpretations, intertwined, contextual, personal, fluid and incomplete (Canavan and McCamley, 2021), (in)authenticity in the home shopping television context, is found to be complex and unpredictable, both itself and as intertwined with its dialectic. Like its authenticity counterpart, inauthenticity is shown to be a multilayered, fluid and polysemous concept, involving overlapping existential and contextual dimensions, that may be more readily encountered in settings staged for consumers, particularly those that are staged as here, not so convincingly. The shoddy staging of Gems TV was superficially engaging and entertaining, but also provoked deeper thinking around the nature of truth. Individual and collective interpretations of frontstage insincerity, and imaginings of backstage sincerity, facilitated sensations of intrapersonal and interpersonal connection. Hence, existential authenticity emerged here as a diamond in the rough, unexpectedly provoked via an inauthentic consumption activity. Complementing, complicating, and perhaps counterintuitive, to established assumptions relating to consumers' search for meaning and connection via consumption, therefore, is inauthenticity as a facilitator thereof.

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Notes

1. Televised home shopping channels involve an emphasis on salespeople and their localised, even personalised, relationships with viewers (Warden et al., 2008). A form of direct marketing, televised home shopping employs a continuous live broadcast format, emphasising relationship building as an alternative to interpersonal interaction (Stephens et al., 1996). Typically, these attempt to build relationships with viewer-consumers through regularly scheduled programmes with hosts who appear as familiar sources of advice within a desirable social setting (O'Sullivan 1999). In this study specific focus was upon Gems TV, a home shopping channel broadcast in the UK and dedicated to selling products relating to gemstones; primarily jewellery, but including such things as home décor items, health, wellness and beauty products.

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