



## Authenticity—the new standard of luxury

Fortunately (for manufacturers, marketers and retailers) recent developments in consumer culture have paved the way for a fertile cultural environment that promises continued involvement in luxury consumption practices. The foundation of this environment is, of course, authenticity. Specifically, in a consumer culture historically characterized by such profound moral ambivalence, our late 20th century preoccupation with authenticity has allowed us, for the first time, to more freely explore our “luxurious desires.” Suddenly luxury consumption became much easier to contemplate, so long as the end result was something authentic. In this, we find that authenticity is our soul salvation - the ideal antidote to our collective moral ambivalence with so-called luxury consuming.

While it often sails underneath our collective radar, authenticity’s brief legacy now encompasses most domains of contemporary existence. The unforeseen price premiums associated with fast casual’s dramatic ascendancy in the restaurant sector go unnoticed as we wait in line at Panera for our “authentic” Portobello & Mozzarella Panini experience. Pottery Barn, Anthropologie and Restoration Hardware - the holy triumvirate of the contemporary shopping arena - have leveraged authenticity to rekindle our interest in expensive versions of “things from our past” and “things from real places.” We may openly mock our neighbor as he motors by in his Porsche - replete with his young, mid-life-crisis girlfriend in the passenger seat - but we do so from the safe confines of our ‘04 Nissan Murano, taking quiet solace in the fact that if necessary, we could traverse open fields and streams in our search for adventure and enlightenment. Finally, we note that those overpriced club level seats at the ball game seem ever-more justifiable when we are considering a park like Camden Yard or Safeco Field, where we can enjoy the luxury of

watching baseball “as it was meant to be played - under the stars and amid the everyday clamor of urban street life.” Wherever we turn, authenticity appears an easily available - and most desirable - option.

But all of this raises the question, “why authenticity?” That is, what is it about authenticity that suddenly makes it okay to pursue more fully our luxury consumption habits and how is this authenticity operationalized?

Without delving into an abstract analysis, we can suggest briefly that authenticity is the ideal antidote to our moral ambivalence due to its ability to imbue distinctions with a sense of naturalness - a sense that the distinction in question (which often demands a price premium) is justified because it represents the “the natural way...” “the way things are supposed to be done.” Deep down most of us recognize (even unconsciously) that most distinctions in consumer goods are, at best, artificial and, at worst, arbitrary. We all know, for example, that it is purely happenstance that many prefer shoes by Manolo Blahnik and accessories by Prada. Likewise, we’re aware of the possibility that our interest may be driven largely out of appeals to status and, hence, appear motivated out of pretense. But should we opt for specialized shoes or accessories that are construed as authentic (e.g., Levi’s, Timberlands), the distinction becomes much easier to justify, much more palatable, much more, well, real.

Also embedded in notions of authenticity - especially in the case of fashion - is a sense of utility and functionality. Objects like a fur coat, a Rolls Royce or a Rolex watch may prove challenging to justify, yet somehow it’s okay to pay similar premiums for an Arc’teryx Alpine shell (with the comfort of Gore-Tex® XCR™), a Hummer or a Suunto Stinger diving watch because these all perform important functions in one’s daily life. Or, to be more accurate, such objects offer the potential to perform important functions. As the 98% of SUV owners well know, the goal isn’t so much to drive the SUV across rough terrain as it is to imagine that you could do so, if absolutely necessary. In reality, most SUV owners are content to traverse the open terrain of only the grocery store parking lot.

Authenticity is crucial because it allows us to naturalize distinctions that are otherwise arbitrary, in the process imbuing them with an internal sense of morality in their claims to “rightness.” For example, one cannot seriously argue that there is any single “right” way to make Parmesan cheese. As something we humans fabricated out of cows, milk, enzymes and a little curiosity, Parmesan cheese is as artificial as golf, silly string and Life Savers, so it proves difficult to claim the stuff from a Wisconsin factory is superior to the stuff from Argentina or, for that matter the stuff from the basement of the local cheese makers club. Yet when we assert that Parmesan cheese originated from a specific place (Parma, Italy) and a specified stylistic tradition (Parmesan Reggiano), we also establish foundational claims to authenticity. Suddenly, a wholly arbitrary distinction is imbued with a distinct morality, a sense that this is the way things were intended to be done. Likewise we are now provided with a strong justifications for (a) significant price premiums, as well as (b) our desire to splurge on “authentic luxuries.”



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