CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW   WILEY

Inauthenticity aversion: Moral reactance toward tainted actors, actions, and objects

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Abstract

Theories of authenticity usually try to explain what leads consumers to see something as authentic. Here, we address the inverse question instead: What makes a brand, individual, or product seem *inauthentic*? This shift in focus reveals a distinct psychology that is more than just the absence or inverse of responses to authenticity. Whereas authenticity typically confers meaning and value, invoking inauthenticity typically implies the detection of a moral violation. Specifically, consumers judge an entity to be inauthentic if they perceive a mismatch between what that entity claims to be (e.g., a socially responsible apparel brand, 100% orange juice) and what it really is upon closer scrutiny. Such judgments give rise to a powerful, non-compensatory reactance we term *inauthenticity aversion*. We segment inauthenticity violations into three principle types: *deceptions*, *ulterior motives*, and *adulterations*. This conceptualization allows us to capture a wide variety of inauthenticity cases and outline psychological commonalities across them. It also helps to explain the powerful outrage consumers display at perceived inauthenticity and illuminates potential hazards in common marketing approaches.

KEYWORDS
authenticity, honesty, inauthenticity, morality, persuasion knowledge, persuasion reactance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of authenticity are relevant to many aspects of consumer behavior. They inform the value that people assign to a variety of consumer goods, from luxury items to everyday household products (e.g., Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Newman & Dhar, 2014); they affect how people evaluate brands and producers (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014); and they are central to how consumers derive pleasure from their experiences (e.g., Howard, 1992; Kovács et al., 2014; Rose & Wood, 2005; Vosgerau et al., 2006). To date, one common approach to understanding the role of authenticity in consumer behavior has been to examine how consumers naturally think about and define the concept. This approach has sought to better understand the factors that make

something seem "authentic" and the reasons why authenticity may be valuable to consumers in the first place.

This paper asks the inverse question—What makes something *inauthentic*? At first blush, it might seem that this is just an issue of semantics: Perhaps the criteria that make something inauthentic are simply the absence or inverse of those that make it authentic. We argue, however, that in many cases relevant to consumer behavior, judgments of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* differ in important ways. Consider an example from the domain of arts and entertainment. Imagine an *authentic* fan of the Star Wars movie franchise. What comes to mind? Maybe you picture someone who adores the films without reservation,[1] or who possesses a deep knowledge of Star Wars trivia and mythology, or who collects memorabilia, or who reads and posts on Star Wars fan blogs. Now, instead imagine an *inauthentic* Star Wars fan. If your intuitions are

anything like ours, the person you imagine is not merely someone who does not like the Star Wars' films, who does not know very much about them, or who does not collect memorabilia or participate in online blogs. Rather, to say that someone is an *inauthentic* Star Wars fan seems to imply something more nefarious—that this person is somehow acting with false pretenses or in bad faith. In other words, invoking *inauthenticity* suggests something that simply lacking the markers of authenticity does not: that some kind of violation has occurred.

This paper aims to sharpen our understanding of the consumer concept of inauthenticity and to explore its antecedents and consequences. To do this, we provide a framework for typifying a wide array of inauthenticity cases, and we discuss their common features as a class of evaluations distinct from judgments of authenticity. In brief, judgments of *authenticity*, we argue, primarily reflect perceptions of value and meaning—that is, perceiving that something is authentic provides some real or imagined form of utility (e.g., Kovács et al., 2014). In turn, the emotions that consumers feel when they encounter something authentic are associated with pleasure and reward. People collect, desire, celebrate, covet, and savor authentic things. By contrast, perceptions of *inauthenticity* typically entail moral condemnation.

We argue that judgments of *inauthenticity* arise when consumers detect a mismatch between what an entity claims to be and what that entity really is upon closer scrutiny. Such mismatches can arise in a multitude of ways, from misleading advertising to unnatural modes of production; and when they do, consumers often feel and express outrage, disgust, scorn, and contempt. In other words, inauthenticity is treated as a moral transgression. Thus, inauthenticity is not the mere removal of the positive characteristics associated with authenticity; rather, it gives rise to its own morally based reactance (Brehm, 1989, 1993)—a characteristic pattern of non-compensatory outrage that often transcends a rational, outcomes-based accounting of the situation. We refer to this judgment process by which consumer perceive and condemn inauthenticity as *inauthenticity aversion*.

Understanding consumers' aversion to inauthenticity is of central interest to theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, we argue that judgments of *inauthenticity* per se represent a distinct psychological process with important effects on downstream judgments and decisions. From a practical perspective, the costs of seeming inauthentic for brands and individuals are steep. They arise across a wide variety of contexts, and they provoke moral outrage and lasting public disapproval.

The remainder of the paper is organized into three sections: In the first section, we examine specific ways in which judgments of authenticity and inauthenticity diverge, and we elucidate the link between perceptions of inauthenticity and moral judgment. In the second section, we identify different ways in which an entity can seem inauthentic and provide a simple taxonomy (*deception*, *ulterior motives*, and *adulteration*) for understanding and explaining the types of violations that provoke consumer perceptions of inauthenticity

and concomitant outrage. In the third section, we discuss implications for marketing practice. Specifically, we argue that many standard marketing activities turn out to be risk factors for seeming inauthentic.

2 | WHY STUDY *INAUTHENTICITY*? IDENTIFYING A DISTINCT JUDGMENT PROCESS

Several recent theory papers have drilled into judgments of authenticity, seeking to explain and predict when consumers will see a product or brand as authentic (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Lehman et al., 2019; Newman, 2019; Newman & Smith, 2016; Wang, 1999). Generally speaking, such approaches all implicitly assume that being or becoming authentic confers some additional source of intangible value, and their goal has been to understand and categorize the various factors that underlie authenticity judgments. But such theories have little to say about the powerfully negative consumer responses we observe to inauthentic politicians, inauthentic social responsibility campaigns, or inauthentic cuisines, to name just a few examples. In contrast to that approach, this section outlines three ways in which *inauthenticity* judgments are distinct. They arise in response to norm-violations, are non-compensatory, and provoke moral outrage.

Central to our analysis is the observation that an entity's authentic form is often its initial, baseline, default, or prototypical form. Originals are seen as more authentic than replicas (Newman & Bloom, 2012). First movers are seen as more authentic than followers and copycats (Silver et al., 2020). Natural products are authentic because they have not been altered or tampered with (Rozin, 2005). This insight—that authenticity is frequently the reference or baseline against which inauthenticity departs—has important psychological consequences. For example, it suggests that while there are but a few ways to become *more* authentic, there are myriad ways to violate expectations and appear inauthentic as a result. Moreover, it suggests that inauthenticity is likelier to capture consumers' attention than authenticity, because *inauthenticity is about violating norms and expectations*. To the extent that (in)authenticity becomes relevant in consumer contexts, it is often because a brand, individual, or product has departed from what is expected of them at baseline.

Consider, for example, Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign, which celebrated the beauty of "real" women and cast a critical eye toward the beauty industry as a whole. The campaign was initially praised as deeply *authentic* and regarded as highly impactful (Bahadur, 2017). However, in later years, Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign came under fire for seeming *inauthentic* as additional information about the campaign (and its parent company, Unilever) came to light (Celebre & Denton, 2014). Charges of inauthenticity took many forms: Claims that the seemingly altruistic campaign was actually driven by profit-motives; that it was hypocritical for

touting "real beauty" while at the same time selling other products which reinforced problematic gender and racial stereotypes; and even that it failed to live up to seemingly unrelated moral expectations by engaging in animal testing or harming the environment. In other words, while there may be some consensus about what made the Real Beauty campaign *authentic* initially (calling attention to unrealistic beauty standards), the factors that ultimately rendered the campaign inauthentic were much more varied, complex, and in some cases, unrelated to the campaign itself. Tolstoy once wrote, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, 2012). In much the same way, we argue that while many offerings may be perceived authentic for a similar reason (often because they fit their category or deliver their expected purpose), they may come to be perceived as inauthentic for a variety of reasons.

A second important way in which authenticity and inauthenticity judgments differ is in terms of their dose sensitivity. For a producer or brand, it may take many years to build up the perception of an authentic heritage or many consistent actions to prove an authentic commitment to a cause (e.g., Balmer et al., 2011; Wiedmann et al., 2011). However, it may take only one piece of inconsistent information to undermine those beliefs, resulting in the judgment that the brand or its products are entirely inauthentic. For one example, taking even a meager profit can make a large and impactful charitable enterprise seem tainted and inauthentic (Pallotta, 2008). For another, modifying a food crop's genetic material even a miniscule amount can lead its fruits to seem inauthentic and unnatural, causing consumers to reject them absolutely (Scott et al., 2016). Moreover, perceptions of inauthenticity are hard to erase. They resist trade-offs with other positive brand or product attributes and can even cause consumers to reject situations that seem to benefit all parties involved (Newman & Cain, 2014). In other words, perceptions of inauthenticity are non-compensatory—a drop of inauthenticity poisons the well.[2]

A third way that reactions to authenticity and inauthenticity differ is in their consequences for consumer affect and utility. While authenticity is typically conceptualized as a source of pleasure or value, perceptions of inauthenticity often seem to entail a visceral sense of moral violation that is more than just the absence of pleasure. Consider finding out that a supposedly authentic soul food restaurant employs a team of entirely white chefs; or that an expensive designer handbag is actually a counterfeit. Such encounters with inauthenticity might provoke displays of moral outrage at having been deceived that go beyond any differences in the objective value of the product or service in question. Indeed, as in classic studies of consumer reactance (e.g., Brehm & Sensenig, 1966), we posit that consumers may respond to such cases as they might to covert persuasion attempts, by asserting a strongly negative attitude in response to an attempt to elicit a positive one and by judging the attempt itself to be inappropriate and dishonest (Friestad & Wright, 1994).[3]

Importantly, moral outrage turns out to be a powerful driver of word-of-mouth and consumer sharing (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2020) and thus carries serious costs for producers in the form of boycotts or public ridicule (Klein et al., 2004). It is no surprise then that many anecdotal cases of consumer moral outrage which "go viral" often entail prosecuting organizations and public figures as inauthentic hypocrites or exposing products and services that fall short of their slogans and branding as phony or deceptive. Examples include public ire at athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs, at vegan meat companies for claiming to sell "real" hamburgers, or at plagiarists for passing off someone else's work as their own.

To review, we have argued that unlike perceptions of authenticity, consumer perceptions of inauthenticity arise in response to norm-violations, are tainting and non-compensatory, and provoke displays of outrage, scorn, and public ridicule. Indeed, a hallmark of inauthenticity aversion is that negative reactions to inauthenticity sometimes outstrip a more rational accounting of the outcomes. Note that this pattern of reactions closely resembles how a consumer might respond to *any* moral violation (e.g., harm, injustice), and this resemblance suggests that inauthenticity may itself be seen by consumers as a form of moral transgression. In support of this position, many recent empirical investigations of inauthenticity have used dependent variables which are fundamentally moral in nature, devising process models which situate perceptions of inauthenticity as psychologically adjacent to judgments of purity (Beverland, 2006), communal motives (Gershon & Cryder, 2018; Lin-Healy & Small, 2012), honesty, trustworthiness, and moral character (Newman & Cain, 2014; Silver & Silverman, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Of course, not all moral violations will provoke perceptions of inauthenticity. In the next section, we provide a simple framework that outlines specific norm-violations which lead brands, individuals, and objects to be perceived as inauthentic.

3 | WHAT MAKES AN ENTITY INAUTHENTIC? A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING PERCEIVED INAUTHENTICITY

Thus far, we have argued that perceptions of *inauthenticity*—as distinct from perceptions of authenticity—represent a class of perceived moral violations which provoke a predictable pattern of psychological reactions and evaluations. In this section, we set out a simple framework for explaining and predicting the specific types of transgressions that give rise to perceptions of inauthenticity. Before laying out our theory, we first outline what we think a useful framework would accomplish in this case.

In our view, any useful framework for understanding consumer perceptions of inauthenticity must do three things. First, it must delineate between inauthenticity and other forms of moral transgression. Second, it must accommodate the dizzying array of cases in which charges of inauthenticity are levied. Indeed, an organization's commitment to going green or to diversity in hiring might be described as inauthentic; but so too might a politician's

answer to a tricky question during a debate, or an actor's portrayal of a historical figure on stage, or a slice of Chicago-style pizza, or a pair of vintage jeans, or a new country music album. Finally, a good framework for understanding inauthenticity effects must simplify: It should organize and contextualize extant findings without adding unnecessary layers of complexity. With these criteria in mind, we conducted a broad literature review, seeking to build a collectively exhaustive framework that can both accommodate a variety of examples and simplify them into a set of tractable, true-to-life categories.

3.1 | How does inauthenticity differ from other moral transgressions?

A common theme across the literature is that charges of inauthenticity involve some form of internal inconsistency or contradiction. That is, inauthenticity cases nearly always entail a claim, commitment, or pretense that is violated upon closer scrutiny. Consider a few examples: A brand of orange juice that bills itself as all-natural but squeezes their product from genetically modified fruit; a person that falsely claims to love an obscure indie band they have never heard of to impress a date; a celebrity who identifies as an environmentalist but frequently charters a private jet service. Although the specific content of these cases differs, together they illustrate a common feature that sets inauthenticity violations per se apart from other forms of moral transgression: the notion of a contradiction between claims/pretenses and reality.

By contrast, consider learning that a plumber has stolen $100 from a top client's dresser or that a member of a college fraternity has committed sexual assault. Although these are deeply harmful moral violations, an observer would be unlikely to categorize them as "inauthentic" in the same way they might describe a deceptive orange juice brand or a hypocritical environmentalist, because there is no claim or pretense being violated. On the other hand, we can easily transform these latter examples into inauthenticity cases by creating a discrepancy between what is preached and what is practiced. Imagine instead a plumber who gives potential clients a heartfelt spiel about honesty and integrity in his pricing and then proceeds to steal a $100 bill from the clients' dresser. We suspect that such an actor would seem to be doing something phony and inauthentic, above and beyond the theft itself and the harm it causes.

If consumer perceptions of inauthenticity are fundamentally about contradictions and inconsistencies between claims and behaviors, a natural question concerns what kinds of claims are relevant for perceptions of inauthenticity and what kinds of behaviors seem like violations of them. A survey of the literature suggests that the boundaries here are quite broad. In principle, anytime a firm or individual actor puts forth a claim about their values, actions, or attributes, they run the risk of seeming inauthentic. Interestingly, such claims might be explicit (e.g., ad copy about a product's attributes, public statements about a firm or public figure's values) or implicit

(e.g., membership in a product category, participation in a movement). Violations, we argue, segment into three principle types: deceptions, ulterior motives, and adulterations. In what follows, we outline and dive more deeply into these three types of inauthenticity violations.

3.2 | What types of violations provoke perceptions of inauthenticity?

We propose that there are broadly three ways in which an actor, action, or product can provoke consumer perceptions of inauthenticity. The first is to be *deceptive* (i.e., to make dishonest or misleading statements). The second is to have *ulterior motives* (i.e., to behave with self-interested or profit-seeking motives). The third is to engage in *adulteration* (i.e., to achieve an outcome or create a product in an unnatural, artificial, or improper way). To illustrate these three types, let us consider a prototypical example of each.

The first type of inauthenticity violation—*deception*—is exemplified well by a recent scandal at Volkswagen. In 2015, it came to light that many of the automaker's models were consistently failing to meet basic emissions standards. Of course, plenty of automobiles fail emissions tests, but what made VW's actions *inauthentic* was that the automaker had spent the better part of a decade touting its commitment to environmental sustainability and its low-emissions vehicles in particular. Consumers decried the brand's actions and messaging as deceptive, and that fall, Volkswagen reported its first quarterly loss in 15 years (Hotten, 2015).

The second type of inauthenticity aversion—*ulterior motives*—is exemplified well by recent discussions of "virtue signaling" in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. In response to recent protests over the killing of unarmed Black women, men, and non-binary people at the hands of police, millions of Americans and scores of major brands have spoken out in support of racial justice with social media posts, press releases, and race-conscious advertising (Chintagunta et al., 2020). Although this upswell of national support and awareness might seem unambiguously positive to consumers who support the cause of racial justice, many have responded with deep skepticism that such statements are actually motivated by a desire to improve public image, turn a profit, or win an election—that they are driven by ulterior, self-interested motives (Jordan & Rand, 2019). Such skepticism has given way to outright outrage at "virtue-signaling"—the act of supporting a cause inauthentically (i.e., with words only; Bartholomew, 2015).

The third type of inauthenticity aversion—*adulteration*—is exemplified well by consumer responses to performance-enhancing drugs (Landy et al., 2017). In the context of athletic or academic achievement, consumers typically celebrate high levels of human performance, but they also display strong intuitions about what constitute the right and wrong paths to achievement. For example, while it might be seen as totally acceptable for a cyclist to increase their blood oxygenation by training at high altitude, it is

seen as inauthentic and wrong for them to do so by taking performance-enhancing drugs, even outside of the context of professional competition (Riis et al., 2008). High performance aided by performance-enhancing drugs seems inauthentic because it entails adulterating the appropriate or essential processes of training and achievement.

We propose that these three species of perceived inauthenticity—deception, ulterior motives, and adulteration—capture a wide variety of relevant cases and illustrate different ways in which inconsistencies between claims and reality might arise to provoke consumer scorn. Relative to how brands and individuals *should* talk about themselves (honestly, forthrightly), deception seems inauthentic. Relative to having the *right* sorts of motivations (benevolent, community-minded), behaving with ulterior, self-interested motives seems inauthentic. Relative to achieving goals or creating products in the *correct* or *essential* way, shortcuts, synthetics, and replicas (forms of adulteration) seem inauthentic. A brand or individual's actions may violate more than one of these criteria, but as we have noted, a single violation on any of these three dimensions seems to be sufficient to produce characteristic patterns of inauthenticity aversion.

It is also worth noting that these three types of inauthenticity violations vary in the extent to which they are domain-general vs. domain-specific. *Deceptions* are relatively domain-general, which is to say that duping, faking, evading, or outright lying are likely to be seen as inauthentic across a wide variety of situations. This is because norms of honesty apply in nearly all contexts and can be violated in a great many of them. *Ulterior motives* are more domain-specific in that they arise only in contexts where avoiding self-interest is expected and preferred (e.g., charity, close relationships, etc.). *Adulterations*, too, are domain-specific, but in a slightly different way: Adulterations are typically perceived relative to an ideal or essential process of bringing about an outcome, but what counts as an ideal or essential process necessarily varies by context. We will now expand on these issues by considering each type of violation in some detail.

3.3 | Deceptions

Deceptions are the broadest and most intuitive class of inauthenticity violations. Like all forms of inauthenticity, deceptions entail inconsistency or incongruence between claims and reality. In the case of deceptions, such inconsistencies are typically characterized by an actor manipulating information available to observers so as to claim credit for attributes or qualities that the actor or their products actually lack. The simplest examples of inauthentic deceptions in the marketplace come readily to mind: Consider a car salesman who passes off a complete lemon as a great deal, a job candidate who lies about their abilities in an interview, or a product that claims to have been manufactured somewhere it actually was not. That people would react negatively to such cases of inauthenticity-by-deception is hardly surprising. For example, explicit false advertising typically

provokes reactance that taints brands and their representatives in the eyes of consumers (Clee & Wicklund, 1980).

More recently, the inauthenticity literature has made insightful advances into the study of deception by (a) showing that a wide variety of seemingly innocuous actions by brands and individuals are treated by consumers as inauthentic deceptions and (b) that outrage at such cases sometimes outstrips what might be expected from rational behavior. Let us consider a few such lines of research.

One class of deception-based inauthenticity cases which have received considerable recent attention are cases of perceived hypocrisy (e.g., Effron et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2020). In standard hypocrisy cases, a brand or individual explicitly endorses a particular principle, action, or belief in public, but behaves inconsistently with it in private. Hypocrisy tends to provoke negative reactions characteristic of inauthenticity aversion—outrage and distrust. For example, Wagner et al. (2009) find that organizations which proactively claim support for social causes and then behave inconsistently seem hypocritical and untrustworthy relative to brands who make no such commitments in the first place (but instead affirm their support after the fact; see also, Barden et al., 2005). Furthermore, such negative reactions to brand hypocrisy are amplified when firms make and then violate specific and concrete social commitments (vs. generic and abstract ones). Evidence from social psychology paints a similar picture. For example, Jordan et al. (2017) find that people tend to dislike and distrust hypocrites—who endorse moral values in public that they violate in private—even more so than individuals who commit similar violations without endorsing any moral values in the first place. Such results illustrate something surprising: Although making public and proactive commitments to supporting a cause might seem to have positive consequences (i.e., reinforcing social norms; Gerber & Rogers, 2009), such claims ring hollow when paired with inconsistent behavior, and they actually provoke *greater* consumer outrage as a result.

A related line of research conceptualizes plagiarism and credit-stealing cases in terms of inauthentic deception (e.g., Altay et al., 2020; Shaw & Olson, 2015). For example, Silver and Shaw (2018) presented participants with scenarios in which plagiarizers claimed credit for music and poetry from unknown folk sources or from idea generators who had explicitly abandoned or sold away their creations. Although people tended to agree that all parties involved benefited from such transactions (idea generators made money, plagiarizers gained fame and fortune, and audiences got to enjoy otherwise unavailable creations), they also condemned them as deeply morally wrong. Such effects arise because people strongly dislike actors who deceptively claim credit for traits they actually lack. Another provocative example of this psychology comes from legal scholarship on the issue of "stolen valor," in which individuals pretend to be war veterans by donning garb or regalia typically worn by members of the armed forces. Whereas legal scholars have argued that dressing up as a soldier represents a constitutionally protected form of free expression (Wood, 2011), lawmakers and laypeople have consistently tried to outlaw such behavior, deeming it morally reprehensible even in cases where the individual pretends

to be a veteran for the explicit purpose of collecting donations for the armed forces.

Interestingly, although both hypocrisy and credit-stealing cases entail deceptions relative to explicit claims (i.e., that one will act in accordance with a stated principle, that one fought in a war or created a particular work of art), some forms of perceived deception seem to require no outright claims at all. Indeed, some cases in which consumers perceive deception involve only an inconsistency between past and present behavior. In such settings, a brand or individual might seem inauthentic relative to expectations derived from their previous actions or from context. For example, consumers tend to see as inauthentic brands and individuals that behave inconsistently through time (e.g., Aaker & Keller, 1990; Fritz et al., 2017; Napoli et al., 2014; Schallehn et al., 2014; but see, Gershon & Smith, 2020). Here, the "claim" that is violated appears to be an expectation or commitment generated from prior actions, products, or services. In line with this idea, consistency and congruence of brand identity through time is theorized to be a central element of brand authenticity both for public figures and for brands (Moulard et al., 2015, 2016). For instance, when a brand's original founder hands off the reigns of firm leadership, consumers begin to worry that the brand has become inauthentic, in part because they suspect promised levels of service and quality will degrade under new management. Here, too, social psychology provides convergent evidence. People tend to dislike and distrust flip-floppers who change their behavior or beliefs frequently and often judge actors who behave differently in different contexts to be insincere and inauthentic (Kreps et al., 2017).

Finally, some recent authors have argued that perceptions of deceptive inauthenticity can arise from instances of non-disclosure (Baum & Critcher, 2020), in which an organization or individual evades or avoids responding to difficult questions (e.g., about past behavior, controversial beliefs, etc.). For example, job candidates asked whether they have previously used drugs in an interview context seem more deceptive and less trustworthy for opting not to answer than for answering in the affirmative (John et al., 2016). Similarly, celebrities and public figures sometimes provoke stronger scorn for choosing not to share their opinions on hot-button political issues like gun control or racial justice than for opposing consumers' viewpoint outright, an effect driven by inferences that the desire not to weigh in is deceptive and strategic (Silver & Shaw, 2020). Such results suggest that perceptions of inauthentic deceptions can arise even when the "claims" violated are not explicit statements or patterns of prior behavior, but rather conversational norms that dictate a particular response (Grice, 1975). That is, when an actor chooses not to answer a touchy question, observers will sometimes infer that the actor is engaged in an attempt to conceal something or contort their public image. Evidently, "lies of omission" can harm perceived authenticity in just the same way more explicit deceptions might (Baum & Critcher, 2020).

In sum, these disparate lines of research suggest that dishonest, hypocritical, contradictory, or evasive actions can lead brands and individuals to appear inauthentic and will provoke reactance and outrage similar to that displayed in classic cases of false advertising.

Critical in all of these cases seems to be an attribution of intentionality. We suspect, for example, that a consumer who visits different coffee shops on different days, although behaving inconsistently, would not seem to be doing something inauthentic. In line with this idea, Reich and Tormala (2013) showed that inconsistency does not provoke negative attributions when the target is already seen as trustworthy. Rather, perceptions of deception-inauthenticity arise when actors seem to be intentionally crafting a public image which does not match their underlying qualities.

3.4 | Ulterior motives

The second class of inauthenticity violations are cases of ulterior motives. Here, the inconsistency between claims and reality is typically a perceived discrepancy between the expected or preferred reasons for doing something and an actor's actual reasons for acting. Most often, this conflict manifests as a perception that a brand, organization, or individual is acting in self-interest when they should be acting out of purer or more communal intentions.

Indeed, across numerous domains, from art to parenting to charity to gift-giving, consumers display a preference for other-oriented, communal motives, and judge actors driven by self-interest to be insincere and inauthentic.

Although many cases in which consumers perceive ulterior motives may also entail deception, ulterior motives diverge from deceptions in two notable ways. First, unlike deceptions, which might arise across contexts (i.e., any time an actor makes a deceptive claim), perceptions of ulterior motives arise only in settings in which consumers value non-selfish intentions. For example, in openly competitive contexts, where self-interest is expected, behaving selfishly does not seem inauthentic. Second, whereas deceptions can often be remedied by "coming clean," the penalties for seeming to have ulterior motives cannot be easily assuaged with honesty. For example, even if a musician admits openly that their primary desire in writing songs is to become a celebrity and make a fortune, their intentions might still seem inauthentic and their success tainted.

Perhaps the clearest manifestations of ulterior motive inauthenticity come from the domain of moral and prosocial behavior (where self-interest stands in stark contrast to an idealized standard of altruism as selfless and self-sacrificing; Barasch et al., 2016; Small & Cryder, 2016). Said differently, consumers think of cause-marketing, social responsibility, philanthropy, and volunteering as belonging to a class of actions which *ought* to be done out of a genuine desire to help others. When observed prosocial behavior seems motivated instead by profits or reputation, it seems insincere and inauthentic. In some cases, brands and individuals who do good are judged more negatively for doing good out of transparent self-interest than for doing no good at all (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013; Newman & Cain, 2014).

For for-profit firms, the question of how to behave prosocially without invoking perceptions of ulterior motives is especially pertinent given that consumers increasingly display a preference

for brands that contribute to the greater good (Elfenbein & McManus, 2010; Nielsen, 2015). In such contexts, the risk of seeming inauthentic generates an interesting paradox: For-profits are incentivized to support social causes but face stringent penalties if their good deeds seem aimed at increasing profits (regardless of otherwise positive externalities). In answer to this quandary, a spate of recent papers have investigated what factors lead consumers to attribute self-interest to observed prosocial behavior. Some critical factors include the order in which brands launch prosocial initiatives (first movers vs. later entrants; Silver et al., 2020), the type of donation (e.g., goods vs. money; Gershon & Cryder, 2018), the perceived fit between brand and cause (Nan & Heo, 2007), and the brand's willingness to take risks in pursuit of the greater good (Silver & Silverman, 2020). More generally, a key consideration seems to be whether any potential benefits from behaving prosocially are coded as a side-effect of or a key antecedent to doing good (e.g., Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Zlatev & Miller, 2016).

Importantly, though, perceptions of ulterior motive inauthenticity are not restricted to the domain of prosocial behavior. Any action for which consumers take note of self-interest and delineate it as the "wrong" underlying motivation can be seen as inauthentic (e.g., romance, public policy, gift-giving). For example, recent work suggests that consumers see as inauthentic artists who "pander" to their audience's interests (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014). Indeed, consumers seem to believe that art ought to be created for some nobler purpose than merely satisfying audience preferences, and they will judge artists who do so as inauthentic "sell-outs." Similarly, people often believe politicians who focus on their poll numbers (Szalai, 2016) or public figures who carefully manage their public image to be behaving inauthentically (Audrezet et al., 2020). Note that in all of these cases, perceived self-interest draws consumer ire in spite of the fact that behaving selfishly also means being responsive to consumer needs and preferences. In this way, perceptions of ulterior motive inauthenticity may also interfere with the pursuit of outcomes that benefit all involved.

A broader understanding of ulterior motive inauthenticity can be gleaned from seminal work on relational vs. transactional framing (Fiske, 1992; Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). For example, McGraw and Tetlock (2005) argued that consumers naturally delineate between contexts in which their relationships with brands and other individuals are seen as fundamentally communal—and therefore entailing an obligation to behave selflessly—vs. fundamentally transactional—and therefore entailing no such obligation. This distinction has been used to explain in part why consumers display strong reticence to assign monetary value to certain kinds of goods and services (see also, Johar, 2005). For example, people are reluctant to price or sell objects of significance to their personal relationships or to put a price on protecting the environment (Baron & Spranca, 1997; McGraw et al., 2005). We propose that judgments of ulterior motive inauthenticity draw on a similar psychology: Introducing self-interest motives into contexts in which communal motives are expected or preferred generates moral outrage and perceptions that the actions of brands or individuals have violated a truer authentic purpose.

3.5 | Adulterations

A third species of perceived inauthenticity—adulteration—manifests when products are created or objectives achieved in the wrong way. For example, products might seem to have undergone processing that alters their natural form or deviates from the default conception of how they "ought" to be created. The norm violation in this case is that the pure, baseline, or natural form of something has been adulterated by bringing it to being in the wrong fashion. The notion of the proper means of creating or achieving something is typically derived from qualities associated with its "essential" or "prototypical" form (Gelman, 2003; Newman, 2016), and such expectations are thus highly context-dependent and often quite specific. For example, in order for a violin to be considered an authentic Stradivarius, it needs to have been fabricated in Antonio Stradivari's shop in 17th century Cremona, Italy. By contrast, the requirements to qualify as authentic guacamole are quite different (perhaps being mixed by hand in a stone bowl or not containing sour cream). Deviations from context-specific expectations about the right way to create something (i.e., by the right people, from the right materials, in the right way) often lead to perceptions of adulteration inauthenticity.

In many cases, the essential or prototypical version of a good is contained in its "original" form. Consider for example the value of an original impressionist painting, a grandmother's original chocolate cookie recipe, or a comic book's original edition. Such value is assigned, at least in part, because originals are thought to contain an immaterial essence which renders them a pure and true version of the good in question (e.g., Keil, 1992; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Newman & Bloom, 2012). As a result, processing which attempts to duplicate, mass-produce, add to, or even improve on originals can seem to tamper with what made the product desirable in the first place, rendering it impure and aversive (Rozin, 2005; Rozin et al., 2012; Scott & Rozin, 2017). For example, when the production of a brand's signature product (like a pair of Wrangler Jeans or a Martin Guitar) is outsourced to a faraway factory, its connection to the essence of the brand is adulterated and it seems inauthentic and tainted as a result (Beverland, 2009; Newman & Dhar, 2014).

Adulteration inauthenticity—the aversion to tampering with a good's original or true form—can also help to explain a pervasive consumer preference for "naturalness." Across a variety of contexts and product categories, consumers value what they see as emanating from the natural world and respond negatively to what they perceive as "unnatural" processing. This preference for naturalness can be understood in part by consequentialist beliefs about the safety and potency of natural products (vs. synthetic equivalents; Scott et al., 2020), but it also seems to reflect a more general moral intuition that the natural world is desirable and benevolent (Scott et al., 2016; Scott & Rozin, 2020). Indeed, consumers seem to see

tampering with nature as a moral violation (i.e., "playing God")—evoking notions of contamination and feelings of disgust (Haidt et al., 1993; Rozin et al., 2008). This psychology is most evident in a strong preference for natural foods (e.g., Gaskell et al., 2000), for which oral consumption seems to trigger the strongest reaction to adulteration, but it is also evident in a widespread aversion to unnatural medicines, cosmetics, and cleaning products (Levine, 2018; Russo, 2015).

As with other forms of inauthenticity aversion, the aversion to unnatural products is often characterized by an intuitive moral objection—feelings that what is unnatural is "simply wrong" (Scott et al., 2016)—that is relatively insensitive to evidence of potential benefits. For example, there is widespread public backlash against genetically modified organisms (G.M.O.s) in food, despite most scientists arguing that genetic modification is safe and has the potential for significant environmental and societal benefits (Frewer et al., 2013; Priest, 2000). To many consumers, though, the process of genetic modification is an unnatural adulteration of these products' authentic forms, to be avoided altogether if possible. Indeed, many consumers are insensitive to evidence about the benefits of GMOs, are grossed out imagining them (e.g., picturing an ear of corn modified with scorpion DNA), and view genetic modification as "just wrong" (Scott et al., 2016). Similarly, people judge psychological enhancement drugs as unnatural and immoral (Riis et al., 2008). Even when safe and effective, people dislike the idea of tampering with traits they view to be central to one's authentic identity. Other technological advances, including vaccinations, chemical pesticides, and artificial sweeteners evoke similar concern (Schwartz & Inbar, 2020). Such beliefs reflect in part what philosophers call "the naturalistic fallacy," a preference for naturalness (and an aversion to unnaturalness) which overrides a rational calculation of costs and benefits. Indeed, even when unnatural processing enhances the objective attributes of a product, perceptions of adulteration can strongly diminish its value.

Beyond the aversion to literally "unnatural" products, convergent lines of research demonstrate that consumers dislike and devalue products and processes that violate the expectation of a category's traditional mode of creation. For example, consumers respond negatively to the machine production of goods traditionally made by hand, such as baked goods and handicrafts (Fuchs et al., 2015). Whereas a handmade craft embodies the essence of the creator, the machine-made version has been adulterated by an unnatural process, even if it yields a more reliable and quality-controlled result. Reactance to adulteration inauthenticity may also help explain consumer reactance to cultural appropriation, the production and dissemination of cultural products or experiences by actors who are not members of the cultural group in question. Consumers seem to believe, for example, that gospel music, in its essential form, should be produced by Black artists, and often judge white gospel musicians as offering an adulterated and inauthentic take on the genre (Thompson-Bradshaw, 2014). Finally, adulteration-aversion may underlie skepticism toward artificial intelligence used for tasks traditionally performed by humans, such as self-driving automobiles and automated medical diagnoses or treatments (Leung et al., 2018; Longoni et al., 2019). If consumers' intuitive theories code making moral decisions behind the wheel or helping sick patients as fundamentally human activities, then automating them may be seen as an unacceptable adulteration of the proper way of things, see Figure 1 below for a depiction of all three forms of inauthenticity violation.

A Taxonomy of Inauthenticity Violations

Inauthenticity violations arise in response to consumer perceptions that an entity isn't really what it claims to be.

Such discrepancies segment into three principle types:

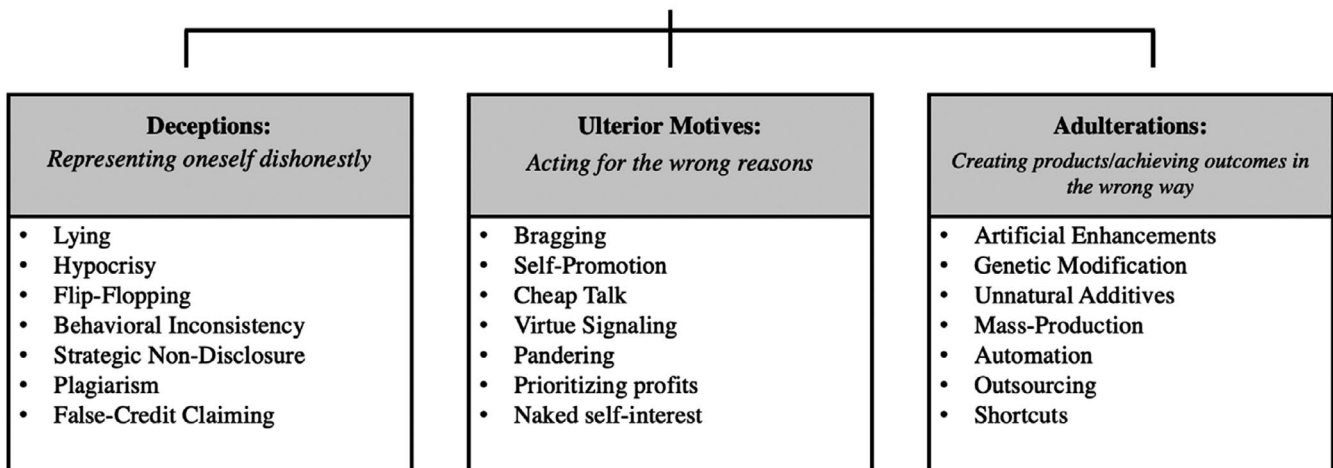| **Deceptions:** *Representing oneself dishonestly*	**Ulterior Motives:** *Acting for the wrong reasons*	**Adulterations:** *Creating products/achieving outcomes in the wrong way*
• Lying • Hypocrisy • Flip-Flopping • Behavioral Inconsistency • Strategic Non-Disclosure • Plagiarism • False-Credit Claiming	• Bragging • Self-Promotion • Cheap Talk • Virtue Signaling • Pandering • Prioritizing profits • Naked self-interest	• Artificial Enhancements • Genetic Modification • Unnatural Additives • Mass-Production • Automation • Outsourcing • Shortcuts

FIGURE 1 A Taxonomy of Inauthenticity Violations. Note that whereas cases of *Deception* and *Ulterior Motive* typically involve judgments of an actor or their actions, cases of *Adulteration* typically involve judgments of products or outcomes themselves as inauthentic

4 | IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTICE

In recent decades, achieving authenticity has become a driving objective for brands. Executives want to lead authentically (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; George et al., 2017); marketers want to cultivate authentic brands (Beverland, 2009); and producers want to create authentic products which provide authentic experiences (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Liao & Ma, 2009). Yet the concept of authenticity is elusive, and although consultants or academics might claim to hold the keys to unlocking brand authenticity, it is often difficult to pinpoint concrete and practical recommendations for becoming *more authentic*. A key challenge for this approach is that authenticity is typically reflected in an entity's baseline, original, or unadulterated form. Thus, when authenticity becomes relevant in consumer decision-making, it is often because something seems *inauthentic*, and not the other way around. A more practical approach, then, might be to highlight the factors that lead to perceptions of *inauthenticity* and to consider how they might be avoided in practice. Building on the taxonomy of inauthenticity violations developed in the prior section, we now turn to this more applied purpose.

In many cases, what makes a brand seem inauthentic is the detection of the precise tactics the brand deploys to persuade consumers in the first place. This idea has deep roots in extant marketing literature. For example, Brehm and Sensenig (1966) found that consumer attitudes can "boomerang" if consumers feeling boxed in by efforts to change their minds or influence their choices. In a classic address to the Association for Consumer Research, Peter Wright (1986) expanded on this notion, arguing that consumers possess and deploy a "schemer schema," a collection of folk theories which help them to detect and parry persuasion attempts in the marketplace. Since then, the idea that consumers are suspicious of and react negatively to such attempts has received considerable support (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994, 1999; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). We argue that inauthenticity aversion draws on a similar psychology, arising when consumers perceive a disconnect between what a brand professes to be selling and its actual attributes and intentions upon closer scrutiny. Building on this idea, we argue that three central, common-sense marketing principles turn out to represent specific risk factors for seeming inauthentic and provoking consumer scorn.

4.1 | Image management

One central objective for marketers is to highlight the positive qualities of the brand (and perhaps to obfuscate its less impressive attributes). But there is a fine line between emphasizing the positive and overclaiming; falling on the wrong side of this line is a risk factor for perceived *deception*. In more extreme situations, exaggerating a brand's positive attributes can seem outright dishonest, giving rise to perceptions of inauthentic "false advertising" and evoking powerful consumer reactance. Even relatively harmless forms of false advertising such as L'Oreal's classic claim that its skin-care line is

"clinically proven to provide visibly younger skin" can result in multi-million-dollar class-action lawsuits if consumers come to see them as inauthentic and deceptive (Katz, 2014). But reactance toward deception-inauthenticity in advertising is not limited to outright false claims: Even slight exaggerations or overclaims can produce powerful consumer outrage. For example, Pepsi's 2018 advertising campaign implying that sharing a soda might help reduce tensions between police and protestors was lambasted by consumers, likely for inauthentically positioning the Pepsi brand as having a role to play in the movement for racial justice (Victor, 2017). In some cases, perceptions of deceptive inauthenticity can arise from a public figure or brand merely seeming to "try too hard" in their attempt to signal a desirable trait (e.g., relatability; Szalai, 2016). Although marketers are often encouraged to accentuate the positive, it seems clear that dressing up a brand's image (beyond what consumers are willing to grant upon closer scrutiny) or seeming too concerned about impression management in general can backfire. In many cases, it may actually be best to err on the side of greater honesty about a brand's attributes or qualities, even if doing so diminishes them somewhat in the eyes of consumers.

4.2 | Profit maximization

A second clear objective for marketers is to maximize profits. But telegraphing this goal to consumers represents a risk factor for *ulterior motive* inauthenticity perceptions. Broadly speaking, seeming to care about profits can harm brand equity. Indeed, Bhattacharjee et al. (2017) find that for-profit firms (vs. non-profits) often appear morally suspect and their existence potentially harmful to the world. Of course, *being* a for-profit firm in the first place is not something that brands can change in order to avoid inferences of ulterior motives. But an awareness of which sorts of firm actions (those for which communal motives are preferred) might be higher risk for inauthenticity perceptions is critical. For example, absent deceptive or unfair practices, consumers do not much mind if a firm that sells widgets tries to make money selling widgets. However, if the same widget brand decides to take a public stand on racial justice or gun control, to sell buy-one-give-one widgets, or to emphasize its commitment to treating its customers like family, the brand may run of the risk of seeming inauthentic in light of its broader desire to turn a profit. Inauthenticity-risk thus provides an important caveat to common marketing recommendations to position for-profit brands around social values (e.g., Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016). Although consumers value and reward brands that pursue social purpose authentically, brands need to proceed carefully in order to avoid perceptions of cheap talk or virtue signaling with ulterior motives.

4.3 | Production efficiency

A third objective for marketers is to maximize efficiency in production. Consider a few examples: A local family-owned bakery might

outsource its production to a central facility in order to open more locations; a large agriculture company might genetically modify its crops to make them hardier and more productive; or an enterprising restaurateur might attempt to recreate an exotic ethnic cuisine in an industrial kitchen in Manhattan. Such choices might seem like shrewd business moves, but our inquiry suggests that they may also inadvertently adulterate essential qualities of the product, evoking inauthenticity aversion and undercutting potential revenue. In order to avoid perceptions of adulterations, marketers need to pay attention not only to providing a consistent and high-quality product as efficiently as possible, but also to specific perceptions consumers may have about appropriate and inappropriate ways of creating their products in the first place.

In summary, we argue that whereas strategies for cultivating an authentic brand may be hard to pinpoint, there are specific and discrete risk factors for *inauthenticity* of which marketers should be aware. These include overclaiming, seeming self-interested in the context of communal activities, and employing unnatural or adulterating means of production. Ironically, because authenticity is often the baseline, natural state, *trying to seem* authentic may activate consumer suspicion and therefore have precisely the opposite effect. A more prudent approach may be to identify and give inauthenticity risks a wide berth by erring on the side of honesty and humility in branding, displaying a willingness to put profits on the line if pursuing social causes, and sticking closely to original and essentialized modes of production.

5 | CONCLUSION

In focusing on what makes something authentic, prior scholarship has overlooked perceptions of inauthenticity as a distinct class of consumer judgments with important consequences. This oversight is critical, given that a variety of recent research programs highlight perceptions of inauthenticity as a strategic risk for brands engaged in seemingly ordinary marketing activities. Indeed, the consumer concept of inauthenticity is invoked in a wide array of consumption domains from art and food to dating and charity, to name just a few. And when it is, penalties for brands and their products can be severe, sometimes leading to the perception that they are tainted through and through.

We have offered in this paper a broad survey of recent literature, attempting to organize a host of research programs under a common inauthenticity framework. More specifically, we have argued that inauthenticity judgments diverge from authenticity judgments in that they entail norm-violations, provide non-compensatory disutility, and provoke moral outrage and public condemnation. Furthermore, inauthenticity cases entail a perceived discrepancy between appearance and reality, often one that seems intentional or strategic in the eyes of consumers. Such discrepancies fall broadly into one (or more) of three categories—deceptions, ulterior motives, and adulterations. Unfortunately for marketers, these perceptions often arise in response to common marketing objectives such as

managing brand image or maximizing profits. Ultimately, we hope this paper helps to carve out and clarify judgments of inauthenticity and provides a framework for researchers and practitioners alike in navigating an important and timely consumer concept.

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ENDNOTES

[1] even, perhaps, Episodes I and II.

[2] That negative aspects of a stimulus play a dominant role in judgment is not unique to authenticity/inauthenticity. Indeed, prior authors have noted negativity biases in impression formation and evaluation more broadly, and elucidated related psychological processes of tainting and contagion (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Building on this work, we note that perceptions of inauthenticity in particular might be especially potent both because (a) entities are typically authentic by default and (b) inauthenticity often involves *moral* scorn specifically. More broadly, negativity biases in judgment provide even more reason to pay attention to *inauthenticity* per se (vs. authenticity).

[3] Note also that while inauthenticity often provokes moral condemnation, authenticity seldom evokes moral praise.

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