Cultures of Authenticity

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Part IV

Social Media

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Chapter 15

What I Talk About When I Talk About Authenticity: An Auto-Bibliographic Inquiry

Crystal Abidin

Abstract

In her introductory chapter, the author has two main objectives. First to offer an overview of changing approaches towards researching authenticity in digital spaces, which have, alternatively, emphasised issues of congruence, authorship, verification and vulnerability. Second, to provide an intensely personal reflection on the concept that ultimately asks us, as researchers, to question what we do when we try to perceive and interrogate the notion of 'authenticity'.

Keywords: Social media; performance; authorship; online; digital media; influencers

This essay is an appetiser to a collection of chapters that interrogate *what* authenticity is and *how* it is deployed online. Specifically, the chapters identify a specific interest group, a social media platform they inhabit, a core ethos of their online community, and how authenticity might be strategized in these spaces.

For Frowjin, Harbers, and Broersma, to be authentic as influencers on Instagram is to ensure that one's online persona is 'align[ed] with their "real" personality'. The ethos promoted is that *authenticity is a reality*: the 'real', as in an *offline, unmediated* version of the self in the flesh. For Heřmanová, to be perceived as authentic influencers on Instagram is to calculate one's status and position within the online community. The idea here is that *authenticity is a template*; there are scripts and rules by which to abide should one intend for a favourable presentation of the self. Wang, de Burgh-Woodman, and Spooner's study of StarCraft

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II community leaders suggests that *authenticity is juxtaposition,* hinged upon a necessity to continuously move between a dichotomy of qualities.

Collectively, the chapters also point to strategies to create, foster, present authenticity. For Frowjin et al.: ordinariness, human imperfection, intimacy, consistency, transparency, interaction. For Heřmanová: being an opinion-leader or committing to community-building. For de Burgh-Woodman et al.: self-branding, collaboration, uniqueness, similarity. The chapters tell us about the *what* of authenticity, as well as the *how* of authenticity. Let us proceed to the *so what* of authenticity.

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My very first study on the idea of 'authenticity' focussed on a predecessor class of influencers known as commercial lifestyle bloggers. The era understood *authenticity as congruence,* where individuals strive to 'produce a reality in which the online-offline persona of the model appears fused, one-in-the-same, and therefore authentic' (Abidin & Thompson, 2012, p. 471). The fixation on authenticity then was groomed through the rise of blogs and social media as breeding grounds for the possibility of internet celebrity. The ability to check for *congruence* fostered the belief that the 'bi-directional' possibility of dialogue online (Abidin, 2015) signalled a new taste for 'ordinary', 'demotic' celebrities (Turner, 2014) over those from the traditional entertainment industry. To be authentic was to be *from the grassroots, the populace*. And although the reality was that these digital impressions of internet celebrities and influencers often bore some posing, some posturing, some photo-shopping, there was a general understanding that light enhancements were unchallenged. At least until they exceeded a threshold and were deemed to be 'doctored', cast as deceit (Abidin, 2020a, p. 38), as breaching the '*maintenance of ethical behaviour*' (Abidin & Ots, 2016, p. 160). So what? Concerning ourselves with the *what* and *how* of authenticity appeared to be an early intervention into reclaiming authority from traditional celebrity, and rerouting capitalist attention.

When money was involved, authenticity became a placeholder for a variety of qualities. A series of influencer faux pas that I have documented through various case studies reveal the subtle evolutions of what it means to be authentic in a highly commercial space. For starters, influencers were being exposed (by fellow influencers, no less) for passing off paid advertisement as organic content, or recommendations they had come across by happenstance (wishcrys.com, 2014a). At a basic level, this signalled authenticity as the mere *disclosure of sponsorship*. But even when followers were already conditioned to be aware of and accept the enthusiasm-laden tonality of sponsored posts, they found fault with influencers who had outsourced the production of such contents and the wording of such disclosures. For instance, in 2015, a highly prolific influencer had accidentally uploaded a sponsored Instagram caption with a personal message from backend staff (presumably a manager or PR officer), revealing that backend staff members had prepared the caption on her behalf. Followers called her out for being 'lazy' or 'careless'. At this juncture, authenticity encompassed a *personal authorship of the content* (Abidin, 2016; wishcrys.com, 2015). In another example, a cluster of influencers were found to have promoted a telecom client's service by way of

'bashing' or 'criticizing' a competitor. This was made public only after their brief was exposed and found to contain various storylines and scripts that influencers were asked to consider. As such, despite being disclosed as sponsored or paid content, authenticity also stood for *transparent authorship rather than astroturfing*, the quiet coordination of coherent actions online that attempt to pass for organic, unprovoked sentiment (Abidin & Ots, 2015). Alongside these understandings of authenticity intertwined with commerce was also the opposing affirmation that to be authentic was simply *to not be sponsored, to speak from a place that does not accumulate personal gain* (Abidin, 2016, wishcrys.com, 2015). In this trajectory, fine combing through the parameters of authenticity was important for devising a toolkit and vocabulary for followers and consumers to identify when the messages they received are augmented, emphasised, jazzed up to maximise persuasion. So what? The literary and visual devices of authenticity as brand strategy thus remind us to arm ourselves with discernment, approach influencers with caution, perceive contents with mental disclaimers, take it all in with a pinch of salt.

Platforms also began to tout corporate ideologies around their brand of authenticity. For instance, Instagram's initial philosophy on its now defunct/updated FAQ page states: 'We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen'. Instagram Inc.'s authenticity was defined as *spontaneity* (wishcrys.com, 2014b). Although this ethos was eroded through the 'Instagram bubble' of picture perfection around 2014–2016, with saturation and in exhaustion, many users returned to waves of this nostalgic spontaneity by 'remaking' authenticity, occupying hashtags such as '#natural #noedit #nofilter #nomakeup #nophotoshop' (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020; wishcrys.com, 2014b) in composures of the same description. What was once a wholesome movement eventually mutated into an ironic meme; influencers began to

> actively juxtapose this stripped-down version of themselves against the median and normative self-presentations of glamour, to continually create and assign value to new markers – faults and flaws, failures and fiascos – to affirm the veracity of their truthness. (Abidin, 2018a)

Building on Goffman's theory of scheduling (1956) and sociologist Dean MacCannell's theory of 'staged authenticity' (1973), this marked *authenticity as a calculated performance, specifically a calibrated amateurism* (Abidin, 2017, p. 4), It involved using 'the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital' to give impressions of being an amateur. Configurations of *authenticity as performance* saw the rise of subgenres: *authenticity as disclosure via the confessional*, as in the case of LGBTQIA+ YouTubers sharing coming out stories (Lovelock, 2017) that would later be commodified as content all the same (Abidin & Cover, 2019, p. 220). Another genre constituted of *authenticity as disclosures of vulnerability*, especially so if the publicity of this vulnerability is minimised to give the impression that it is a sincere sharing (Abidin, 2020b, p. 78); and even *authenticity as a journey of verification,*

where users are invited to continuously (re)visit and (re)assess the breadcrumbs of the 'front stage'/'backstage', 'virtual'/'real life', 'disclosed'/'implied' left by influencers that can be decoded to convey authenticity (Abidin, 2018a). So what? The evolving narrations and narratives of authenticity as personal performance remind us that nothing is sacred anymore, and that all aspects of life can be carved up and pieced together in digital pastiches that become increasingly convincing; perhaps 'pure authenticity' is now a simulacra, a chasing after the wind.

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Allow me, in what could be perceived as an act of apparent 'authenticity', to finish this essay with an apology: I am sorry for the self-indulgence of walking the reader through an *auto-bibliographic inquiry*.

In 1981, American writer Raymond Carver edited a collection of short stories entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. The playful lyrical rhythm in the title points to the delicate dance of a *discourse about discourse* – a feel around the dark for subtext, placeholders, reflexivity. Culture writer Fiona Bell, on observing the mimicry of the template of a title across several book and essay titles, notes that this framing is an attempt to 'identify the conversation… as the center of [the] story', and 'offers a diagnosis of the current conversation and prescribes a new way of doing things' (2020), rather than to talk about 'the story' per se.

More than two decades later, Japanese writer Haruki Murakami – riffing off Carver's original – published *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007), bearing an autobiographical account of his relationship with training for a marathon. The switch from the collective 'we' to the individual 'I' marks an authorial and authoritative shift in voicing: these are my attempts in communicating the reality experienced and held *inside* my body and mind, with other disparate beings who exist *outside* of the container of my body and mind. It is in this spirit that I craft this essay as a work of auto-bibliography: A self-examination of my own scholarly works.

You see, having been trained as an anthropologist and ethnographer, such acrobatics with the practice of reflexivity is second nature to me. Bear in mind that our bodies and minds are mere interfaces for attempts at connection with the *outside* world, and that the *outsiders'* guestimation of who we might be on the *inside* hinges almost entirely on what they are able to see, hear, touch, feel, connect with on the *outside*. As anthropologists, our bodies are conduits for conveying *how* we feel about the world, *why* we ask questions about the world, and subsequently *what* questions we ask of the world.

In past invitations, I have been asked to commit to similar inquiries. One attempt was a public reflection of how I had navigated my employment (read: stability), status (read: gravitas), and legitimacy (read: community) through the five stages of being an undergraduate, postgraduate, postdoctoral, sessional, and continuing/tenured academic. More importantly, the piece traced how I assumed the tenuous label of being an 'interdisciplinary' scholar as I moved across departments and institutes while mostly working in the same general field (Abidin, 2019). In a similar vein, what we *perceive* and *question* about the notion of 'authenticity' – when treated and processed through the various framings, theories, and curiosities

of disciplinary canon – might be more productively situated if we ask what we *value* when we try to perceive and question the notion of 'authenticity'.

The second attempt was a public accounting of my educational trajectory and training, transparently pointing to my scholarly influences and preferences, while exposing my blind spots all the same (Abidin, 2018b). At the time of writing, moving the words from the *inside* of my mind to the *outside* on paper felt like a radical act of transparency, as I grappled with identifying the politics of my own knowledge production – an obedient response to pay heed to feminist standpoint theory (Rolin, 2009) and Southern Theory (Connell, 2007). In a similar vein, the inquiries we have about the nature of authenticity and its implications are inevitably rooted in the spotlights and shadows of what we hold in our *insides*.

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In the age of mass automation and algorithmic decision-making, authenticity is perhaps most simply put as being '*of the human*', *requiring actual human action*. In the 2014 clean up of bot accounts known colloquially as 'The Great Instagram Purge', the platform pointed to its (former) Community Guidelines to remind users to partake only in 'meaningful and genuine' actions (wishcrys.com, 2014a). While rather simple in ethos, this was perhaps a prophetic take on the decade to come, as we progressed from the human-populated spaces of Web 2.0, social networking sites, social media, to the pixelated worlds of virtual influencers, and abstractions of NFT (non-fungible tokens) marketplaces. What questions would we pose of 'authenticity' when humans are receding from view? When minds are inorganic, computerised, a pastiche of anonymous *insides*? What do we talk about when we talk about a 'post-authenticity'? Perhaps the machines would tell us then.

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