

## **Authenticity Dimensions and the Sustainable Development Goals: Is there a Congruence?**

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## **AUTHENTICITY DIMENSIONS AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: IS THERE A CONGRUENCE?**

### **ABSTRACT**

The past 30 years have observed an exponential growth in scholarly attention across disciplines focusing on the concept of sustainable development. With specific reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this research outlines the implications of authenticity dimensions on responsible management practices in service businesses. This working paper critically assesses the association between two authenticity dimensions and SDGs 8, 9 and 12. Consumer orientated dimensions of authenticity, specifically *Authenticity of the Producer* and *Deviated Authenticity*, are applicable to a wide range of tourism and hospitality contexts and provide the potential to generate a significant contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. Future research in authenticity in a service context should consider deeper engagement with such authenticity dimensions to encourage responsible and future-proof service enterprises.

**Keywords:** Authenticity; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Responsible Management; Tourism; Service Industries

### **Authenticity: Frameworks and Typologies**

Authenticity is a concept introduced to understand tourists' quest of experiencing the 'real life' of others (MacCannell, 1973). By introducing the authenticity typology (i.e. objective, constructive and existential authenticity), Wang (1999) has received substantial credence and wide applicability in contemporary authenticity research due to its success in explicating understandings of authenticity in a straightforward and accessible manner (Belhassen & Caton, 2006). This typology, however, is still largely anchored in the blurred lines of objective and constructive authenticity, which in most cases, require official authoritative validation (i.e. cool authentication, Cohen & Cohen, 2012) to establish such distinction. This act, nevertheless, is rarely seen in service businesses due to the fundamental requisite for fulfilling the ever-evolving and heterogeneous expectations of consumers. As such, conceptualising authenticity as a consumer-oriented construct, that is, to "glean insights from consumers' views in order to cater to their expectations regarding authenticity" (Le et al., 2022, p. 3), would be of higher value for service industries.

### **Authenticity of the Producer and Deviated Authenticity**

Following the consumer-oriented approach, recent research has attempted to re-conceptualise authenticity to yield more practical benefits for service businesses. A multi-dimensional scale of authenticity encompassing *Authenticity of the Other*, *Authenticity of the Producer*, and *Authenticity of the Self* has been proposed and empirically tested in the context of restaurant experiences (Le et al., 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). The term 'Producer' here is used to denote the service provider who produces or possesses the observed essence that is being evaluated by the consumer. As such, the observer would believe (or not) the observed essence reflects the values and characteristics possessed by the underlying producer of the object/entity. Along with this, *Deviated Authenticity* (first introduced by Le et al., 2021b) which is a subordinate of *Authenticity of the Other*, describes the state of being unusual of an object that departs from people's commonly accepted standards. *Deviated Authenticity* is

also closely associated with *Authenticity of the Producer* to a certain extent since something perceived as unusual and unfamiliar due to the consumer's socially and individually constructed beliefs and knowledge about a category can also be viewed as reflective of the characteristics possessed by the producer itself (thus *Authenticity of the Producer*).

Despite being recently conceptualised and tested, this consumer-oriented typology of authenticity, and *Authenticity of the Producer* and *Deviated Authenticity* in particular, are deemed applicable to a wide range of tourism and hospitality as well as other service contexts. One of the initial efforts to enhance their applicability and relevance for such industries is to associate them with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are foci of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs are promulgated to address persistent economic, environmental and sociocultural problems, especially in less economically developed countries (Moyle et al., 2021). The purpose of this paper, is to discuss some implications of the two authenticity dimensions, *Authenticity of the Producer* and *Deviated Authenticity*, to provide a better and more responsible way of working by outlining how these dimensions support the SDGs (i.e. 8, 9, and 12), and thus enhancing responsible management practices.

## **Authenticity and the Sustainable Development Goals**

*Authenticity of the Producer* and *Deviated Authenticity* are intrinsically linked with SDG 8 which aims to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”, to SDG 9 which aims to “incorporate inclusive and sustainable development, together with resilient infrastructure and innovation”, as well as SDG 12 which aims to “ensure responsible consumption and production patterns” (United Nations, 2021, pp. 21-24).

Service businesses would be able to identify and segment their customers based on their assessments and expectations of authenticity using different authenticity dimensions established in Le et al. (2021b, 2022). By doing this, they can target and cater for specific demand and expectations of authenticity for each customer segment, which in turn increases their customers' satisfaction and loyalty. This further enhances brand equity if the business is heavily attached and influenced by its brand and reinforces business sustainability. Businesses can use the authenticity cues to conduct an authenticity-related SWOT analysis to identify their strengths and amalgamate business resources to promote the appropriate authenticity cues (and subsequently project the appropriate authenticity dimension) that appeal to consumers (Le et al., 2022). This implication, as a result, supports SDGs 8 and 9.

*Authenticity of the Producer* provides critical insights for businesses that value and strive to sustain a positive organisational brand image. For instance, a business can be considered as an authentic, responsible organisation that always strives to do the “right” thing (e.g., doing green, committed to corporate social responsibility) (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This research however also stressed the importance of an honest projection of *Authenticity of the Producer*, and that staging authenticity of the business (or being pretentious) can put businesses at risk of being disclosed by customers, which subsequently may lead to decreased trust and dissatisfaction (Demetry, 2019). Green-washing, and its associated term woke-washing, that is, when a brand or company uses marketing to take a stance regarding social issues to make a profit (Sobande, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), are typical examples of staging authenticity of the business. Staging authenticity, thus misrepresenting the authenticity of the business, can lead to damaging public image and business sustainability. Therefore, a key implication for businesses here is to project their values and characteristics genuinely considering the fine line between being authentic and being pretentiously authentic (Le et al., 2021b). From a positive lens, *Authenticity of the Producer* can be reflected through a foodservice business that claims to value sustainability and moral practices by featuring and offering food sourced only from local producers, treating their animals ethically or growing their crops in an environmental-friendly way (Le et al., 2021a). This in turn will foster the sense of self-making and meaning-making among service employees (by cultivating organisational pride and a positive organisational image perceived by

employees) (Brosi et al., 2018; Raza et al., 2021), thus leading to a decreased employee turnover rate in service enterprises (Kraemer et al., 2014). This implication hereby supports with SDGs 8 and 12.

*Deviated Authenticity* also offer useful implications for service businesses. *Deviated Authenticity* suggests a state of non-conformity of the entity in which the customer cannot classify it into a class or type (Le et al., 2021b). This state of being unusual, however, does not imply a lack of authenticity of the business, rather, it implies a uniqueness that is necessary to differentiate the business from other competitors. As a result, it is imperative for businesses to continuously innovate to sustain their unique selling proposition as it can reveal the true, authentic business projection/offering towards consumers (Le et al., 2022). This will have a positive impact on enhancing memorability of the experience offering, thus increasing the business viability, and therefore is linked with SDG 8. Further, amid the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of *Deviated Authenticity* facilitates business effort to continuously innovate to sustain their unique selling proposition, which in turn enhances their competitive advantage and business resilience to cope, as well as reinforcing business capabilities to recover from the pandemic (Le, Phi, Le, 2021). This implication therefore supports SDG 9.

## **Authenticity: Future Research**

*Authenticity of the Producer* and *Deviated Authenticity* are catalysts for service businesses to implement responsible and ethical practices in an attempt to enhance customer loyalty and sustain a unique selling proposition, thus reinforcing the long-term viability of the business. Achieving these three goals henceforth serves as the basis for sustainable economic growth in the service industries. Establishing a clear pathway for these two authenticity dimensions to support the SDGs will help design organisational strategies and policies to enhance organisational sustainability and resilience amid disruptions and crises. Future research in authenticity in the service context should consider deeper engagement with such authenticity dimensions to warrant responsible and future-proof service enterprises.

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