Exploring Video Game Brand Authenticity

Dr Jacqueline Burgess
University of the Sunshine Coast
School of Business and Creative Industries
Locked Bag 4, MAROOCHYDORE DC QLD 4558, AUSTRALIA
+61 7 5456 5485
jburgess@usc.edu.au

Professor Christian Jones
University of the Sunshine Coast
Engage Research Lab
School of Law and Society
Locked Bag 4, MAROOCHYDORE DC QLD 4558, AUSTRALIA
+61 7 5459 4849
cmjones@usc.edu.au

Keywords
Keywords: brand management, brand authenticity, *The Sims*, qualitative research.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ensuring effective brand management and strong relationships with consumers is particularly important in the video game industry because it relies heavily on established brands for sales from continuations, extensions, and tie-in merchandise (Burgess & Jones 2020). The extant video game brand management literature has investigated brand continuations in the video game industry (Butcher et al. 2017), and video game brand communities (Burgess & Jones 2020; Weijo et al. 2017). However, there are important aspects of video game brand management that remain under-explored such as brand authenticity, which is how a brand being perceived by its consumers as dedicated to ideals and having a core set of values (Johnson et al. 2015). These ideals and values are created by stable, consistent brand behavior (Moulard et al. 2015), and are thus co-created by consumers and brands (Preece 2015). Behavior that consumers perceive as being inconsistent reduces their perceptions of brand authenticity (Fritz et al. 2017). This research explored how players evaluated the brand authenticity of a long running, active and successful video game series to begin to address the lack of video game brand authenticity research as well as answering calls to better understand the video game industry from a business perspective (Alpert 2007; Teng 2017).

There are many positive effects that result from consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity including increased credibility and trust (Moulard et al. 2015; Schallehn et al. 2014), awareness and perceptions of quality (Lu et al. 2015), greater emotional bonds between consumers and the brand (Fritz et al. 2017), and increased feelings of belongingness (Guèvremont & Grohmann 2016). However, the internet and social media have enabled consumers to disseminate what they believe are core and authentic values for brands faster than ever before (Preece 2015). Among the biggest challenges for a brand to maintain authenticity is to consistently conform to consumers'

expectations of brand behavior (Athwal & Harris 2018), which are based on the brand's previous behavior.

This research utilized *The Sims 4*, launched in September 2014, as the research context due to the game being a continuation of the long-running successful *The Sims* series first launched in 2000. Between May 19 and May 24, 2020, 14 threads were created on the r/theSims subreddit and identified as sources of data for this research. These threads discussed the quality and value of players' purchasing decisions regarding *The Sims 4*, the features that were missing, and the content that *The Sims 4* downloadable content (DLC) contained. These threads were selected as they were likely to contain commentary explaining how consumers evaluated *The Sims 4* game and its authenticity. The threads contained 2194 comments that were downloaded using a custom python script.

The research design involved a case study approach, which is appropriate when the researcher needs to understand the particular and important contextual conditions in a case, as in this research (Yin 2014). The methodological approach to the data involved qualitative analysis because it is considered a particularly appropriate method for investigating online communities (Kozinets 2002). Thematic analysis, following the guidelines and methods established by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to explore the major themes arising from the analysis of the data. The analysis also involved the researchers taking on the role of active story interpreters, which requires immersion in the context surrounding the data to explore and decode it, and the cultural insights of the phenomenon being investigated to ensure a valid analysis (Reid & Duffy 2018). The software program, NVivo, was also used to aid the traditional human interpretative approach (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2016) to code all of the comments. Comments were returned to and re-examined to refine codes and groupings as the analysis progressed and to consider their collective meaning. All of the comments were first read before analysis commenced to ensure appropriate familiarization.

The analysis revealed that posters felt that *The Sims 4* did not feel like a true *The Sims* game because it lacked features that were standard in previous games, and so it was commonly called 'unfinished' by posters. The removal of expected, core features was deemed so impactful that it led to evaluations that the game could not be considered complete until these features were added. Furthermore, posters deemed the game unenjoyable to play unless expansions containing these features were purchased. For example: 'The base game should be full and in depth on its own and DLCs should just be extra add on. Not required for it to be slightly enjoyable'. Due to the lack of perceived value and missing features, *The Sims 4* was even described as lacking 'soul' or 'heart' and being a 'cash cow'. Thus, the posters can be understood as viewing *The Sims 4* as an inauthentic *The Sims* game. It did not align with consumers' expectations and consistency (Athwal & Harris 2018) regarding gameplay features established and present in previous games (Fritz et al. 2017), and as a result, consumers deemed it to lack brand authenticity and value.

These results underscore the need for video game developers and brand managers to maintain authenticity, even if they are working on a video game brand that had built up brand authenticity over a long time as *The Sims* brand had done. Consumers evaluated *The Sims 4* authenticity by considering the features in the game that were deemed to be core and thus required for the game to be evaluated by them as authentic and they found it wanting when compared to prior, authentic *The Sims* releases. Therefore, even video game brands that have been deemed authentic in the past must ensure during the planning of any new brand extensions and continuations that they will be evaluated by consumers as authentic, and gameplay features and design contribute to evaluations of brand authenticity. Developers must ensure they remain in touch with their player-bases

and understand what they perceive to be required game features for authenticity. An evaluation of inauthenticity by consumers is important to avoid as it can adversely affect a brand, as this research demonstrated, by resulting in consumer dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alpert, F. 2007. "Entertainment software: Suddenly huge, little understood". *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 19, (1), 87-100. https://doi.org/10.1108/13555850710720920

Arvidsson, A. & Caliandro, A. 2016. "Brand public". *Journal of Consumer Research,* 42, (5), 727–748. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv053

Athwal, N. & Harris, L. C. 2018. "Examining how brand authenticity is established and maintained: The case of the Reverso". *Journal of Marketing Management, 34*(3-4), 347-369. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1447008

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology". *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burgess, J. & Jones, C. 2020. "Exploring the forced closure of a brand community that is also a participatory culture". *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(5), 957-978. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-01-2019-0075

Butcher, L., Tang, Y. & Phau, I. 2017. "Pawning n00bs: insights into perceptions of brand extensions of the video game industry". *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 25, (3), 215-224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2016.11.008

Fritz, K., Schoenmueller, V. & Bruhn, M. 2017. "Authenticity in branding – exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity". *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(2), 324-348. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-10-2014-0633

Guèvremont, A. & Grohmann, B. 2016. "The brand authenticity effect: Situational and individual-level moderators". *European Journal of Marketing*, 50(3-4), 602-620. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-12-2014-0746

Johnson, A. R., Thomson, M. & Jeffrey, J. 2015. "What does brand authenticity mean? Causes and consequences of consumer scrutiny toward a brand narrative". *Brand Meaning Management (Review of Marketing Research, Vol. 12)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1548-643520150000012001 (accessed 22 February).

Kozinets, R. V. 2002. "The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities". *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61-72. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935

Lu, A. C. C., Gursoy, D. & Lu, C. Y. 2015. "Authenticity perceptions, brand equity and brand choice intention: The case of ethnic restaurants". *International Journal of Hospitality Management,* 50, 36-45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.07.008

Maxis. 2014. *The Sims 4*. PC. Redwood City, California, United States of America, Electronic Arts.

Moulard, J. G., Garrity, C. P. & Rice, D. H. 2015. "What makes a human brand authentic? Identifying the antecedents of celebrity authenticity". *Psychology & Marketing,* 32(2), 173-186. https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20771

Preece, C. 2015. "The authentic celebrity brand: unpacking Ai Weiwei's celebritised selves". *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(5-6), 616-645. 10.1080/0267257X.2014.1000362

Reid, E. & Duffy, K. 2018. "A netnographic sensibility: Developing the netnographic/social listening boundaries". *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3-4), 263-286. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1450282

Schallehn, M., Burmann, C. & Riley, N. 2014. "Brand authenticity: Model development and empirical testing". *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 23(3), 192-199. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-06-2013-0339

Teng, C-I. 2017. "Impact of avatar identification on online gamer loyalty: Perspectives of social identity and social capital theories". *International Journal of Information Management*, 37 (6), 601-610. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2017.06.006

Weijo, H., Bean, J. & Rintamäki, J. 2017. "Brand community coping". *Journal of Business Research,* 10(054), 1-9. 10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.10.054

Yin, R. K. 2013. *Case study research: Design and methods, 5th edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE