

# BRAND AUTHENTICITY IN ACTION SPORTS

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## Introduction

The rise of consumer and corporate interest in action sports, widely known as extreme sports, has been phenomenal, as illustrated by an increase in media coverage, athlete endorsements, branding, corporate sponsorships, and lay-athlete participation (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2003; Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006). Naturally, the elevated status of action sports has been followed by mainstream athletic footwear and apparel companies' efforts to establish a presence in the alternative sports market, notwithstanding suspicions surrounding those companies' perceived authenticity. Core action sports brands have realized that in this competitive environment success will come not only from strengthening their core, but also from expanding to mainstream markets and enhancing their brand's authenticity through specific product elements and marketing campaigns.

## Review of literature

Brand authenticity is defined as consumer judgment about the extent to which a brand is considered to be authentic (or inauthentic) (Kadirov, 2010). Research shows that consumers attribute authenticity to marketed products and services, although such attribution can be largely contingent upon consumption context, consumer personality, and life goals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009). Kadirov (2010) conceptualized brand authenticity through seven dimensions: real vs. contrived, true self vs. overreacting, commercialization, unique vs. mass product, history, community link, and empowerment. The author suggested that brand authenticity is a graded multidimensional construct that has a differential effect on marketing performance. Authenticity is subjective, socially constructed, dynamic, and possibly created, imagined, and invented. However, since notions of authenticity are socially constructed, consumer-expressions of authenticity often reflect wider social norms (Beverland, 2009).

## Aim of paper

The notion of brand authenticity is highly relevant to action sports where core subcultures form and define the sport and have an effect on the perceived authenticity of brands and products. The present study examines a successful action sports company and its attempts to maintain its authenticity and integrity in the core action sports market while expanding into mainstream markets. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to identify the elements that form the perceived authenticity of this company's brands, as seen by the organization's employees.

## Methodology

The subject of this study is the Board Sports Company (BSC), a private company and globally recognized leader in action sports footwear and apparel with distribution in more than 70 countries and revenues of \$200 million. Although the roots of the company can be found in skateboarding, BSC has developed seven distinct brands that expand to surfing, snowboarding, motocross, and BMX. Personal observations and review of company documents were performed so as to acquire information about the organization as a whole, as well as the individual brands. Furthermore, 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews were completed with key BSC employees in order to assess their perceptions about the authenticity of the seven brands, as well as how the company's efforts to expand its brands and products into mainstream markets affected the brands' authenticity. Sources of data (i.e., interviews, observations and documents) were analyzed through QSR NVivo 7.

## Discussion of findings

Data from the personal interviews and review of documents were used to produce a detailed profile for each of the seven BSC brands including sport(s), product lines, target markets and distribution channels. Unarguably, the authenticity demonstrated in the attitude and mentality of a board sports company is of the utmost importance to core consumers and, potentially, to mainstream consumers. This research showed that the multi-brand strategy adopted by BSC has allowed the company to appeal to mainstream consumers through the "lifestyle" brands, while maintaining its authenticity and integrity as a core action sports company through its more traditional brands. Expressions like 'legitimate,' 'self-expression,' 'individualistic stance,' 'anti-authoritarianism,' 'anti-capitalism,' 'anti-establishment' and 'anti-materialist' were constantly used to describe elements of authenticity within BSC. Interestingly, one of the interviewees utilized the term "authenticitude," a combination of the words authenticity and attitude, in order to illustrate the trend amongst action sports companies to cultivate the concept of brand authenticity. Results also indicate that displayed authenticity is pivotal for success in the board sports industry. Authenticity is based on a constant scanning of trends within boarding subcultures and lifestyle elements of core and mainstream consumers. Innovation in product features and technology also appeared to be integral aspects of distinctive differentiation in the industry, while athlete endorsements were seen as strategies to enhance the company's "authentic" image.

## References

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