

THE REAL DEAL

Facilitator's runsheet for a 100-minute workshop on authenticity and virtual worlds

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For reference: Some of the big questions underlying this workshop:

- What does it mean to be authentic?
- Should we value authenticity? If so, why?
- What role does authenticity play in meaningful relationships and social connections?
- Is reality malleable? Are we living in an age where reality itself is being artificially constructed?

Resources needed for this workshop:

- This runsheet, and a speaking ball
- Accompanying slideshow with video clips embedded
- Backup copies of four video clips:
 - Celebrities and Starbucks;
 - Nation Branding and Tourism;
 - Oobah Butler – The Shed at Dulwich Clip 1;
 - Oobah Butler – The Shed at Dulwich Clip 2
- Activity cards – the following quantities are for one small group of approx 10 students:
 - The Shed - Activity 1:
 - two copies of the set of 'Group 1' cards;
 - two copies of the set of 'Group 2' cards;
 - one copy of the set of headline themes
 - The Shed - Activity 2
 - two copies of the set of 'Group 1' cards
 - two copies of the set of 'Group 2' cards
 - one copy of the set of headline themes

> **SLIDE: Cover slide**

[0:00] **Welcome and introductions**

Quick brainstorm & scribe – What do we mean by ‘authenticity’?

Part A (*Overthink* podcast excerpts on authenticity)

[0:02]

> **SLIDE > Play video: Celebrities and Starbucks**¹ (2.5 min)

Transcript:

- Perhaps the biggest compliment you can give a celebrity today is to say that they're authentic. And we live in this social media driven world where people constantly try and present a picture perfect view of their lives.
- We crave authenticity. It's something that's very appealing to us. It's something that draws us in. Authenticity is something that we crave so much so that it is now basically rammed down our throats as a commodity. In recent years, corporations have become obsessed with appearing authentic. Starbucks is a perfect example of this. When Starbucks first launched in Seattle, it became extremely popular because it staged a kind of theatre or ritual around the act of having a cup of coffee. It centred on the character of the barista, who was usually a heavily tattooed, maybe mohawk-wearing person behind the counter who would carefully craft each cup of coffee and then call customers by their name, establishing a personal relationship to them. And through this theatrical performance of having a cup of coffee, quote unquote, the old way, the Starbucks coffee house became a gathering place for the modern age. Starbucks has been able to grow worldwide and has become established precisely because what it sold was authenticity. Which is hilarious, because nowadays, Starbucks feels like the least authentic brand ever. But after this initial huge success of Starbucks, other corporations hopped on the bandwagon and became more focused in the 2000s on authenticity through generating experiences.
- By now, if you are a corporation, we can even tell you exactly what you have to do step by step if you want to give off a vibe of authenticity to your customers. And so I want to read a quote from Ferrara's book where he talks about these steps. He says, first, try to make your commercial offer look sincere by way of appearing above commercial considerations. Instil brand cult in your company's staff. Make a public show of interest in the community or communities within which your firm operates. Create the impression of dedication to, and pleasure taking in, the production of what is being marketed. Try to appear amateurish and artisanal. And try to look as someone sticking to his roots...

[0:06]

Discussion

> **SLIDE: How companies can *appear* authentic**

Here's that list we just heard, about how companies can project a vibe of authenticity.

How does reading this list make you feel?

What's the difference between *being* authentic, and *appearing* authentic?

How might we go about detecting ‘fake authenticity’?

¹ Audio excerpted from ‘Authenticity’ episode of the *Overthink* podcast, featuring Ellie Anderson and David Peña-Guzmán.

[0:13]

Is it even possible to be genuinely authentic in a world where authenticity is commodified and marketed? Before we try to answer this, let's consider the example of lingerie brand Victoria's Secret:

> **SLIDE: Victoria's Secret #1 - 'Diversity'**

This brand famously jumped on board the diversity movement and launched a bunch of campaigns featuring models with different kinds of bodies. But then, when the diversity approach proved to be unprofitable...

> **SLIDE: Victoria's Secret #2 - 'The Perfect Body'**

... the brand did a backflip and switched back to traditionally proportioned, skinny, white models.

> **SLIDE: Victoria's Secret #3 - 'Victoria's Secret goes back to basics...'**

Conservative media outlets trumpeted the "news" that the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion marketing strategy had "tanked sales" and caused the company financial losses.

> **SLIDE: Victoria's Secret #4 - 'Victoria's Secret misses the mark...'**

But some critics argued the real problem was that Victoria's Secret had been cynically using diversity as a marketing tactic, without addressing its broader company culture. So the company went through all the motions of *appearing* to care about diversity – using tag lines like 'We've Changed', 'We See You', and 'Real', and using images with women of different sizes, ethnicities and abilities; they followed the recipe and checked all the boxes, without taking steps to actually address the company's culture -- and the public saw right through it.

Is there even such a thing as authenticity in the a commercial world, or is it all just performative? (*Pair talk*)

Cultural critic Emily Bootle writes:

> **SLIDE: The moment you begin...**

"The moment you begin to perform authenticity, it becomes meaningless."²

And communications specialist Charli Edwards suggests that a person, place or product becomes ...

> **SLIDE: [They become] doubly inauthentic...**

... "doubly inauthentic by trying to appear authentic."³

Do you agree with these two statements? (*Pair talk*)

² Quoted in Bishop, S. (February 2023). Emily Bootle's 'This Is Not Who I Am'. *The Monthly*. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/february/stephanie-bishop/emily-bootle-s-not-who-i-am#mtr>

³ Edwards, C. (08/09/2023). Why marketers must beware 'inauthentic authenticity'. *The Drum*. <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2023/09/08/why-marketers-must-beware-inauthentic-authenticity>

> SLIDE: Authenticity in capitalist culture...

Writer Stephanie Bishop has stated that “authenticity in capitalist culture remains a profitable mirage” – in other words, there’s no such thing as true authenticity under capitalism. Indeed, some might say that in a capitalist world, the only really authentic thing about branding or marketing is that companies authentically want to make a profit!

Alex Smith, a marketing strategist, has argued that when the idea of authenticity is marketed and sold, there's a risk of diluting the very authenticity that people were seeking in the first place.

> SLIDE: [Coffee cup]

He actually uses the example of Starbucks, which was mentioned in the video clip. He says:

> SLIDE: I cannot express my admiration...

Read aloud:

“I cannot express my admiration highly enough for [Starbucks] calling what is basically a milkshake a ‘frappuccino’. The cynicism is breathtaking... [But marketing] strategy is always a cynical act. It is always an act of manipulation; of behind-the-curtain computation designed to elicit your desired outcome.”⁴

First of all, do you think that *admiration* is an appropriate response to such cynical manipulation?

I think Alex Smith is right about companies manipulating consumer choices in various ways.

How do companies manipulate consumer choices – can you think of some of the ways? (Pair talk/brainstorm)

In your view, is projecting ‘fake authenticity’ (or ‘inauthentic authenticity’) *worse* than the other kinds of manipulation that companies engage in?

[0:30]

> Play video: Nation branding and tourism⁵ (2 mins)

Transcript

- The thing is, it's not even just corporations anymore. Even countries... are getting in on the act. ... This new phenomenon that's called nation branding ... is where national governments will dedicate a budget to market themselves to tourists as destinations for encounters with an authentic national culture.
- ... Is this why Iceland became so hot about 10 years ago? Remember when everybody was like, you gotta go to Iceland and go to the hot springs.
- Yeah, the hot springs. I definitely drank that Kool-aid and went to the hot springs in Iceland, yes I did.
- An example that I think is really good is ... Venice. Because in the eyes of a lot of potential travellers to Italy, Venice is so Italian. It's like *the* Italian town, with the canals and the architecture ... And yet, if you actually go to Venice, what you encounter is a 200 to 1 visitor

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Audio excerpted from ‘Authenticity’ episode of the *Overthink* podcast, featuring Ellie Anderson and David Peña-Guzmán.

to local ratio. For every one person that lives there, there are 200 visitors, which means that if you go to Venice hoping to encounter 'Italianness', that's the last thing that you're actually gonna get. What you're gonna get is people looking for Italianness, so it's yet another ritual performance, kind of like the Starbucks cup of coffee.

- That might be an even worse ratio than on Hollywood Boulevard, which is really saying a lot. And this is something that does happen in LA a lot in some of these really high tourist areas. But... I'm not even sure that we can say that L. A. has any authenticity to it to begin with. Part of what I love about it is its superficiality. So here it's almost as if people come to L.A. wanting something that is a contradiction in terms: An authentic experience of Hollywood inauthenticity.

[0:32]

>SLIDE: Still images from nation branding clip

Discussion

What does it mean for a tourist destination to be *authentic*?

How might the phenomenon of 'nation branding' affect a nation's identity and culture?

What happens when culture itself becomes a marketable commodity? Are communities likely to feel pressured to *perform* their culture for commercial gain?

Can you make sense of the paradoxical notion of seeking an 'authentic experience of Hollywood inauthenticity'?

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Continues overleaf...

[0:45] Part B (*The Shed at Dulwich*)

[> Play video: Oobah Butler: The Shed at Dulwich \(clip 1\)](#) (3 mins)

Transcript

In the winter of 2017, a 25 year old named Oobah Butler found himself running the most popular new restaurant in London. It was called The Shed at Dulwich. The Shed had recently become the number 1 restaurant on TripAdvisor. It seemed like everyone wanted a table at The Shed. And it's easy to see why. The restaurant's TripAdvisor page had nearly 100 glowing reviews from people all across the country. Every reviewer said the same thing: The Shed at Dulwich was amazing. But the reviews also came with this warning: it's almost impossible to get a reservation.

"Hi, are you open today?"

'We are open but was are also fully booked.'

What they didn't know was the struggle to get a table wasn't just because the Shed was so popular. The truth was, The Shed, the number 1 restaurant in London, didn't exist. The five-star reviews were fake. The food photos were staged. Everything about the Shed at Dulwich was a lie. Oobah made the whole thing up as part of an elaborate prank.

Before the Shed became a hit restaurant, before Oobah became an international sensation, he was just a kid in his early 20s who had a dream of being a writer, and started looking for jobs. And one of the only jobs he could find was writing fake reviews on TripAdvisor. Oobah was stunned to find out that some of the reviews on TripAdvisor were faked. There was this secret online network of people that were paid to game the system. And these fake reviews had real world impact on a restaurant's success. And this made him wonder where the line could be drawn. If there could be fake reviews, could there also be a fake restaurant? So he decided to create a fake restaurant. He named his restaurant The Shed at Dulwich. His inspiration was his own apartment. He was living in a garden shed in the London suburb of Dulwich at the time. He created an email for his fake restaurant; he spent a few hours making a website; he bought a prepaid cellphone so the restaurant had a telephone number, and that was it.

In April of 2017, TripAdvisor officially verified Oobah's fake restaurant: The Shed at Dulwich. Oobah immediately started recruiting people to write reviews. The Shed was absolutely overrun with fake reviews. The restaurant was quickly climbing the TripAdvisor ranks. And on the morning of November 1st, 2017, Oobah woke up to find that The Shed at Dulwich had made it to the number 1 restaurant in London.

Business executives and celebrities sent The Shed emails, bragging about their influence in hopes of scoring a table.

Once the restaurant hit number 1, Oobah noticed new reviews appearing on the restaurant's TripAdvisor page. Strangers were leaving their own fake reviews for The Shed, not to build the restaurant's credibility, but to help to build theirs. Being the type of person who ate at The Shed, the number 1 restaurant in London, had started to mean something. And if they couldn't get a table in real life, they would pretend they did online. They were crafting their own false reality from Oobah's false reality: a lie built on a lie.

[0:48]

The Shed – Activity #1

Preparation – print and cut:

- two copies of the set of 'Group 1' cards to distribute to subgroups 1 and 3
- two copies of the set of 'Group 2' cards to distribute to subgroups 2 and 4
- one copy of the set of headline themes

Break students into four subgroups (or two, if the entire group is very small).

Show students the three headline themes, and invite students to place each of the quotes alongside the best-matched theme (note: there may be more than one good way to do this).

Share/report back and choose one quote per subgroup to discuss further as desired.

Possible categorisations are set out below.

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In a world filled with digital noise, we yearn for genuine recommendations that can help us make informed decisions. But online reviews can be so easily faked that we can no longer rely on them to guide our choices.

- Group 1: "Restaurant-goers can — and should — question [TripAdvisor's] value, integrity and validity." – Josh Barrie (8/12/2017), What the VICE TripAdvisor Takedown Says About User Review Platforms — and London's Use for Them. London Eater. <https://london.eater.com/2017/12/8/16747348/vice-tripadvisor-oobah-butler-review-platforms-london-analysis>
- Group 1: "Within the current climate of misinformation, and society's willingness to believe absolute bullshit, maybe a fake restaurant is possible?" - Oobah Butler, I Made By Shed the Top Rated Restaurant on TripAdvisor. Vice <https://www.vice.com/en/article/434gqw/i-made-my-shed-the-top-rated-restaurant-on-tripadvisor>
- Group 1: "The story of how a fake restaurant went to the top of the ratings on TripAdvisor is a lesson in trust and authenticity" - Rosalyn Page, Keeping it real: Social influence manipulation, fake reviews and the power of influence." CMO (marketing company). <https://www.cmo.com.au/article/664378/keeping-it-real-social-influence-manipulation-fake-reviews-power-influence/>
- Group 2: "...in an era increasingly influenced by disinformation online, The Shed at Dulwich also has served as another reminder of the ease with which pranksters and other dishonest actors are able to game online platforms." Eli Rosenberg, 'The Shed at Dulwich' was London's top restaurant. One problem: it didn't exist, AFR <https://www.afr.com/technology/the-shed-at-dulwich-was-londons-top-restaurant-one-problem-it-didnt-exist-20171210-h0232s>
- Group 2: "...writing fake reviews on TripAdvisor.... convinced me that TripAdvisor was a false reality." - Oobah Butler, I Made By Shed the Top Rated Restaurant on TripAdvisor. Vice <https://www.vice.com/en/article/434gqw/i-made-my-shed-the-top-rated-restaurant-on-tripadvisor>

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Some people seek validation through belonging to an exclusive group, or participating in an exclusive lifestyle. Social media encourages people to compare their lives with the curated content of others.

- Group 1: "Strangers were leaving their own fake reviews for The Shed, not to build the restaurant's credibility, but to help to build theirs. Being the type of person who ate at The Shed, the number 1 restaurant in London, had started to mean something." (Hannah Smith, 'The Opportunist' podcast)
- Group 2: "Eating out in London is increasingly experiential; it's about cultural and social capital — about bragging rights and securing the most exclusive and elusive reservations that one's contemporaries have not. The Shed at Dulwich was ... *by appointment only*, and 'so popular' as to be unbookable." – Josh Barrie (8/12/2017), What the VICE TripAdvisor Takedown Says About User Review Platforms — and London's Use for Them. London Eater. <https://london.eater.com/2017/12/8/16747348/vice-tripadvisor-oobah-butler-review-platforms-london-analysis>

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People have a tendency to follow trends and popular opinion, and to conform their behaviour to the collective norm.

- Group 1: "We served ready meals.... like a 60-cent microwavable meal... if enough people around you saying, "This is delicious," will you go, "Yeah, it's delicious, I guess....?" I was really nervous about the way that they'd react. And when

they left, they loved it.” - Oobah Butler, How A Fake Restaurant Became London's Top Spot On TripAdvisor, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/12/09/569601017/opening-the-hottest-fake-restaurant-in-town>

- Group 2: “..it certainly demonstrated the power of social influence, not to mention also the psychology of consumers to follow what's hot.” - Rosalyn Page, ‘Keeping it real: Social influence manipulation, fake reviews and the power of influence.’ CMO (marketing company). <https://www.cmo.com.au/article/664378/keeping-it-real-social-influence-manipulation-fake-reviews-power-influence/>
- Group 2: “This feat is the perfect example of “following the crowd” in information cascades. When connected by a network, people often become influenced by the decisions of other people.” - Eli Rosenberg, The Shed at Dulwich was London's top-rated restaurant. Just one problem. It didn't exist.' The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2017/12/08/it-was-londons-top-rated-restaurant-just-one-problem-it-didnt-exist/>

[1:00] Short break

[1:03]

> [Play video: Oobah Butler: The Shed at Dulwich \(clip 2\)](#) (2 mins)

(If this hyperlink doesn't work, please contact The Philosophy Club, www.ThePhilosophyClub.com.au)

Transcript

His phone kept ringing. Every time Oobah answered and made up an excuse as to why The Shed was fully booked. Then one day, he gave somebody a reservation at his fake restaurant. Now, he had to figure out how to turn a tiny shack he rented in someone's garden into the hit restaurant everyone thought it was. He borrowed some tables from a cafe, convinced a neighbour to lend him outdoor heaters, and waited for the big night.

People sit in an overgrown backyard as Oobah sprints around. He darts in and out of The Shed where he's cooking TV dinners for his guests. The customers who had finally managed to get a reservation at The Shed look uncomfortable. They're huddled over their plates of microwaveable food on a cold fall night in London. I can't be sure what anyone expected when they showed up for dinner at the city's top restaurant, but I can imagine it wasn't this.

And I'm seeing out the last table of four, and the guy doesn't look happy. And he says “Can I have a word please?”, as I'm seeing him out. And I think, oh God, this guy's probably gonna punch me in the face. And he says, “About tonight – now that I've been once, is it going to be easier for me to book again next time?”

For one night in November, Oobah managed to pull the general public into his prank. He turned The Shed into a real restaurant.

“It made me feel that people trust online hype more than what they put in their mouths. And that was almost some kind of weird parable about the constructed realities that we surround ourselves with online.”

Oobah had illuminated a flaw in our modern world. He had made a statement about the way that we interact on the internet. He had taught us a lesson about how the false realities online can seep into our real lives.

[1:05]

The Shed – Activity #2

Preparation – print and cut:

- two copies of the set of ‘Group 1’ cards to distribute to subgroups 1 and 3
- two copies of the set of ‘Group 2’ cards to distribute to subgroups 2 and 4
- one copy of the set of headline themes

Break students into four subgroups (or two if the entire group is very small).

Show students the three headline themes, and invite students to place each of the quotes alongside the best-matched theme (note: there may be more than one good way to do this).

Possible categorisations are set out below.

Our digital lives powerfully impact our real lives, with online influences sometimes overpowering own own sensory experiences.

- Group 1: “People trust online hype more than what they put in their mouth.” - Oobah Butler (in video clip)
- Group 2: “[The Shed at Dulwich] served as another reminder of the ease with which pranksters and other dishonest actors are able to manipulate online platforms to sometimes unthinkable results.” - Eli Rosenberg, ‘The Shed at Dulwich’ was London’s top-rated restaurant. Just one problem: It didn’t exist. *Washington Post*. 8/12/2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2017/12/08/it-was-londons-top-rated-restaurant-just-one-problem-it-didnt-exist/>

A compelling narrative, even a fabricated one, has the power to shape human behaviour and beliefs.

- Group 1: “...diners ate spruced up mac 'n' cheese, used paper napkins, and sipped wine from mugs...Despite the freezing-cold temperatures ... and microwaved food, guests loved it. "It's different, a great concept, totally mystical, and we would definitely come back," commented one couple. But did they love what they actually experienced, or what they believed the evening to be?” – Katherine McGrath, How a Fake Restaurant in a Garden Shed Became London’s Top-Rated Eatery on TripAdvisor. *Architectural Digest*. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/the-shed-at-dulwich>
- Group 2: “The stunning hoax of The Shed at Dulwich deceived millions and showed how willing we are to consume an appetizing story.” – Julia Creet (9/2/2018). Believe nothing: The hoax of the Shed at Dulwich. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/believe-nothing-the-hoax-of-the-shed-at-dulwich-91211>
- Group 2: “You can quite literally build a very real, high-performing restaurant and potential franchise on an absolute fiction.” – Oobah Butler, quoted in Amber Hurwitz (16/11/2019). Oobah Butler: Virtual Worlds. *Monrowe Magazine*. <https://monrowemagazine.com/2019/11/16/oobah-butler-virtual-worlds>

The use of deception represents a moral dividing line between satire and fake news.

- Group 1: “Satire has to be transparent... the key to distinguishing fake news from satire is deception... The managing editor of The Onion [a satirical ‘news’ publication]... says... “while we absolutely intend for our publication to be considered a joke and to be recognised as such, there are countless [media] outlets that [are] outright attempting to deceive their audiences with entirely fabricated stories.” – Amanda Meade (28/08/2017). The Onion in the age of Trump: ‘What we do becomes essential when its targets are this clownish’, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/aug/28/the-onion-in-the-age-of-trump-what-we-do-becomes-essential-when-its-targets-are-this-clownish>

- Group 2: “If satire dupes its audience, then it misses its target by a mile. Fake news, on the other hand, is intended to deceive, swapping the high-minded morals of satire for ideological manipulations, lies, propaganda and profit.” – Julia Creet (9/2/2018). Believe nothing: The hoax of the Shed at Dulwich. *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/believe-nothing-the-hoax-of-the-shed-at-dulwich-91211>

[1:12]

Discussion – what kind of phenomenon was The Shed at Dulwich?

A journalist has commented that “Public response [to The Shed at Dulwich] was a combination of laughter, embarrassment and concern.”⁶

Was The Shed at Dulwich **satire** or was it **fake news**? Could it be both? (*This question picks up on one of the themes addressed in the previous activity.*)

Some people have described it as a **prank** or a **social experiment**. Some have described it as **performance art**.

What description do you think fits best?

[1:26]

Creative response time – if time permits (otherwise the remaining workshop time can be used to complete previous discussions).

Creative response time is an opportunity for students to produce any kind of creative response to the discussions they’ve had today. It could be a written reflection, story, dialogue, comic, poem, drawing, mini-zine, persuasive argument, letter, or whatever other format they like.

Creative response stimuli:

“Marketing strategy is always a cynical act. It is always an act of manipulation.”

“The moment you begin to perform authenticity, it becomes meaningless.”

“They become doubly inauthentic by trying to appear authentic.”

“Authenticity in capitalist culture remains a profitable mirage.”

“If you go to Venice hoping to encounter ‘Italianness’, that’s the last thing that you’re actually gonna get. What you’re gonna get is people looking for Italianness – so it’s yet another ritual performance, kind of like the Starbucks cup of coffee.”

“Writing fake reviews on TripAdvisor convinced me that TripAdvisor was a false reality.”

[1:40] End of workshop

⁶ Julia Creet (9/2/2018). Believe nothing: The hoax of the Shed at Dulwich. *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/believe-nothing-the-hoax-of-the-shed-at-dulwich-91211>