Therapeutic Servicescapes and Brand Symbolism-Induced Affect: The Moderating Effect of Trait Authenticity

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Drawing on research indicating that individuals with trait inauthenticity often experience a diminished sense of meaning in life, this study investigates how vintage-themed therapeutic servicescapes can help restore meaning and enhance consumer well-being. We theorize that perceived brand authenticity (PBA) symbolism is critical in this meaning reconstruction process. Across a survey study, we identify three key antecedents of PBA-symbolism—brand continuity, self–brand attachment, and self-image congruence— and examine their impact on eliciting positive affect and feelings of authentic pride among consumers. Crucially, the results demonstrate that the positive effects of PBA-symbolism on affective outcomes are significant for individuals with low, but not high, trait authenticity, underscoring the moderating role of individual differences. This research contributes to consumer and marketing scholarship by illuminating how therapeutic commercial environments can alleviate the unease stemming from inauthenticity, thereby advancing understanding of when and for whom brand symbolism restores meaning and fosters positive emotional responses. Additionally, the findings offer practical insights into the strategic design and management of therapeutic servicescapes that deliver both consumer well-being and managerially relevant outcomes.

Keywords: trait authenticity, positive affect, authentic pride, perceived brand symbolism, therapeutic servicescapes

INTRODUCTION

The presence of meaning in life is a critical precursor to well-being, contributing to improved mental and physical health (Huta & Waterman, 2013; King & Hicks, 2021). In contrast, inauthentic living often leads to a diminished sense of meaning, resulting in adverse psychological and physiological outcomes. Individuals with trait inauthenticity—characterized by a chronic sense of not living in accordance with one's true self—are particularly susceptible to experiences of meaninglessness and its associated negative health consequences (Sedikides et al., 2019; Luthar et al., 2021).

Contemporary consumer culture increasingly fosters inauthenticity through curated digital personas, the normalization of cosmetic enhancements, and the proliferation of knockoff products (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). As a result, a growing number of consumers experience trait inauthenticity. Research suggests that such individuals, recognizing the negative impact of inauthenticity on their quality of life, are often motivated to pursue a more authentic self (Lasaleta et al., 2019; Jiang & Sedikides, 2022). This pursuit manifests through consumption practices aimed at restoring a sense of self-authenticity and meaning.

Previous studies have examined how consumers use products to buffer the internal tension caused by threatened authenticity and disrupted meaning frameworks. Products that reinforce self-continuity or a sense of being true to oneself have been shown to bolster meaning and enhance well-being (Arnould & Price, 2000; Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Sarial-Abi et al., 2017; Steger et al., 2006). For instance, Lasaleta et al. (2019) demonstrated that retro-styled products can restore feelings of authenticity by enhancing perceptions of self-continuity, which contributes to well-being (Sedikides et al., 2016).

However, the predominant focus of authenticity and meaning-maintenance research has been on tangible goods and their role in ameliorating transient inauthenticity [Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006; Sarial-Abi et al. 2017; Steger et al. 2006, Lasaleta et al.,2019]. Less attention has been paid to the potential of service environments to address the distress caused by chronic, trait-level inauthenticity. This paper addresses this gap by examining how therapeutic servicescapes can serve as venues for meaning restoration and emotional renewal for individuals with low trait authenticity.

Therapeutic servicescapes are commercial spaces in which market-orchestrated experiences help compensate for socio-cultural dilemmas and contribute to well-being (Lears, 1983; Higgins, 2019). These environments may offer respite from alienation associated with late capitalism (Belk & Costa, 1998) or serve as sites for spiritual renewal (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2010). Prior studies have explored how such spaces manage pleasure and happiness by enabling consumers to escape from everyday tensions (Goulding et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2017) and how consumers use cultural resources to derive meaning from their experiences regain a sense of personal achievement (Canniford & Shankar, 2013). Yet, no research to date has explored the capacity of therapeutic servicescapes to foster emotional renewal among consumers experiencing trait inauthenticity.

Building on prior work that links authenticity to the presence of meaning (Wilt et al., 2021), this study proposes that consumers with low trait authenticity, facing disrupted meaning frameworks, seek to restore a sense of coherence and renewal. By enabling the reconstruction of alternative meaning frameworks, therapeutic servicescapes may serve as effective instruments for mitigating the deficits of meaning associated with inauthenticity. In particular, this paper proposes that feelings of positive affect and authentic pride are critical emotional outcomes of restored self-authenticity and meaning. These affective responses are especially valuable for individuals affected by authenticity deficits, offering emotional compensation and renewal.

A central argument of this paper is that brand symbolism plays a pivotal role in transforming commercial spaces into therapeutic arenas. Brand symbolism can facilitate the restoration of meaning and evoke restorative emotional states by fostering feelings of connection to the past, to others, to place and to one's true self (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010). In addition to investigating the role of therapeutic servicescapes in eliciting positive emotions among trait inauthentic consumers, this paper extends the growing literature on brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2014) by offering and empirically testing a model that explains how brand symbolism can help mitigate inauthenticity and meaninglessness.

This research makes several key contributions. First, it illuminates the role of brand symbolism in eliciting positive affect and feelings of authentic pride within therapeutic service contexts. It identifies three antecedents of perceived brand symbolism—brand continuity, self-image congruence, and self–brand attachment—which collectively capture connections to people, place, and the past. Unlike prior studies that assess emotional responses to specific service encounters, this paper focuses on emotions that emerge from the compensation for an authenticity deficit. Second, this paper tests the proposition that brand symbolism facilitates the development of new meaning frameworks, restores feelings of authenticity, and ultimately evokes positive affect and authentic pride in inauthentic consumers. Third, it contributes to the emerging field of clinical consumer psychology and broader consumer well-being discussions. Positive emotions have been shown to enhance cognitive flexibility (Isen, 1987), improve coping (Aspinwall, 1998), and support psychological resilience (Fredrickson, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011)—benefits that are particularly valuable for consumers struggling with inauthenticity. Finally, the findings offer important managerial implications. Positive affect and authentic pride are linked to greater brand loyalty (Pulligadda et al., 2016), suggesting that therapeutic servicescapes have the potential to attract and retain consumers seeking

emotional and existential restoration. Given the prevalence of inauthentic living in modern society, commercial environments that offer opportunities for authenticity recovery may hold widespread appeal and significant value for both consumers and marketers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A Meaning Maintenance Model and Brand Symbolism

Prior research defines meaning as the relation between individuals and the broader world (Baumeister, 1991; Heine et al., 2006). Meaning connects people to what lies beyond the self—others, places, and things—through predictable and expected associations (Heine et al., 2006). It represents the mental frameworks or associations individuals construct and impose on their environments. Heine et al. (2006) propose that terms such as "meaning," "relation," and "association" are interchangeable, as they all refer to these expected connections. When these relationships break down, individuals experience a disruption that motivates efforts to restore meaningful associations (Heine et al., 2006).The Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) introduced by Heine et al. (2006) identifies three realms where people create and maintain meaning frameworks: the external world, the self, and the self's relationship to the external world. The model suggests that individuals are driven to construct meaning by identifying patterns, making connections, and finding signals within noise. The realm of the self about the external world represents a desire for personal connection with people, places, objects, and events. This involves the mental representations of oneself, which individuals strive to maintain across time, roles, and contexts. These connections are critical for a stable sense of identity. When these relationships become unreliable or are disrupted, individuals experience a heightened need to restore a viable alternative network of connections that reinforce meaning via fluid compensation.

This paper posits that individuals with trait inauthenticity, when confronted with meaninglessness, experience an intensified drive to pursue authenticity (e.g., Lenton et al., 2016; Lutz et al., 2023). As they seek coherent relations between themselves and the external world, any disruption in these mental representations increases their efforts to rebuild their meaning frameworks and restore authenticity.

Trait Inauthenticity and Disrupted Meaning Frameworks

Authenticity refers to the extent to which individuals align with their true selves by living following their values and beliefs (Lenton et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2008). It encompasses multiple dimensions, such as authentic living, non-acceptance of external influences, and self-alienation. These dimensions reflect opposite ends of the authenticity-inauthenticity continuum, with authentic living representing a positive aspect and self-alienation a negative one (Wood et al., 2008).Individuals with trait inauthenticity experience unease due to disruptions in their mental representations of relationships to the past, people, and places. This leads to a diminished sense of meaning and a heightened motivation to compensate for this loss. Research by Wilt et al. (2021) and Erickson and Wharton (1997) supports the idea that authenticity is positively associated with the presence of meaning and negatively associated with daily struggles with meaninglessness. When people live authentically, they maintain stable meaning frameworks, and authenticity inversely correlates with distress stemming from a lack of meaning. Moreover, prior studies suggest bidirectional associations between authenticity and the presence of meaning. Acting out of alignment with one's values erodes personal meaning, while maintaining meaning fosters flourishing and self-fulfillment—both markers of high authenticity (Sutton, 2020). For instance, Wilt et al. (2021) showed that the presence of meaning is strongly associated with Authentic Living (positively) and Self-Alienation (negatively). Living following one's true self plays a key role in preserving meaning (Schlegel et al., 2016).

As discussed earlier, fluid compensation in response to meaning threats (Heine et al., 2006) suggests that a lack of meaning prompts individuals to restore connections to people, places, or the past. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) demonstrated that the desire for identity benefits, connection, control, and virtue drives consumer decisions to choose authentic brands. Similarly, trait inauthenticity is positively correlated with a preference for retro-styled objects (Lasaleta et al., 2019), and this preference is mediated by nostalgia—a desire to reconnect with the past. These findings indicate that meaning disruptions stimulate a longing for

intertemporal connections, a need that vintage products, as enduring symbols of bygone eras, seem to fulfill (Sarial-Abi et al., 2017).

Morhart et al. (2015) noted that the brand symbolism dimension of perceived brand authenticity (PBA) captures the ability of authentic brands to foster the rebuilding of connections. Products and services that allow consumers to symbolically reconnect with the past, places, and people may help restore a general sense of meaning in life (Heine et al., 2006; Sarial-Abi et al., 2017), thereby enhancing well-being.

Vintage and its Role in Rebuilding Disrupted Meaning Frameworks

The concept of "vintage" is commonly associated with the past, yet it retains contemporary relevance by bridging temporal gaps and offering opportunities for recycling and reinvention. Vintage items carry a sense of continuity, establishing connections across time periods. For many consumers, vintage objects symbolize more than aesthetic appeal; they represent a tangible link to a previous era, reflecting enduring values and quality. These items, seen as contributions from a past time, carry historical significance and function as meaningful extensions of the past into the present. The appeal of vintage products lies in their ability to infuse contemporary life with historical resonance, thereby connecting the present with the legacy of the past. In some cases, the allure of vintage is also linked to nostalgia—an idealized recollection of a simpler, safer, or more wholesome time (Kulczynski & Hook, 2024).

Research suggests that meaning disruptions, particularly those linked to trait inauthenticity, stimulate a desire for intertemporal connections. Vintage products serve to satisfy this need by offering a symbolic bridge between past, present, and future (Sarial-Abi et al., 2017). Moreover, retro-styled objects, which resemble vintage items, are shown to appeal to individuals experiencing a threatened sense of authenticity, as they help restore continuity between temporal phases (Lasaleta et al., 2019).

The rise of online shopping and digital product information has shifted how consumers interact with objects, often detaching them from the physical characteristics—such as texture, weight, and craftsmanship—that traditionally guide purchasing decisions. While digital representations of vintage products (e.g., cameras, vinyl records, or antiques) are becoming more prevalent, they lack the embodied experience of interacting with the actual items. This detachment can reduce the consumer's connection to the physical essence of vintage objects, further emphasizing the importance of tangible experiences in fostering meaningful relationships with products.

In a consumer culture marked by mass consumption and disposability, vintage items stand out by offering consumers a sense of authenticity. They provide an anchor for self-identity, offering a degree of stability and rootedness in an otherwise volatile, often inauthentic, world. As stated earlier, servicescapes that address socio-cultural dilemmas can serve therapeutic functions (Higgins et al., 2019). For example, they can provide a form of spiritual revitalization, counteracting the alienation produced by post-industrial capitalism. This paper argues that vintage-themed commercial establishments, offering locally crafted and vintage products, create therapeutic environments that support the rebuilding of meaning frameworks. These commercial establishments, centered around vintage objects, often emphasize traditional craftsmanship, where quality and longevity are prioritized, thereby enhancing their therapeutic value.

The historical significance of vintage objects adds depth to these commercial spaces, providing therapeutic qualities that resonate with consumers. This collective memory, embedded in vintage items, fosters an emotional connection that is especially pronounced among inauthentic consumers experiencing disrupted meaning frameworks. Such individuals seek to restore continuity between past, present, and future by incorporating vintage objects into their lives, which imbue their possessions with a sense of lineage and timelessness. Vintage-themed servicescapes facilitate this process by offering a tangible connection to history and self-identity.

Building on prior research, this paper proposes that vintage-themed commercial establishments provide a unique setting where low-authenticity individuals can rebuild their meaning frameworks. By fostering relationships with place, past, and people, these environments elicit positive emotional responses and enhance feelings of authentic pride.

Perceived Brand Symbolism Connects Consumers to People, Places, and Past

Morhart et al. (2015, p. 203) conceptualized perceived brand authenticity (PBA) as a multidimensional construct encompassing brand symbolism, integrity, credibility, and continuity. Building on this, Nunes et al. (2021) proposed that these four dimensions of brand authenticity should be treated as composite formative constructs, defined entirely by their individual components. This paper argues that, in the context of vintage-themed commercial establishments, brand symbolism and brand continuity are particularly significant in determining perceived brand authenticity. Additionally, a causal relationship is posited between brand continuity and brand symbolism. In line with Morhart et al. (2015), who conceptualized symbolism as a brand's ability to provide self-referential cues that represent connections to the external world, this paper theorizes that brand symbolism plays a crucial role in constructing meaning and re-establishing a sense of coherence. Specifically, it facilitates the rebuilding of relational frameworks by reconnecting individuals to people and places as well as fostering intertemporal connections.

Heine et al. (2006) note that meaning is sought in most easily recruited domains. In this context, perceived brand authenticity in therapeutic servicescapes promotes connections in three key domains: intertemporal connections, connection to people, and connection to place. These connections help foster the rebuilding of meaning frameworks, which in turn instills a sense of order, stability, and predictability. This paper proposes that three antecedents of brand symbolism—brand continuity, self-congruence, and self/brand emotional attachment—conceptually capture these three domains of connection.

The continuity dimension of perceived brand authenticity reflects a brand's perceived timelessness, historical significance, and its ability to transcend trends. It also reflects the perception that the brand will continue to persist in the future. Vintage-themed therapeutic servicescapes foster symbolic connections across time (Sarial-Abi et al., 2017). When consumers perceive the past, present, and future as interconnected, it facilitates the rebuilding or reaffirming of their meaning frameworks (Heine et al., 2006; Sarial-Abi et al., 2017).Brand symbolism also enables consumers with trait inauthenticity to re-establish mental representations of expected relationships between the self and other people. This process is captured by the concept of self-image congruence, which refers to the alignment between a consumer's self-concept and the image of a brand and consumers with brand affinity (Sirgy, 1986). Consumers who perceive self-image congruence with a brand feel a connection with other individuals within the same commercial context, seeing them as "people-like-you." The third connection fostered by brand symbolism is the self/brand connection. While vintage markets are often temporary, they provide a consistent space where like-minded consumers gather. This creates a shared social environment, where interactions among vendors and visitors establish the intangible boundaries of the vintage scene. The self/brand connection reflects the relational structure that ties consumers to the physical and social context of the therapeutic commercial establishment.

To summarize, theoretical and empirical literature supports the notion that authentic self-pursuit drives individuals to seek meaning (Schlegel et al., 2016), and brand symbolism serves as a conduit for rebuilding these meaning frameworks. Drawing from research showing strong, positive associations between authenticity and meaning (Wilt et al., 2021), this paper posits that trait inauthentic consumers, who experience a lack of personal meaning, rely on brand symbolism as a resource to reconstruct their meaning frameworks. Thus, it is both theoretically and conceptually significant to test the hypothesis that it is through connecting to people, place, and the past, orchestrated by brand symbolism, that inauthentic consumers can engage in fluid compensation and rebuild meaningful frameworks. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Brand symbolism serves as a conduit for constructing meaning frameworks when consumers visit branded vintage-themed therapeutic servicescapes. Specifically, brand symbolism within a therapeutic servicescape is influenced by three antecedents: brand continuity, self-image congruence, and self/brand connection.

Positive Affect as an Outcome of a Meaning Rebuilding Response and Restored Authenticity

Affective states refer to the overall emotional condition that a consumer experiences at any given moment. These emotional states are typically positive or negative (Pulligadda et al., 2016). Positive emotions, in particular, have been shown to benefit well-being by broadening attention and, improving cognition (Isen, 1987) and facilitating coping with stress and adversity (Aspinwall, 1998). Strengthening these psychological resources positively impacts both physical and mental well-being (Fredrickson, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011).

Beyond improving consumer well-being, positive affect also has significant managerial implications, particularly regarding consumer choice and brand loyalty. Consumers often use affect as a source of information and as a basis for judgment (Schwarz and Clore, 1983; Pham, 1998), favoring objects when in a positive emotional state and disfavoring them when experiencing negative emotions. Pulligadda et al. (2016) demonstrated that individuals with high trait positive affectivity are more likely to exhibit brand loyalty. Consumers in a positive affective state also tend to place greater weight on brand name when forming preferences (Adaval, 2003).

Prior research has explored the relationship between meaning and positive affect (Folkman et al., 2000; Fredrickson, 2000; King et al., 2006; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). It has been shown that finding meaning, whether in ordinary events or adversity, leads to an emotional "lift" (Folkman et al., 2000; Fredrickson, 2000). This paper proposes that restoring meaning in a therapeutic commercial setting will evoke positive affect, alongside a sense of authentic pride. Therefore, eliciting positive affect in trait inauthentic consumers is expected to expand the pool of loyal consumers.

Consistent with prior research indicating that a sense of authenticity leads to positive affect (Lenton et al., 2016; Wilt, 2021), this paper suggests that this affective state is a consequence of a restored and integrated sense of self. Rebuilding meaning frameworks activates a high-level global construal that fosters meaningful connections between life events, preserving the integrity of the self-view and re-establishing a sense of normalcy and coherence in one's life. This process leads to a restored feeling of authenticity, eliciting positive affect. Moreover, meaning enhances self-esteem by making life goals and values more salient and fostering a sense of control over one's ability to live up to those goals and values (Zhang et al., 2019).

This paper posits that the brand symbolism within therapeutic vintage-themed commercial spaces evokes positive effects among trait inauthentic individuals. The paper further argues that this affective outcome is mediated by heightened feelings of authenticity and the rebuilding of meaning frameworks. This study is the first to examine how the authentic self-pursuit driven by trait inauthenticity leads to the reconstruction of meaning frameworks and the elicitation of positive affect.

H2: Perceived brand authenticity (PBA)—specifically, brand symbolism—will be positively associated with positive affect. The consumer trait authenticity will moderate the relationship between PBA-brand symbolism and positive affect, such that for trait inauthentic consumers, high (low) PBA-brand symbolism will result in high (low) positive affect. High trait authenticity consumers will experience strong positive affect regardless of the level of PBA-brand symbolism.

Authentic Pride as an Outcome of a Meaning Rebuilding Response and Restored Authenticity

A lack of meaning and trait inauthenticity can be a threat to a positive self-view. When individuals cannot maintain an integrated sense of self, they may struggle to preserve a stable and coherent identity, resulting in diminished meaning and a weakened sense of normalcy. Research has shown that self-esteem reflects how individuals perceive their lives as meaningful (Crocker & Park, 2004). Furthermore, people whose positive self-view is challenged are often motivated to reestablish intertemporal connections that highlight their life accomplishments, which in turn helps restore self-esteem (Heine et al., 1999; Heine et al., 2005). Importantly, the pursuit of self-esteem tends to diminish when individuals are presented with opportunities to reflect on meaningful personal achievements attributed to their own efforts (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). Therapeutic servicescapes may foster such reflection by activating high-level

construals—mental representations that link life experiences into a coherent whole—thereby making meaningful patterns in one's life more accessible.

The experience and regulation of pride are closely tied to maintaining a positive and authentic self-view, particularly in contexts characterized by volatility and perceived inauthenticity (Brown & Marshall, 2001). Since positive affect and authentic pride correlate with self-esteem (Tracy & Robins, 2007), their relationship may reflect a shared foundation in positive self-evaluation.

Tracy and Robins (2007) distinguish between authentic pride and hubristic pride. Authentic pride arises from attributions to internal, unstable, and controllable causes. It is rooted in a genuine and stable positive self-view, typically experienced when accomplishments are perceived as the result of intentional and sustained personal effort (Tracy & Robins, 2007; Williams & DeSteno, 2009). This form of pride is closely associated with self-reflection on one's life achievements and the experience of self-worth and internal coherence.

This paper argues that perceived brand authenticity—specifically, the symbolism dimension—can evoke authentic pride by reinforcing consumers' connections to meaningful aspects of their identity. These connections help restore a sense of personal coherence and achievement. For individuals with low trait authenticity, such brand symbolism may serve a compensatory function, fostering feelings of authentic pride through reconstructed meaning frameworks. In contrast, those with high trait authenticity may experience authentic pride consistently, regardless of the degree of perceived brand symbolism present.

H3: Perceived brand authenticity—specifically brand symbolism—will be positively associated with authentic pride. Consumer trait authenticity will moderate this relationship, such that for consumers low in trait authenticity, high (vs. low) brand symbolism will elicit higher (vs. lower) feelings of authentic pride. For consumers high in trait authenticity, levels of brand symbolism will have no effect on experienced authentic pride.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND BACKGROUND

This study's primary objective is to examine the role of perceived brand symbolism in eliciting positive affect and feelings of authentic pride among consumers; and to identify the boundary conditions under which these effects are observed. Specifically, the research investigates how brand symbolism within vintage-themed therapeutic commercial spaces contributes to eliciting positive affective responses, and how individual differences in trait authenticity moderate these outcomes.

This study employs a survey-based methodology to investigate consumer experiences at Brooklyn Flea, a well-established vintage-themed market in New York City. Brooklyn Flea offers a context rich in symbolic value and emotional engagement, making it a suitable setting for studying affective responses within a therapeutic commercial environment. It has gained recognition for its authentic brand positioning and its unique blend of commerce, community, and cultural expression.

This paper posits that vintage-themed therapeutic commercial environments promote the rebuilding of meaning frameworks through fluid compensation. Brooklyn Flea exemplifies such a setting. It has evolved through dynamic interactions among cultural actors—primarily consumers, purveyors of vintage and handcrafted goods, and street-style photographers—whose shared engagement and content dissemination have helped cultivate and communicate the market's symbolic and aesthetic identity. These actors buy, sell, and document vintage and artisanal goods, contributing to the creation and reinforcement of a distinctive "vintage mood."

FIGURE 1
EVOKED POSITIVE AFFECT AND AUTHENTIC PRIDE DRIVEN BY PBA-SYMBOLISM IN RESPONSE TO TRAIT INAUTHENTICITY AND LACK OF PRESENCE OF MEANING
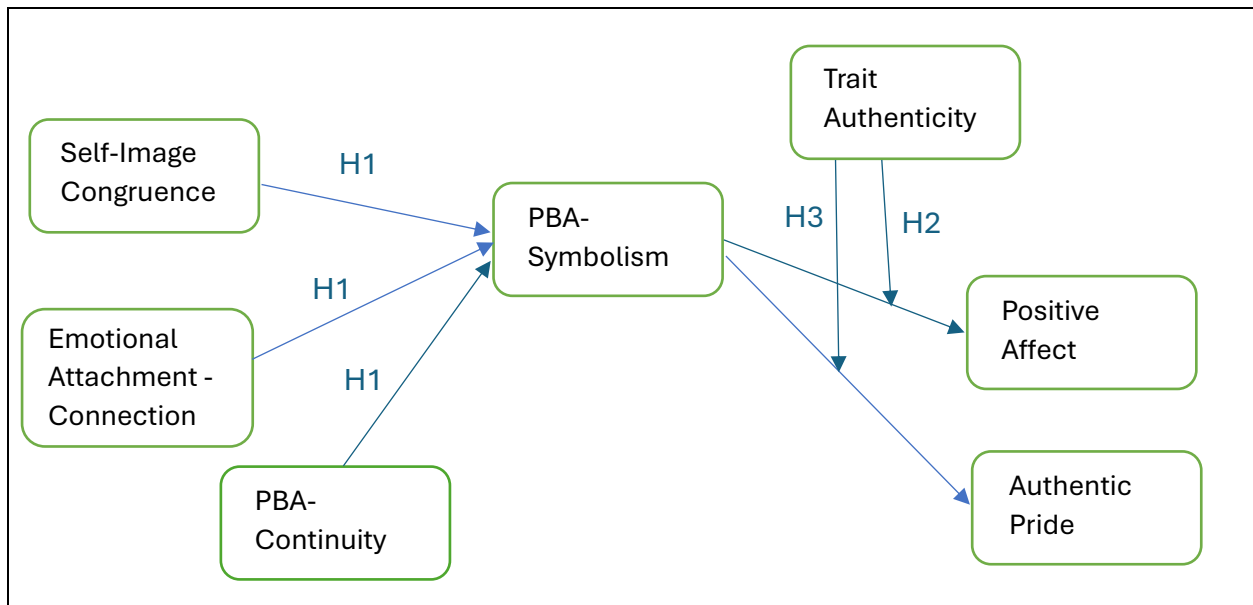
Although often described as "more of a weekend hangout than a retail zone" (Albo, 2009), Brooklyn Flea is widely recognized as one of New York City's premier destinations for shopping vintage clothing, handcrafted goods, and artisanal food (Dy, 2011; Mooney, 2011). It has come to symbolize the organic, sustainable, locally-sourced, and repurposed lifestyle ethos that characterizes contemporary representations of Brooklyn (Peters, 2014). This commercial space is intentionally crafted as a counterpoint to the inauthenticity associated with modern mass consumption. It provides a setting where consumers and producers collectively foster a slower, more community-oriented consumption experience.

As Peters (2014) notes, vendors at the Brooklyn Flea aim to "put the heart and soul back into retail," believing that their practices represent a meaningful departure from conventional retail norms. This environment offers participants a sense of psychological and emotional renewal, allowing them to return to daily urban life feeling refreshed and reconnected. Similarly, Sternberg (2010) characterizes Brooklyn Flea as a hybrid of a consumer bazaar and creative laboratory, cultivating a unique atmosphere of authenticity and cultural engagement. The interactions among consumers, vendors, and observers contribute to an intangible "mood" that alleviates the alienation typical of post-industrial, corporate capitalism (Higgins et al., 2019).

Though it operates as a recurring event, Brooklyn Flea also functions as a stable physical and social place. The vendor booths, food carts, and recurring social rituals create a defined space market participants visit. Interactions among cultural actors establish the symbolic boundaries of the vintage-themed environment. For consumers, this space enables the construction of meaning frameworks by facilitating connections across temporal dimensions (past, present, and future), reinforcing relationships to place, and fostering identification with like-minded individuals. These layers of meaning fostered by the brand symbolism of the therapeutic commercial space, elicit positive affective responses and support consumer well-being (Wilt et al., 2021).

HYPOTHESES TESTING

Sample and Procedure

Data collection was conducted via a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that involved handing out questionnaires to respondents who visited Brooklyn Flea. Four hundred fifty-six visitors participated in the study (M_{Age} =46.5% males; 53.5% females). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants did not receive an incentive. Participants were told that the researchers were interested in visitors' opinions about the Brooklyn Flea.

The questionnaire included the measure of perceived brand authenticity (PBA) (Morhart et al., 2014), authentic pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007), consumers' emotional brand attachment- connection (Thomson et al., 2005), and trait authenticity (Wood et al., 2008). Participants also completed a measure of positive affect (Roehm&Roehm, 2005) and self-image congruence (Sirgy at al.,1997).

Measures

Consumers' Emotional Brand Attachment- Connection

Emotional Connection (a subdimension of Emotional Attachment construct) to a brand was measured using a ten-item scale developed by Thomson et al. (2005) anchored from 1, not at all, to 7, very well. The scale asked participants to indicate the extent to which the following items describe their feelings toward the service brand: 'Connected,' 'Bonded,' and 'Attached.' Cronbach alpha results (α =.910) supported the development of an Emotional Connection index, formed by averaging the responses to the three 7-point scale items: ' Connected, ' 'Bonded,' and 'Attached.'

Positive Affect

Positive affect was measured using four 9-point semantic differential items: 1 = bad, unpleasant, sad; negative; 9 = good, pleasant, happy; positive), consistent with empirical conceptualizations of affect in the marketing literature (Roehm&Roehm, 2005). Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this measure of affect was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .895).

Authentic Pride

Tracy & Robins (2007) developed a seven-item scale to measure authentic pride. Example items are, "I feel accomplished," I feel achieving,' I feel confident,' ' I feel fulfilled,' ' I feel productive,' ' I feel I have self-worth,' and ' I feel successful.' Subjects were asked to indicate to what extent each item describes how they feel on a 5-point scale: 1 – not at all, 5 – extremely, where lower numbers represent lower levels of authentic pride and higher numbers represent higher levels of authentic pride. Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this unidimensional measure of Authentic Pride was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .886) and exceeded the minimum suggested level of Cronbach's Alpha=.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Self-Image Congruence

A self-image congruence was measured by using three items proposed by Sirgy at al. (1997). Example items are, "The image of the Brooklyn Flea is highly consistent with how I see myself," "The typical visitors to the Brooklyn Flea are very much like me," "I identify with those people who prefer the Brooklyn Flea." Subjects were asked to indicate their agreement with the self-image congruence items by providing their response on a 7-point Likert scale (1 -strongly disagree, 2 -moderately disagree, 3 - slightly disagree, 4 – neither agree/no disagree, 5 - slightly agree, 6- moderately agree, 7 - strongly agree). Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this unidimensional measure of the self-image congruence was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .917) and exceeded the minimum suggested level of Cronbach's Alpha=.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)- Continuity

Morhart et al. (2014) developed a four-item scale to measure brand authenticity - continuity. The items are, "A brand with a history," A timeless brand,' A brand that survives times,' and 'A brand that survives

trends.' The four items were measured on a 7-point scale: 1 - strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree, where lower numbers represent lower levels of brand authenticity and higher numbers represent higher levels of brand authenticity. Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this unidimensional measure of Brand Authenticity- Continuity was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .874) and exceeded the minimum suggested level of Cronbach's Alpha=.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)- Symbolism

Morhart et al. (2014) developed a four-item scale to measure brand authenticity - symbolism. The items are, "A brand that adds meaning to people's lives," A brand that reflects important values people care about,' A brand that connects people with their real selves,' and 'A brand that connects people with what is really important.' Each of the four items were measured on a 7-point scale: 1 - strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree, where lower numbers represent lower levels of brand authenticity and higher numbers represent higher levels of brand authenticity. Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this unidimensional measure of Brand Authenticity- Symbolism was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .912) and exceeded the minimum suggested level of Cronbach's Alpha=.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Authentic Personality was measured using a twelve- item scale following (Wood et al., 2008). Participants were asked to describe themselves using a 7-point rating scale, anchored from 1(does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me very well) using the items such as: ' I think it is better to be yourself, than to be popular,' 'I always stand by what I believe in,' ' I am true to myself in most situations,' 'I live in accordance with my values and beliefs.' Results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that this unidimensional measure of the trait authenticity was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha= .863) and exceeded the minimum suggested level of Cronbach's Alpha=.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Study 1: Brand Symbolism Evokes Positive Affect Among Trait Inauthentic Consumers

The effects of PBA- Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA- Connection (independent variables) on the positive affect (dependent variable) through PBA- Symbolism (mediator) were analyzed (Model 14—Hayes, 2022). The Hayes (2022) macro for SPSS® and 5,000 bootstrapped samples were used to analyze the mediation process. The effect of each independent variable was analyzed individually while the remaining independent variables were included as covariates and treated as statistical controls. This approach, including all independent variables in the model, yields an estimate of the part of one independent variable's effect on dependent variable (directly and indirectly through mediator) that is unique to that variable relative to the other variables in the model (Hayes, 2022). Results reveal that the effect of the PBA- Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA on the positive affect is statistically significant and is mediated by the PBA- Symbolism.

The results for mediation are determined for each level of trait authenticity to provide a deeper understanding of the mediation process. Specifically, the bootstrap analysis shows that when the trait authenticity was low (-1 SD) and average (mean), the conditional indirect effect of PBA- Continuity on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism was significant (-1 SD: indirect effect [a × b]= .1251; 95% confidence interval CI:.0482 to .2222, p < .05); mean: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0759; 95% confidence interval [CI: 0.0143 to 0.1506, p<.05); +1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0267; 95% confidence interval [CI: -0.0481 to 0.1096, p > .05] and the direct effect is insignificant (direct effect [c]= .1392; 95% confidence interval CI:-.0106 to .2890, p > .05). The bootstrap analysis shows that when the trait authenticity was low (-1 SD) and average (mean), the conditional indirect effect of Self-Image Congruence on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism is significant (-1 SD: indirect effect [a × b]= .0292; 95% confidence interval CI:.0030 to .0647, p < .05); mean: indirect effect [a × b]= .0177; 95% confidence interval CI:.0003 to .0420, p < .05) and the direct effect is insignificant (direct effect [c] = .0565; 95% CI: -0.0148; 0.2071, p > .05, the confidence interval doesn't include zero). The bootstrap analysis also shows that when the trait authenticity was low (-1 SD) and average (mean), the conditional indirect effect of Consumers' Emotional Brand Attachment- Connection on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism is significant (-1 SD: indirect effect [a × b]= .0624; 95% confidence interval CI:.0200 to .1184, p < .05); mean: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0378; 95% confidence interval [CI: 0.0050 to 0.0795) and the direct effect is

insignificant (direct effect [c] = .1389; 95% CI: -0.0015 to 0.2071, p > .05, the confidence interval doesn't include zero). Thus, the results suggest that for consumers with lower levels of trait authenticity, Consumers' EBA- Connection, Self-Image Congruence, and PBA- Continuity evoke positive affect, which is mediated by PBA- Symbolism.

Results show that for consumer high in trait authenticity, the mediated effect of PBA- Continuity on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism was weaker and insignificant (+1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0267; 95% confidence interval [CI: -0.0481 to 0.1096). Similarly, the mediated effect of Self-Image Congruence on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism was weaker and insignificant (+1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0062; 95% confidence interval [CI: -0.0134 to 0.0284). The mediated effect of Consumers' EBA- Connection on the positive affect through PBA- Symbolism was also weaker and insignificant (+1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = 0.0133; 95% confidence interval [CI: -0.0251 to 0.0562).

Therefore, an analysis reveals that for consumers high in trait authenticity, the PBA- Symbolism does not mediate the effect of the PBA- Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA-connection on the positive affect.

Overall, results provided support for the proposition that PBA- Symbolism mediates the relationship between Consumers' EBA- Connection, Self-Image Congruence, PBA- Continuity, on the one hand, and positive affect, on the other, thus supporting H1 and H2.

Furthermore, the results of the test of highest-order unconditional interaction indicate that there is a statistically significant interaction between trait authenticity and PBA-Symbolism ($\Delta R2 = 0.0075$, $F(1,441) = 4.2811$, $p<0.005$) which provides further support for H1 and H2. The index of moderated mediation is statistically significant (index = -.0230; [95% CI: -0.0493 to -0.0029], the confidence interval doesn't include zero), which provided additional support for H1 and H2.

FIGURE 2
MODERATING EFFECT OF TRAIT AUTHENTICITY ON PBA-SYMBOLISM'S INFLUENCE ON POSITIVE AFFECT
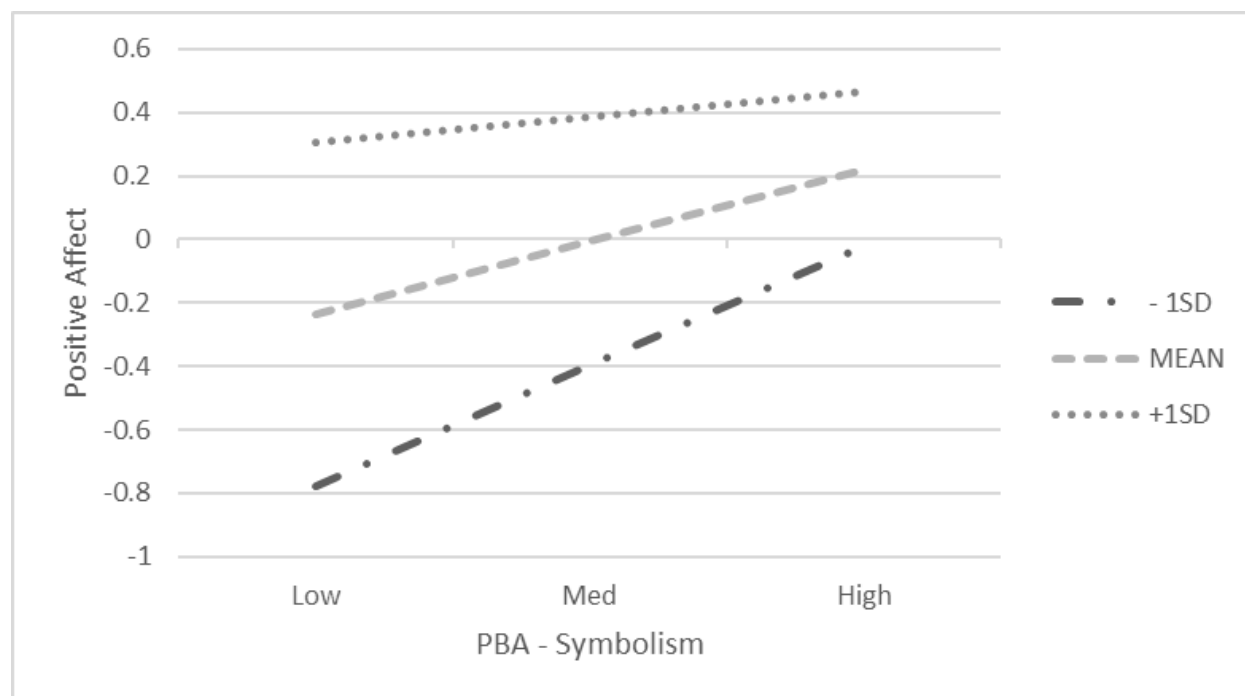

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction of PBA- Symbolism and trait authenticity. The plot shows the relationship between PBA- Symbolism and the positive affect at three levels of trait authenticity (one

standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one above the mean). The Johnson–Neyman technique was also used, as suggested by (Hayes, 2022), by employing the PROCESS macro for SPSS® (Hayes (2022). Findings point to a significant interaction effect of PBA- Symbolism and trait authenticity on the positive affect ($\Delta R2 = .0075$, $F = 4.2811$, $p < 0.05$), with PBA- Symbolism being significantly related to stronger positive affect at low levels of trait authenticity. Figure 2 illustrates the interaction of PBA-Symbolism and trait authenticity at high, medium, and low levels. The Johnson–Neyman technique showed that trait authenticity at a value of 1.999 is the turning point from significance to nonsignificance of the effect of PBA- Symbolism, with 52.7840% of the respondents below and 47.2160% of the respondents above this value.

Findings of Study 1 supported the H1, stating that PBA- Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA- Connection are antecedents of PBA-brand symbolism. In addition, this study supported the H2 providing insights into the seemingly more complex relationship between PBA-Symbolism and positive affect, showing that trait authenticity moderates the relationship. PBA – symbolism evokes a positive affective state among low trait authenticity consumers.

Study 2: Brand Symbolism Evokes Authentic Pride Among Trait Inauthentic Consumers

Similar to the analysis for positive affect, the effects of PBA-Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA-Connection (independent variables) on authentic pride (dependent variable) via PBA-Symbolism (mediator) were examined using Model 14 (Hayes, 2022). As in the previous analysis, the Hayes (2022) PROCESS macro for SPSS® and 5,000 bootstrapped samples were used to analyze the mediation process. Each independent variable's effect was analyzed individually, with the remaining independent variables included as covariates and statistical controls. Mediation analysis demonstrated that the effects of PBA-Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA-Connection on authentic pride were significant and mediated by PBA-Symbolism.

The mediation results were again examined across levels of trait authenticity. Specifically, the bootstrap analysis showed that at low trait authenticity (-1 SD), the conditional indirect effect of PBA-Continuity on authentic pride through PBA-Symbolism was significant (indirect effect [a × b] = .0473; 95% CI: .0078 to .0894, p < .05), while the direct effect was insignificant (direct effect [c] = .0483; 95% CI: -.0152 to .1118, p > .05, confidence interval includes zero). Likewise, the conditional indirect effect of Self-Image Congruence on authentic pride through PBA-Symbolism was significant at low trait authenticity (-1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = .1009; 95% CI: .0002 to .0259, p < .05), with an insignificant direct effect (direct effect [c] = .0434; 95% CI: -.0034 to .0903, p > .05, confidence interval includes zero). For Consumers' EBA-Connection, the conditional indirect effect on authentic pride through PBA-Symbolism was significant both at low (-1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = .0231; 95% CI: .0038 to .0468, p < .05) and average (mean) levels, while the direct effect was significant (direct effect [c] = .0847; 95% CI: .0277 to .1417, p < .05, confidence interval does not include zero).

For consumers high in trait authenticity, the mediated effects were insignificant. Specifically, for PBA-Continuity, the mediated effects through PBA-Symbolism were not significant at average (mean: indirect effect [a × b] = .0252; 95% CI: -.0078 to .0892, p > .05) or high (+1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = .0030; 95% CI: -.0336 to .0413, p > .05) levels. Similarly, the mediated effect of Self-Image Congruence on authentic pride through PBA-Symbolism was insignificant at average and high trait authenticity (mean: indirect effect [a × b] = .0058; 95% CI: -.0020 to .0167, p > .05; +1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = .0007; 95% CI: -.0091 to .0106, p > .05). Finally, the mediated effect of Consumers' EBA-Connection on authentic pride through PBA-Symbolism was also insignificant for consumers with higher trait authenticity (mean: indirect effect [a × b] = .0123; 95% CI: -.0043 to .0315, p > .05; +1 SD: indirect effect [a × b] = .0133; 95% CI: -.0180 to .0216, p > .05). Therefore, while the indirect effect was not significant for high-trait-authenticity consumers, authentic pride levels remained high at both low and high levels of PBA-Symbolism.

Overall, the results supported the hypothesis that PBA-Symbolism mediates the effect of Consumers' EBA-Connection, Self-Image Congruence, and PBA-Continuity on authentic pride. Consistent with the prior analysis, the test of the highest order unconditional interaction indicated a statistically significant

interaction between trait authenticity and PBA-Symbolism (ΔR^2 = 0.0080, F(1,448) = 4.6649, p < 0.005), providing further support for H3. Additionally, the index of moderated mediation was statistically significant (index = -.0100; 95% CI: -.0203 to -.0013, confidence interval does not include zero), further supporting H3.

Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between PBA-Symbolism and trait authenticity, depicting the relationship between PBA-Symbolism and authentic pride at three levels of trait authenticity (one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean). As in the previous section, the Johnson–Neyman technique was employed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). The results confirmed H3, showing a significant interaction effect between PBA-Symbolism and trait authenticity on authentic pride (ΔR^2 = .0080, F = 4.6649, p < .05), with PBA-Symbolism being significantly related to stronger feelings of authentic pride among low-trait-authenticity consumers. The Johnson–Neyman analysis revealed that trait authenticity at a value of -.1500 marked the turning point from significance to nonsignificance in the effect of PBA-Symbolism, with 42.5439% of participants below and 57.4561% above this value.

FIGURE 3
MODERATING EFFECT OF TRAIT AUTHENTICITY ON PBA-SYMBOLISM INFLUENCE ON AUTHENTIC PRIDE
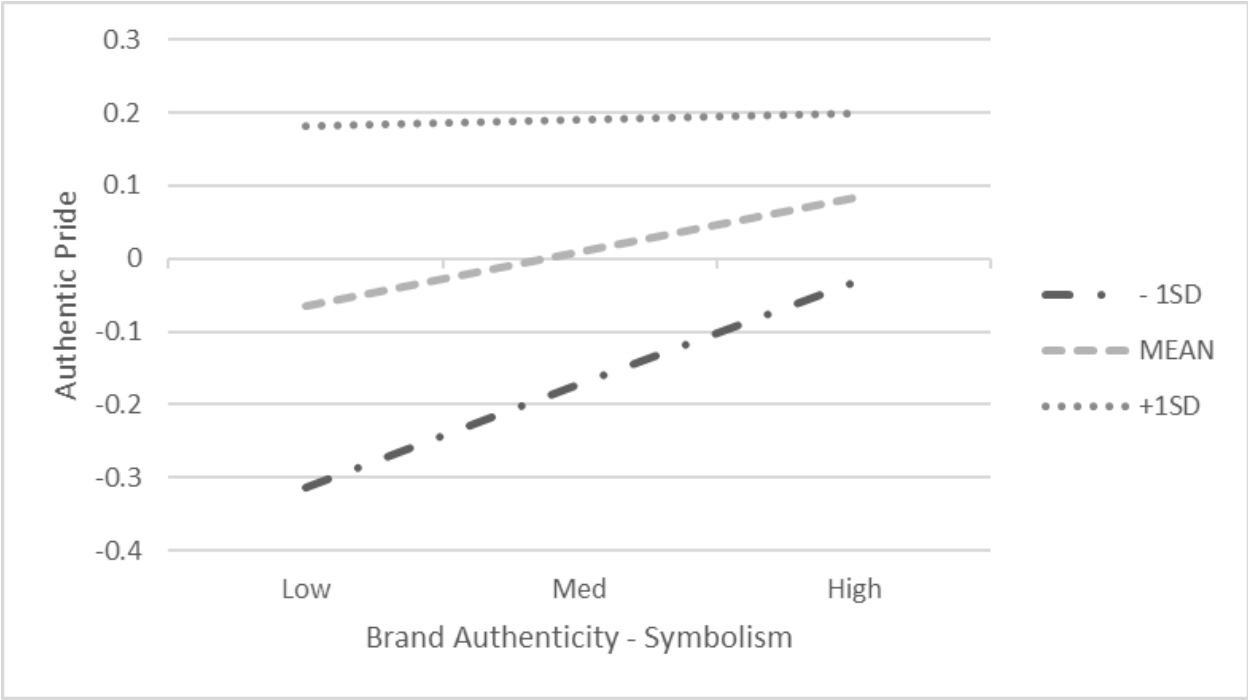
Study 2 thus again supported H1, confirming that PBA-Continuity, Self-Image Congruence, and Consumers' EBA-Connection are antecedents of PBA-Symbolism. In addition, it supported H3, offering insight into the more complex relationship between PBA-Symbolism and authentic pride, showing that trait authenticity moderates this relationship. Consumers low in trait authenticity appear to experience feelings of authentic pride evoked by the PBA-Symbolism present in a therapeutic servicescape.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Experiences of inauthenticity are increasingly prevalent in contemporary life. Felt inauthenticity is closely tied to perceptions that one's life lacks meaning (Wilt et al., 2021), which has negative consequences

for both mental and physical health (King & Hicks, 2021). This paper examined the previously unexplored role of the *symbolism dimension* of Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA-Symbolism) in vintage-themed therapeutic commercial spaces, investigating how this specific dimension adds meaning to consumers' lives, elicits positive affect and authentic pride, and ultimately contributes to consumer well-being and marketplace-relevant outcomes.

The results of the survey study presented here provide compelling evidence for the robust effect of PBA-Symbolism in therapeutic servicescapes on positive affect and authentic pride. Specifically, the study addressed whether trait authenticity moderates these effects. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between PBA-Symbolism and emotional outcomes is contingent on individual differences in trait authenticity: the positive affective responses evoked by PBA-Symbolism are especially pronounced among consumers with low trait authenticity, but they do not significantly vary among those with high trait authenticity, who maintain positive affect and authentic pride regardless of the level of PBA-Symbolism.

The study further identified key antecedents of PBA-Symbolism—namely, brand continuity, self-brand attachment, and self-image congruence—which help generate positive affective responses. Importantly, the findings highlight the role of relational integration of the self with people, place, and past driven by PBA-Symbolism in shaping consumers' affective response. Prior research has shown that positive affect and authentic pride are positively linked to meaning in life and well-being, while inversely related to inauthenticity (Wilt et al., 2021). Meaning, in this context, refers to existing relational structures that integrate the self with people, places, and the past in expected and predictable ways (Sarial-Abi et al., 2017). Previous work has also established that vintage-themed offerings evoke "vintage anemoia"—a form of vicarious nostalgia for a past one has never experienced (Kulczynski & Hook, 2024).

The present findings suggest that vintage-themed therapeutic servicescapes satisfy not only consumers' desire for intertemporal connections, particularly among those experiencing trait inauthenticity, but also foster identification with other visitors and emotional connection to the place itself, imbued with the "vintage mood." The collective exchanges among market participants contribute to self-image congruence by mediating relational dynamics between cultural actors who share an appreciation for vintage aesthetics, fashion, design, and cultural elements. This pattern of relational integration further enables inauthentic consumers to address meaning disruption by reconstructing alternative meaning frameworks, which in turn evokes positive emotional states.

While the results underscore the role of PBA-Symbolism in eliciting positive affective responses, they also reveal a more nuanced relationship between PBA-Symbolism and emotional states. Specifically, the moderating role of trait authenticity suggests that individuals with disrupted meaning frameworks (i.e., high trait inauthenticity) are particularly responsive to PBA-Symbolism, as it offers a route to reaffirm alternative relational structures and restore meaning. In contrast, individuals with high trait authenticity maintain stable positive emotional states irrespective of the level of PBA symbolism.

These findings, derived from a naturalistic setting rather than contrived laboratory scenarios, enhance confidence in their generalizability and applicability to other vintage-themed therapeutic commercial environments. The results carry significant implications for marketplace strategy, underscoring the importance of a service brand's potential to deliver therapeutic benefits and managerially relevant outcomes. Effective tactics might include selecting strategic geographic locations, implementing vintage-themed merchandising strategies, using prominent signage featuring vintage cues, curating social media multimedia content, and orchestrating brand communications that strengthen consumer associations between the brand and the aesthetics, fashion, styles, and design elements contributing to the "vintage mood." Given the pervasiveness of trait inauthenticity, it is incumbent upon scholars and practitioners to further explore how commercial establishments endowed with therapeutic qualities can serve as meaningful interventions for consumers struggling with inauthenticity.

While prior research has suggested that therapeutic consumption can compensate for generalized daily anxieties (Bauman, 2007), this paper introduces vintage-themed commercial establishments as settings that specifically alleviate the unease associated with a lack of meaning among trait inauthentic consumers. Importantly, the study provides robust evidence that while high trait authenticity consumers experience positive affect and authentic pride regardless of the level of PBA-Symbolism, trait inauthenticity

individuals show affective responses that are directly contingent on the strength of PBA-Symbolism of the commercial establishment.

This study's findings open up new avenues for research. Although trait authenticity emerged as a significant moderator, it is plausible that other individual difference constructs may play similar roles; exploring these possibilities remains an open avenue for future investigation. Prior research has identified mechanisms such as therapeutic release, therapeutic renewal, therapeutic relations, and restorative emotion scripts (Higgins et al., 2019) underlying therapeutic servicescapes' restorative effects. This paper extends that work by proposing relational integration of the self, people, place, and past as a previously unexamined driver of restorative effects, and by identifying PBA-Symbolism as a mediator that facilitates the rebuilding of meaning frameworks, thereby alleviating the unease arising from inauthenticity.

Beyond advancing understanding of how PBA-Symbolism produces therapeutic outcomes, this research contributes to two recently identified priority areas for marketing scholars. First, Haugtvedt et al. (2008) have called for greater integration of individual differences in marketing research. Given trait authenticity's association with numerous important outcomes, understanding how it shapes managerially relevant effects enriches both theoretical and practical insights. Second, this paper contributes to the emerging paradigm of clinical consumer psychology (Mirabito et al., 2022; Posavac et al., 2022), which seeks to understand when clinical psychology phenomena intersect with consumer tendencies. As trait authenticity is linked to various maladaptive psychological outcomes, identifying consumption contexts that help restore meaning and authenticity holds both scholarly and practical significance. From a consumer well-being perspective, reducing inauthenticity and meaninglessness is a worthy goal in its own right, suggesting that all service brands might benefit from introducing therapeutic elements into their offerings to add much-needed meaning to consumers' lives.

In summary, this research demonstrates that trait authenticity plays a crucial role in determining when PBA-Symbolism can restore a sense of authenticity and evoke positive affective outcomes. By identifying a consumption context that improves the well-being of inauthentic consumers, the present study simultaneously advances the understanding of an important trait relevant to clinical consumer psychology and contributes actionable insights for the design and management of therapeutic commercial spaces.

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