



forward thinking series

# Even better than the real thing

Understanding generation Y's definition of 'authenticity' for the Levi's brand

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## Introduction

“People increasingly see the world in terms of real and fake. They want to buy something real from someone genuine, not a fake from some phony”, wrote James Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II in their management book “Authenticity. What Consumers Really Want” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). In a society looking for less materialistic buying motivations, choosing an authentic product or brand reduces the feeling of guilt. ‘Consuming’ becomes discovering new sensations and merely innocently enjoying a forgotten or seemingly lost past. The postmodern consumers today are looking for new experiences or thrilling events that engage them personally and will be remembered forever. As the market is not only flooded with an abundance of goods and services, but also increasingly filled with deliberately staged live experiences, the distinctions between real and unreal are blurring. This ‘experience economy’ has affected the choice criteria consumers are using today. Their perception of how real, genuine or sincere a company or brand is became essential in doing business today. Consumers seem to value authenticity in a world that is characterized by the mass production of artefacts. The popularity of reality shows on TV, for instance, can be seen as a quest for authenticity within the traditionally fiction-oriented entertainment paradigm (Rose and Wood, 2005).

The classic way of looking at the concept of “brand authenticity” is defined by components such as: origin, history and heritage of a brand. (Gilmore and Pine, 2007) Levi Strauss & Co., known as the inventor of the denim jeans with its Levi’s® 501® jeans model positioned as the ultimate original jeans, was interested in finding out what the modern interpretations of authenticity are today. More specifically they wanted to translate their own brand heritage and history (a constant and considerable part of the Levi Strauss & Co. DNA in the past and even today) in a postmodern way to the target group of young consumers (13-29 year olds). Previous studies into the characteristics and behaviour of Generation Y have largely demonstrated the consumer cynicism and brand and marketing savviness of this generation of young people. Purely image-based strategies of brands that “are” instead of “do” are often considered to be inauthentic. In making buying decisions they often put greater trust into the opinion of their immediate social circle (peer group members, parents and even store personnel) than into big marketing or

advertising campaigns (Twenge, 2006 and Verhaeghe, Van den Bergh, Colin, 2008). Many multinational or global brands targeting youth are therefore challenged to stay relevant for a generation that was raised by their baby boom parents in a media and advertising saturated world full of exciting experiences and choices – because nothing kills authenticity like ubiquity. Using advertising to project an image of authenticity might not be so productive because methods of mass marketing are believed to undermine such claims (Beverland and Luxton, 2005). The success of global brands today is often not depending on operational excellence or product superiority but lies in youth’s perception of the brand as authentic. These perceptions are directly linked to the degree to which a brand reflects the individual young consumer’s self-image as well as his/her affiliation with certain youth lifestyles or subcultures (Gilmore and Pine, 2007 and Verhaeghe, Van den Bergh, Colin, 2008).

In this paper we will describe the qualitative research in Belgium and The Netherlands that reviewed different approaches of the authenticity concept and deduced the most engaging attributes that are both influencing the authenticity perception as well as triggering brand consideration among youth. These findings eventually resulted in a new definition of authenticity, perfectly in line with the “Live Unbuttoned” campaign for the Levi’s® 501® jeans.

Since authenticity is becoming more important in relations between (young) consumers and marketers, this paper will also assess the impact of this changing environment for qualitative market researchers who are interacting with the Generation Y.

## Definitions of authenticity

Many authors (Kapferer, 2001; Aaker, 1996) have denominated authenticity as a core component of successful brands since it supports the creation of a unique brand identity. According to John Grant, author of bestselling management books such as *The Green Marketing Manifesto*, “authenticity is the benchmark against which all brands are now judged”. Still, little is known about how companies and brands can create and maintain images of authenticity (Jones, Anand and Alvarez, 2005; Fine, 2003) and until now, few studies have been addressing the impact of authenticity on consumer decisions (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). To our knowledge

Figure 1 – Back pocket logo



studies documenting the way the critical Generation Y perceives and values brand strategies based on authenticity are completely lacking.

The term “authenticity” etymologically originates from the Greek ‘authentikos’, in which ‘autos’ means self and ‘entea’ refers to tools or instruments. Today it is generally defined as: the quality of being of an established authority (author) or being genuine, not corrupted from the original, or truthfulness of origins (Derbaix and Decrop, 2007). Nowadays many brands communicate to consumers when they were established. For instance on a Levi’s® jeans the logo (see figure 1) shows that the use of copper rivets to strengthen the stitched pockets of the denim working pants was patented on May 20th, 1873, the day blue jeans were invented. Kronenbourg, the brewery founded by Geronimus Hatt, is also communicating its year of birth 1664. It is even the name of the main lager brand of the company.

In this current paper we will use two approaches of authenticity, a traditional approach and a postmodern approach:

### 1. The classic approach

Consumers are looking for cues that are lowering purchase risks and indicating that a brand offers good value for money, meaning relatively high quality for an affordable cost. Origin, history and heritage of a brand are cues that support this brand positioning and can be seen as the traditional definition of brand authenticity. The ‘origin’, as illustrated in the examples

of Levi’s® and Kronenbourg, is the invention, starting point or beginning of a company or brand. ‘History’ is what happened since the origin of a brand until now, such as new product launches, new identities, advertising campaigns, etc. And the difference with ‘heritage’ is that the latter is also a collection or collective memory of things that happened with a brand without the involved company or brand having a deliberate influence on this. Examples of heritage are: celebrities who consume or use a certain product or brand in public – as long as they are not asked or sponsored by the brand, or just leading edge or even mainstream consumers that pick up brands and make them fashionable (Gilmore and Pine, 2007)

### 2. The postmodern approach

In broader view authenticity refers not only to a realness based on origins, brand history or heritage but also to staying true to a unique brand DNA, and not trying to be something different to be in vogue. In this definition not pretending and honesty are core attributes.

In the last decades of the previous millennium, Levi Strauss & Co. positioned their 501® jeans model in what can be seen as the classic way of defining ‘brand authenticity’. Levi Strauss & Co. uses the term “original authenticity” to describe the fact that they are the oldest brand. In fact Levi’s® is probably the youngest oldest brand in the world. The 501® jeans is the first and genuine, the classic, the original, 100% American iconic jeans brand. The fact that movie stars such as James Dean made the blue jeans popular to youth is also an essential part of the brand’s heritage. For years Levi’s® was also one of the only global jeans brands available. By the end of the 1990s, new entrants in the market such as Diesel, Replay, Pepe jeans and G-Star Raw challenged the American classic by adding a rather edgy aspect of brand personality and introducing more extreme jean models and washings to the market. Other luxury fashion brands such as Armani, Dolce & Gabbani, and Gucci, etc. also acknowledged the value of the denim market and entered the category with their own luxury line of expensive jeans. Both strategies were well received among young target groups, especially with the status seeking part of the market whose main concern is to look cool in front of others to gain social success and belong to a group of popular kids. While most Baby Boom parents were wearing the Levi’s® brand, it became more challenging for the brand to

connect with the youngest generation and fight against a whole new range of competitive brands. Although origin, history and heritage serves as a mean to the end perception of good quality and reliability, it was worth exploring whether Generation Y consumers were still involved enough with the traditional 'brand authenticity' attributes. To develop the marketing campaign of the 501® jeans model, Levi Strauss & Co. decided to investigate their own 'original' and 'authentic' brand DNA and examine whether a modern, more attitudinal and emotional interpretation of brand authenticity would also secure the appeal among today's generation of youth. Levi Strauss & Co. could for instance also approach authenticity by stressing that it is not pretending to be something that it is not and that Levi's® stays honest to itself and society as opposed to competitors.

Most researchers agree that authenticity shouldn't be seen as an attribute inherent in a product or brand but is better assessed by a particular evaluator in a particular context (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) This paper explores both the perception of the old definition of authenticity as well as the more modern attitudinal interpretation among the target group of youth (13-29 year olds). Starting from these entry points, Levi's® also wanted to focus on their competitive brand image positioning compared with the main competitors in both Benelux markets.

## Discussing 'authenticity' online with youth

Forty-eight youth in three age groups (13-17; years 18-24 years; 25-29 years) and in two countries (Belgium and The Netherlands) were recruited to take part in online discussion groups (each consisting of eight participants) in the course of July 2008. Youth were equally spread across age and gender and came from different regions and educational backgrounds in both countries. They were recruited via telephone. Online discussion groups enable a synchronous conversation of around two hours and allow using a variety of projective, drawing, sorting, uploading and media sharing techniques (De Ruyck, Schillewaert, Verhaeghe, Friedman, 2009). Specifically for youth a chat environment is more comfortable than an offline face-to-face setting where both an adult moderator as well as peers (and the pressure involved with social status and acceptance) can be intimidating especially for the youngest (teen) population.

Topics discussed online during the sessions with youth were:

- Pairing exercises with most favorite brands of youth and reasons why;
- Association exercise with tag cloud-technique for the meaning of 'authenticity' (one based on classic authenticity, one on postmodern authenticity);
- Authentic persons, products and brands;• Honesty: honest vs. dishonest brands, the use of celebrities, brand stretching examples;
- Origin: idem;
- Heritage: idem and reactions after showing an Adidas commercial that focuses on the Adidas brand heritage;
- Credibility: idem;
- Green (ecology) and red (social, e.g. Product Red) claims;
- Authenticity centered mapping exercise: brand sorting – Levi's® vs. Diesel vs. G-Star vs. Replay;
- Translating authenticity related values such as honesty and transparency to the market research context (what do young participants expect from the interaction with market researchers).

After the qualitative sessions we organized an online user-created brainstorm (Verhaeghe, De Ruyck, Schillewaert 2008) asking one single question to 188 youth in Belgium and the Netherlands: "Suppose an unspecific apparel brand is brought to life in a human form and you have a blind date with that brand (that person). What kind of questions would you like to ask the brand to detect whether you would make a good match with that brand (person)?"

## Discussing 'authenticity' online with youth

The results of the online discussion groups can be linked to the two approaches of 'authenticity'.

### 1. The classic approach: Origin – history - heritage

Youth are not aware of the origin of their favorite brands and origin only plays a subtle role, i.e. indicating quality or inducing a feeling of nostalgia and coziness. Youth don't actively seek for information related to birth dates of a certain brand. For instance

in the beer category where the date of origin is often an integral part of the brand logo (Kronenbourg, Stelle Artois), the recognition and recall of these packaging or logo items is very low. When the age or history of a product or brand is concerned, youth tend to think more in relative and comparative terms. A brand such as Apple seems to have the same association of quality and 'being around for a while' even if it is in fact a rather recent brand. In their limited years of being a conscious consumer Apple has always been present for youth, just like Levi's®. The fact that parents or grandparents are using a certain brand is also a proof to youth that the brand is "old". When it concerns the country of origin, the critical Generation Y does make a distinction between the real origin and the country in which a brand or product is produced. Most youth don't know the country of origin of their favorite brands, but the awareness of where it is manufactured is higher since this is often indicated in a label "made in...". For certain product categories the country of origin can evoke good as well as bad quality associations. Japanese brands nowadays seem to have the halo of being technologically advanced, for instance, as opposed to Chinese brands, which equals crap for them. Gilmore and Pine (2007) correctly emphasize that some regions that were once known for junk, like Japan, are today symbols of quality. China is now known for its ability to "ManeFAKEture" (a term coined by Ted Fishman in New York Times, 2005) but may one day be known for its authenticity. Country of origin plays a more important role for the quality perception among young target groups in certain industries such as food, health and beauty, technology (durables), cars and clothing. Other researchers have also found that a feeling of 'authenticity' can be aroused through an ethnic or cultural identity. Lu and Fine (1995) for instance found that the appearance and role performance of waiters and cooks are crucial to the customers' evaluation of the authenticity of the food they had in an ethnic restaurant. In contrast to what we had expected from these savvy consumers, youth don't mind too much when brands fake a certain origin. For example, Häagen-Dazs ice cream is linked by youth to Switzerland or a Scandinavian country. When confronted with the fact that it is in fact an American brand using foreign branding as a marketing technique, and the digraphs 'äa' and 'zs' are actually invalid in all Scandinavian languages, they consider this to be funny and cunning.

Youth are not aware of the heritage of brands and it is not something they are really interested in. The history of a brand and how it was affected by acts of external people have very little importance to them. Advertisers that want to claim brand heritage such as Adidas face a difficult challenge to convince Generation Y that their brand stories are genuine and real. The same conclusion can be made about using celebrity endorsements for brands. Youth are very critical about this marketing strategy. To them celebrity endorsement implies that a brand is not confident enough to have an own image and hence it is interpreted as a weak moment of a brand. It shows that a brand has no real personality on its own and needs to buy coolness by using cool persons. Therefore celebrity endorsement only pays off in certain circumstances, e.g. if the sector of the product is related to the natural environment and the skills of the celebrity. Athletes supporting the Nike brand or Philippe Starck designing the bottle, glass and can for the 1664 beer brand are considered as creating an added value for the brand. On the other hand Gordon Ramsay, the Michelin-starred celebrity chef, endorsing Gordon's gin (only based on the similarity with his famous first name) is not linked to the gin brand's heritage (with a date of origin that goes back 200 years before Ramsay was born) and therefore rejected by youth. The fact that Gordon Ramsay is simultaneously supporting about 400 other products is of course also undermining the credibility of this celebrity endorsement (Ritson, 2008).

## **2. The postmodern approach: Honesty – credibility – openness - transparency**

Honesty as a concept is much more diverse and complex than the upfront interpretation of just avoiding telling lies. It is also about being respectful (to youth, to society, to the environment, to children, animals, etc.), and also about being open and transparent. It is about not being afraid to listen to youth, to discuss with them and stay constructive when receiving negative comments. Youth want to feel respected and valued in their opinion. Generation Y was raised by Baby Boom parents, who gave birth at an older age (average age of the first child was 30 years) resulting in a more mature and democratic way of taking up the role as an educator, coach or teacher. As a result Generation Y seems to value authenticity in many more aspects of life than only the products they buy. Other researchers (Millet, Van den Bergh,

Pandelaere, in review) give the example of the unwillingness to take a pill that would enhance traits but at the same time fundamentally change who you are. They argue that people might even prefer an inferior but authentic product to another that is superior but not authentic. During the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing the nine-year old Lin Miaoke “sang” the Hymn to the Motherland. Although the performance was perceived as perfect, people were shocked when it turned out that the girl actually performed a playback and the real singer was not allowed to perform in front of the cameras due to esthetic aspects of her appearance. Interestingly enough lying is not a definite situation to this generation. People can admit their mistakes, explain everything and win back their credibility. Bill Clinton and the oval room confession concerning his relationship with Monica Lewinsky is a good illustration of this. The Bill Clinton ‘brand’ actually became suddenly more like them: accessible, human, fragile, imperfect and thus forgivable. For youth it is quite difficult to recognize honesty in people when they do not really know them. When discussing honest people with them, they will refer to people in their close neighborhood (parents, friends, and teachers) because they know these for a longer period and have experienced whether they are honest or not. The same conclusion can be made with relation to the honesty of brands. It is quite difficult for a brand to claim honesty with youth today. Although they want to believe that some brands are honest, they feel they are never really sure. Being ‘honest’ as a brand to youth means that you are worth their money, and you never disappoint them. This reliability is detected by ‘trial and error’ choice strategies. Apart from reliability, brand honesty also means staying true to oneself. It is the typical youth market paradox of focusing on the authentic core businesses on one hand while also being innovative enough to stay interesting, thrilling, not boring and relevant to this fickle generation of ‘stimulus junkies’ on the other. Considering this paradox, line extensions are often more credible than brand extensions. McDonald’s can easily start serving breakfast, salads or ice cream but mobile phone cards would be too far-fetched. Other authors have also suggested that strong brands should balance their actions reinterpreting their symbolic brand stories in response to changing tastes (Brown, Kozinets and Cherry, 2003).

In the older age group (18-29 years and specifically 25+ years) honesty is closer linked to Corporate

Social Responsibility programs of companies and their position towards child labor, animal testing, ecology (carbon footprint) and charity and also often linked to certain people working or representing that company or brand, e.g. Steve Jobs, Richard Branson.

As a multinational like Coca Cola or Nike it is much more difficult to be honest according to youth. The reasoning behind this is that multinationals employ more people, and the more people involved with businesses, the greater the chance that someone within the organization could do something dishonest and ruin the company’s image. In this digital age where consumers have more power using social networks, blogs or discussion boards to discuss brands, advertising or customer experiences, they have all the tools at their disposal to detect what is real, honest and true. This new reality of transparency has put an even higher premium on authenticity, making it an import driver of brand credibility (Blackshaw, 2008). But this does not automatically imply that a company or brand that gets negative comments on the internet is immediately perceived as inauthentic since ‘authenticity’ is a combination of several dimensions and ‘honesty’ is just one of them. In general the favorite brands of this generation of youth need to be more human, more honest and more real than brands used to be. Especially in image oriented product categories such as apparel, fashion and jeans a brand should be like a real friend to youth. Brands must be: **credible, real, unique** (have an own style and stay true to this style), **reflect the self-image** (do the same kind of activities they like themselves whether they are into extreme sports, clubbing or art for instance – for more information on youth subcultures and the mirroring implications for youth brands, see Verhaeghe, Van den Bergh, Colin, 2008) and **stay honest**. Using an acronym for these characteristics, youth brands should generate a ‘**CRUSH**’ (Credible – Real – Unique – Self-Image – Honesty) with youth rather than depend on the old H<sub>2</sub>O (Heritage, History, Origin) interpretation of authenticity.

When analyzing the User Created Brainstorm using the propagation method (see Verhaeghe, De Ruyc, Schillewaert, 2008) we noticed that the qualitative conclusions were largely confirmed by the sample of 188 youth. The youth asked a lot of questions about:

- **Quality and good value for money** (reliability/honesty)
  - “Are you of good quality?”
  - “Do I get value for money as a consumer?”
- **Origin of the brand** (real)
  - “Which country are you from?”
- **Honesty of the brand** (honesty)
  - “Was there any child labour involved?”
  - “Are you reliable?”
  - “Which thought/philosophy/motto do you propagate?” (also self-image)

- **Originality (uniqueness) of the brand** (unique)
  - “Why are you different from other brands?”

## How Levi Strauss & Co. uses the modern definition of authenticity

By propagating that Levi's® is honest to itself and not pretending to be what it is not, the brand modernized the brand value proposition to the market of Generation Y youth. Levi Strauss & Co. wanted to stress in the marketing campaign of the 501® jeans that it believes everybody has the freedom to express their own individuality and creativity without being judged by others. The campaign idea “Live Unbuttoned” is related to completely be yourself. To live unbuttoned is to be uninhibited, unrestrained,

Figure 2 - Website

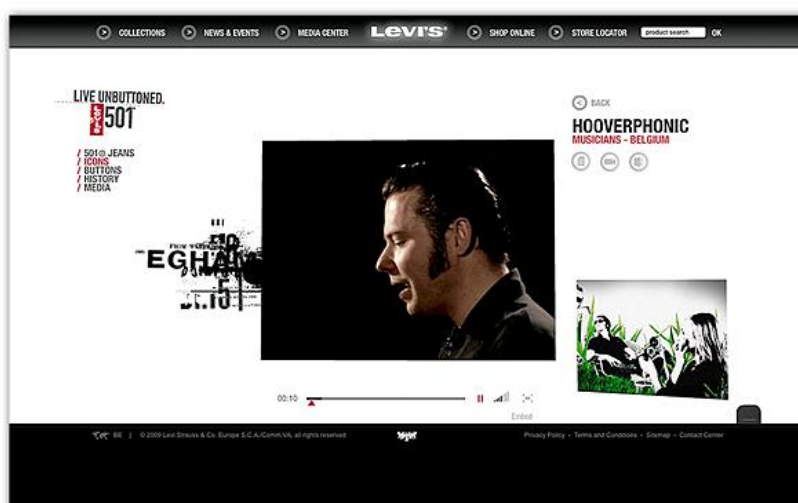


Figure 3 – TV Commercial screenshot



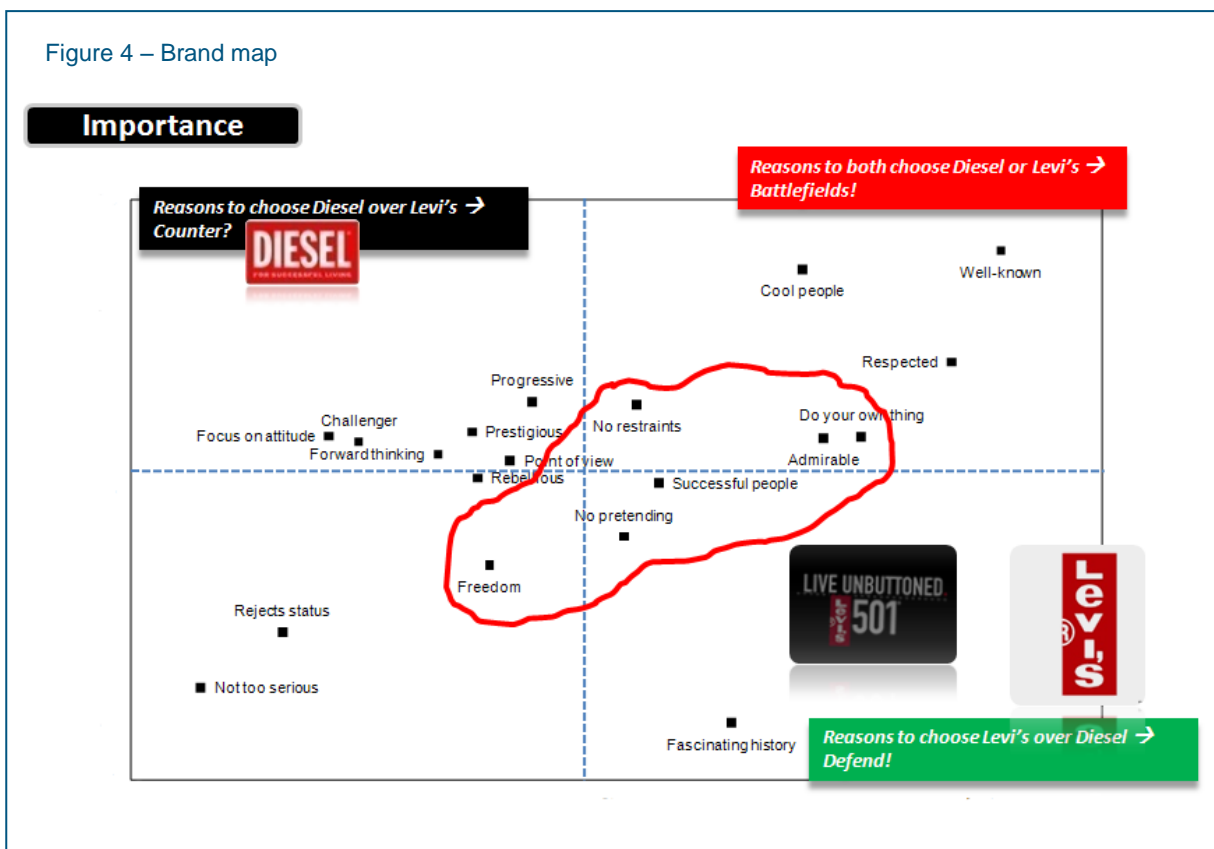
unembarrassed. It's about throwing off the restraints of convention and doing what comes naturally. Following your heart. Telling people what you really think. Opening up and letting it all out. It's about freedom. The campaign (see figures 2 and 3) started with the Live Unbuttoned websites showing movies with local heroes (e.g. emerging artists) demonstrating the revelation of 'personal secrets'. The "hero" answers five intimate questions and invites the visiting audience to do the same and be honest and open. The audiovisual ad campaign shows a flirting couple revealing step by step (while literally unbuttoning the 501® jeans) personal stuff to each other.

By integrating this modern or attitudinal interpretation of 'authenticity' into the 501® jeans campaign, Levi Strauss & Co. managed to come up with another interpretation of its brand values proposition that would match with the Generation Y of youth. The brand mapping in figure 4 shows the brand image attributes of both Levi's® and one of its main competitors Diesel based on the perception among Belgian youth aged 13-29 years. This graph shows the reasons why Levi's® fans prefer their brand on the horizontal axes and the same for Diesel buyers on the vertical axes. The upper right quadrant of the mapping shows brand items that are attributed to both Levi's® and Diesel, this is the 'battlefield' containing

the most important image aspects to compete in the jeans market. The upper left corner is showing the relative strengths of the Diesel brand compared to Levi's® and the lower right corner does the same for Levi's® compared to Diesel.

This 'battlefield' analysis of both brands also shows that the Levi's® 501® jeans Live Unbuttoned campaign and its core message of "not pretending, no restraints, freedom of thinking and acting and do your own thing" is referring to important battlefield brand items on one hand but staying close to the Levi's® brand perception and strengths on the other hand. It is crucial for a brand's credibility among this critical generation of youth to stay true to one's own nature and not to try to relate to image attributes that are perceived by the target group as claimed by competing brands. The modern attitudinal interpretation of the Levi's® brand values and the Live Unbuttoned marketing campaign are both perfect examples of how a brand can stay honest to itself while also remaining relevant for the new generation of youth.

Levi Strauss & Co. is also honest to society by several corporate social responsibility programs. In 1985 the Levi Strauss Foundation was the first U.S. corporate foundation to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and it has since contributed more than \$40



million in grants to HIV/AIDS service organizations in more than 40 countries. The foundation and company-supported programs help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, specifically in communities with extreme need and scarce resources. The Levi Strauss Foundation funds programs that challenge the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS, support disproportionately affected and underserved communities (e.g. by research activities that contribute to the development of strategies for HIV control) and increase the availability of clean syringes to prevent the spread of HIV through needle sharing. During one of the recent brand activities, linked to the work of the Foundation, Levi Strauss Benelux & Nordic Countries has invited artists from the most diverse disciplines – but all breathing the spirit of the brand – to add their personal touch to the classic back pocket, resulting in precious little works of art by artists like fashion designers, TV-hosts, actresses, and ‘must see’ artists and bands. The back pockets were then sold as collectables through internet auctions (see figure 5).

## Implication of ‘authenticity’ for market researchers

The modern definition of authenticity and its importance to Generation Y also affects the way we as researchers should interact with this target group.

Therefore, the concepts of ‘openness’, ‘transparency’ and ‘honesty’ were also discussed with youth in the context of participating in (online) research. This part of the findings is useful to understand the new challenges market researchers are facing when interacting with young populations.

We are dealing with a new generation of respondents. Especially for the 13-17 year old segment, the internet has a different role in their lives than it does for older people. They are the so-called ‘digital natives’: they grew up with the internet and a big part of their lives takes place online. Their online networks are just as important as their offline networks. But, they are still regular teenagers; they just live in another context. They still want to have fun, make friends and have a voice (Bennett, Maton and Kervin, 2008).

During this qualitative study we focused on the following elements:

- **Appeal:** how can we make research projects more ‘fun’ for them and do we need to adapt our incentive system to keep them motivated?
- **Loyalty:** is there a need for a dedicated community of youth in which we can provide them with survey feedback and content? What could be the impact of using a range of new interactive research techniques and methods on

Figure 5 – Back pockets



their participation behaviour? And last but not least, looking at the high number of youth unused e-mail addresses, what is in it for them if they update their personal information and contact details? In other words, what do they get back from us?

### Reinventing ourselves: towards a new research experience

We should make our research more fun and entertaining, in content as well as in style. Young participants are looking for an informal style and a friendly moderator with a nice tone of voice. The idea of giving young participants the power to co-create research questions with researchers seems to be a bridge too far for most youth and it is actually an idea that is opposed to the concept of the expert researcher (see below). Although the youngest segment (13-17 years) seems more enthusiastic about the idea, and evaluates it as 'new and innovative', practical burdens such as time pressure are likely to decrease the success of such a concept with this extremely busy generation. Incentive systems should also be adapted to the target group. Considering the fact that social programs are high on their agenda, charity should be part of the incentive. But as cynical participants, they clearly want to see the results of the money donated. For themselves, they prefer smaller incentives, but with a higher chance to get or win one.

Channels that should not be used for research yet: digital TV ('TV= a social platform, not for asking me about my personal opinion'), gaming consoles ('we are in a different mood then') and mobile phones ('it will be expensive to take part, too time consuming and I believe that my personal space should not be invaded by researchers'). Channels that could be used as a recruitment or invitation medium (or even a research platform): e-mail and social networks (especially for the youngest age group 13-17 years). Youth feel that they should be given the choice between e-mail and social network applications to recruit them to research projects. For the youngest group, social networks are preferred over e-mail since many of them don't even read their e-mail anymore. To them social networks, such as Facebook, have become the new e-mail/chat tool. The possibility of using new channels targeted at this age group needs to be researched more thoroughly in the future.

### Transparency towards the younger research participant

Feedback about results is a very important driver for participating in research among the Generation Y. Participants want us to give them something in return for their time and efforts. They want to know why they should participate including information about the goal of the study and if possible even about the client behind the study. They also want feedback about the results and the main actions taken by the client based upon the information they and their peers have shared with the researchers. The most important project conclusions and action points can be sufficient. Giving them this kind of feedback means showing them respect. Remember, they have been brought up in a democratic style, valuing their opinion in family decision making. By evaluating the concepts of sharing results of a research project and the idea of a qualitative youth research community, we have noticed a difference between the 13-17 year olds and the older age groups. The youngest group would like to know whether their responses are in line with peers or would even want to know whether their friends think exactly the same about the topics discussed in the research. Some of them even expressed their desire to have online conversations with other participants about the results of a certain research project in a kind of youth community. This teen population seems to be heavily influenced by interactive quiz applications on popular social networks such as Facebook. The older segment (18-29 years), on the other hand, is only interested in gaining insights into the overall results of the research and doesn't fancy the idea of knowing exactly what their friends answered, nor want to chat about the research outcomes with others. Setting up an online forum for community members will increase their involvement and dedication. It can also be a platform to give them the desired feedback. For the youngest teenage group, this kind of forum is about conversation (discussing research results with each other). For the older groups of 18+ years, it is mainly about information (being informed on research goals and outcomes).

### The role of the researcher

The market researcher is still considered to be an external expert and not seen as a peer, although a more personal approach is necessary in the future. This implies that the connection researchers try to

make with the young generation should not be on an individual level but more as a research company, e.g. by showing a short movie at the beginning of a project with lots of visuals or pictures introducing the research company behind the research but also the client that commissioned the study. Knowing the goal of a study as well as the client behind it is a very important driver for Generation Y youth to participate in market research.

## Conclusion

In this experience economy the authenticity of brands becomes more important, not only because its uniqueness helps them to differentiate from the many alternatives but also because consumers value 'reality' in a world flooded with imitations and staged experiences. To the new consumers of Generation Y the old interpretation of authenticity (origin, history and heritage) is less appealing and less relevant. Often they are not aware of the claims of these brands and it is not the most enticing strategy to win their hearts. The concept of "perceived authenticity" seems to be quite interesting for advertisers. Considering the limited time frame and brand context of youth as well as their consumer cynicism, subtle cues suggesting authenticity (for instance in advertising or packaging) will often work much better than stressing the old authenticity claims through mass advertising or labels of origin. The latter will evoke doubts of truthfulness, while the former may support an image of reliability and credibility. The modern interpretation of authenticity: being honest to yourself (the brand DNA), to youth (transparency) and to society (CSR) relates better to the current consumer climate as well as to specific Generation Y expectations fed by their education. Being honest as a brand (or 'authentic new style' if you want) can truly differentiate your brand from competitors. In this digital age, honesty, as opposed to the old definition of authenticity, cannot be faked and is therefore of much greater value to the young generation. As a brand it is important to choose the right battlefields in campaigning, i.e. those areas in brand image mappings that are of greater importance in your market, relevant to your main competitors' buyers (in order to gain market share) but also close to your own brand DNA strengths. Only this strategy will be credible among this generation of marketing savvy consumers. Next to this brand battlefield analysis, the CRUSH formula (Credible – Real – Unique – Self-Image – Honesty) we have developed in this paper as

an acronym to summarize our new view on the concept of brand authenticity is a good guide to touch the hearts of a brand new and brand loving generation of consumers.

We want to conclude with our belief that we as market researchers should also aim to substantiate these insights and adapt our research approach to the new 'authenticity' context of the young participant. This will without any doubt require much more transparency from both the research agency as well as the research client, not only during recruitment and field phases but also in the post-project stage by disclosing main insights and translate them to real value for the research participant/consumer. In this way we are creating the foundations of a true research ecosystem, a required evolution in postmodern consumer research.

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