AUTHENTICITY IN CONTEXT:
EXAMINING FOLK THEORIES OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE AUTHENTICITY THROUGH COMPUTERIZED TEXT ANALYSIS

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Examining Folk Theories of Online and Offline Authenticity through Computerized Text Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined folk notions of authenticity through a computerized text analysis of participant responses, and connected them to conceptual pillars in the philosophical literature on authenticity. Participants (N=178) were asked to describe an experience in which they felt authentic or inauthentic, and either prompted to recall an experience on social media or offline (no specific prompt for social media). Their responses were analyzed using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) 2015, and the results were examined through Kernis and Goldman’s four-part framework for authenticity (2006). Recall of authentic events involved more unbiased processing and confidence, while recall of inauthentic events revealed higher self-awareness. Social media responses were negatively linked with family-words, weakly positively-linked with friend words, and more pro-social in drives. These findings affirm Kernis and Goldman’s framework, and offer insight into current folk notions of authenticity in an era of social media.

Keywords: authenticity, folk psychology, folk notions, LIWC, social media, analytical thinking, cognitive complexity, confidence, social concern
1. Introduction

With roots in individualism, the concept of authenticity has special relevance today as “something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture” (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Yet despite extensive applications of this concept in diverse fields including politics, tourism, business, ethics, and well-being, authenticity is conceptually difficult to define. With the rise of self-presentations on social media (Boon & Sinclair, 2009), a systematic analysis of authenticity is necessary to understand the relationship between social media behavior and the self. Such analysis can advance our theoretical understanding of authenticity in the social media era, and can also help individuals and social media platforms enable opportunities for effective self-expression.

From this background, we seek to address two key questions: first, what does authenticity represent in our current cultural context? Second, how do our conceptions of authenticity change (or not) in relation to behavior on social media platforms? As we are interested “not in an absolute sense of authenticity” but in what “users consider authentic” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 119), this study focuses on folk notions of authenticity as reflected in people’s described experiences. We seek to make two main contributions: 1) to understand authenticity in light of today’s context and technologies, and 2) to use language analysis as a lens for studying a concept that has resisted easy definition or examination.

2. Background

Contemporary explorations of authenticity have focused on specific contexts, studying, for example, political authenticity (Dumitrica, 2014), strategic authenticity (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015), and staged authenticity in the context of tourism (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003). Business texts speak of consumer perceptions of authentic products (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), and the Internet abounds with how-to articles on creating authentic commercial brands and presences.
However, prior to these applications of authenticity for more utilitarian ends, authenticity was seen more as an ideal to be pursued for one’s well-being (Gil-Or, Levi-Belz, & Turel, 2015), and considered under a more philosophical lens. Across the authenticity literature numerous scholars have highlighted the notion of autonomy, which emphasizes the individual’s ability to self-govern without manipulation by others (Varga & Guignon, 2016). In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor outlines key conceptual pillars for authenticity, including Descartes’ demand that one thinks self-responsibly, Rousseau’s notion of self-determining freedom, and Herder’s ideal of being true to one’s own originality (1992).

Beyond notions of autonomy, Kernis and Goldman conducted a review of the extant literature on authenticity, from which they created the following four-part conceptualization:

i) **Awareness** – knowledge of and trust in self-relevant cognitions while accepting one’s multi-faceted and potentially contradictory self-aspects, as opposed to rigid acknowledgement of only those aspects deemed internally consistent with one’s overall self-concept;

ii) **Unbiased processing** – objective processing of internal experiences and information, without interpretive distortions such as defensiveness and self-aggrandizement;

iii) **Behavior** – behaving according to one’s values, preferences and needs rather than acting ‘falsely’ to please others, attain rewards or avoid punishment; or at least a heightened sensitivity to the fit (or lack thereof) between one’s true self and environmental dictates, and awareness of the potential implications of one’s behavior;

iv) **Relational orientation** – valuing and striving to be genuine rather than fake in one’s relationships with close others (2006).
Social media presents a particularly interesting intersection of the ideal and pragmatic with its dual goals of authenticity and self-presentation. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow users to create profiles that represent themselves, and to express their personality through posting and responding to personal content. Compared to the calculated nature of political and commercial applications of authenticity, social media platforms seem to offer the promise of “immediacy and intimacy” through the sharing of “raw” content (Kantrowitz, 2015). Yet social media platforms have been critiqued as providing “disembodied, mediated and controllable” spaces for creation and performance of the online self (Pearson, 2009), which “invariably lack the solidity and verifiability of the real” and “can be a challenge to our real world cultural frameworks or truth and trust” (Boon & Sinclair, 2009, p. 104).

The range of ‘authenticities’ both across and within these ethical, political, commercial, and personal domains underscores Marwick and boyd’s idea that authenticity is a “localized, temporally situated social construct” that resists simple top-down definition (2010, p. 124). Against this backdrop, we therefore study written samples about experiences with authenticity or inauthenticity by everyday social media users to gain an understanding their intuitive notions of authenticity in their own situated context. Our approach takes an interest in folk theories, which Malle describes as “the fundamental concepts by which people grasp social reality”, which, unlike scientific theories, are “not formalized in any way and are implicit” (2004, p. 34). We use computerized text analysis to attempt to quantifiably identify components that make up people’s notions of authenticity, as well as their connections with existing philosophical frameworks.
3. Present Study

We use computerized text analysis to study two dimensions of authenticity: 1) components of folk notions of authenticity, and 2) ideas of authenticity as reflected on social media. To address these questions, we asked participants to recall and describe an experience in which they felt authentic or inauthentic – either on social media, or with no such specification (henceforth referred to as ‘offline’). These responses illuminated the salient aspects of (in)authentic experiences and were studied using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) to explore the unconscious psychological processes underlying linguistic decisions. This leads to our research questions and hypotheses. Due to the lack of existing literature that uses similar methods, these research questions are exploratory in nature – besides the variables directly hypothesized about, we also seek to surface any other LIWC variables that show significant results, for future analysis.

**RQ1:** How do participants’ recollections about authenticity differ from recollections about inauthenticity?

Based on Kernis and Goldman’s four-part definition of authenticity (2006), we study the cognitive processing of internal and external circumstances related to the components of awareness and unbiased processing, core self and values related to the component of behavior, and social concerns related to the component of relational orientation. These three dimensions were investigated through multiple hypotheses.

We first connect authenticity with Pennebaker’s findings on linguistic reflections of honesty. Pennebaker found that students who write about their true beliefs, in comparison to students who write about other beliefs, used more complex sentences, had more nuanced and less emotional arguments, and showed a relatively heavy use of exclusive words, indicative of attempts to demarcate beliefs and non-beliefs through formal, analytical thinking and complex cognition.
In his own experience of writing recommendation letters, Pennebaker found that he wrote more complex sentences in the more genuine letters (2011). We speculate that because experiences of authenticity are presumably aligned with one’s beliefs and preferences, participants will describe these events in more analytical and cognitively-complex detail than they do for experiences of inauthenticity. These existing findings lead us to our first hypothesis:

**H1:** *Recall of authentic experiences will reflect greater analytical thinking and cognitive complexity than recall of inauthentic experiences.*

Historically, authenticity has been viewed as an ideal state of moral and psychological well-being. Greater self-reported authenticity has been found to relate to higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction, and to lower net negative affect (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). We hypothesize that authentic recall participants do not face the internal conflicts and challenges to their core self that inauthentic recall participants do, and that this difference will be evident in the confidence of their written responses. We study this through participant’s use of tentative words and their clout score, a LIWC variable which reflects the speaker’s level of expertise and confidence. We focus on expressed confidence as it is more closely linked to one’s relation to the core self – while affect may correlate with one’s sense of authenticity, it can be influenced by other situational details and is not a pure indicator.

**H2:** *Recall of authentic experiences will reflect higher confidence than recall of inauthentic experiences.*

As Descartes, Rousseau, Herder and numerous philosophers have illustrated, (Taylor, 1992), individual authenticity is often conceptualized as standing up to (or being threatened by) external social influences that infringe on individual liberties. In a study measuring participants’ memory and visual task performance, Deutsch and Gerard found that the more uncertain the
participant was about the correctness of his or her judgement, the more likely he or she was to be susceptible to social influences while making the judgement (1955). We speculate that pressures from other individuals may motivate participants to act in inauthentic ways, and that their writing reflects this concern for others.

**H3:** Recall of inauthentic experiences will reflect greater social concern than recall of authentic experiences.

**RQ2:** How will structural features of participants’ recollections about authentic and inauthentic experiences on social media differ from those for experiences offline?

boyd and Ellison define social network sites (SNSs) as web-based services that allow users to construct their public or semi-public profile within the system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections as well as those of other users (2007). This definition foregrounds the prevalence of self-presentation, as well as the articulating and making visible of social networks which they argue makes SNSs unique (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The importance of social concern also resonates with Kernis and Goldman’s concept of relational orientation within authenticity (2006). We hypothesize that social media responses will show greater occurrence of social words in LIWC than offline responses, including friend-words and family-words.

**H4:** Recall of social media experiences will reflect greater social concern than recall of offline experiences, across both authentic and inauthentic events.
4. Methods and Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete our survey (N=178). As responses were collected for a different study looking at cross-platform differences between Facebook and Instagram, participants were randomly assigned according to 6 (2x3) conditions with two parameters: authenticity (authentic/inauthentic) and modality (No prompt for social media/Facebook prompt/Instagram prompt). In this study, we consolidated Facebook and Instagram responses into a ‘social media’ condition. In the other condition participants were told to recall an experience in their life with no specific mention of social media (referred to as ‘offline’).

For our study procedure, we drew on Gino, Kouchaki and Galinsky’s 2015 paper, where participants were asked to recall experiences of authenticity or inauthenticity, and then assessed for moral self-regard and feelings of purity. Participants were asked to write a description of 600 characters or more in response to the following prompt, adapted from Gino et al. (2015, p. 985):

“Please recall a time in your life/on Facebook/on Instagram when you behaved in a way that made you feel true/untrue to yourself, that made you feel authentic/inauthentic. It should be a situation in which you felt authentic/inauthentic with your core self, and/or conformed to social norms or pressure [for inauthentic recall]. Please describe the details about this situation that made you feel authentic/inauthentic. What was it like to be in this situation? What thoughts and feelings did you experience?” (italicized parts to be varied based on condition).

Responses were then grouped and analyzed using LIWC 2015. LIWC checks individual words of a text document against its internal dictionary of over 2300 words and word stems, and reports the percentage of total words that fall into specific linguistic categories (Cohn et al., 2004). We include the variables analyzed for our hypotheses in Table 2 below.
**Table 1.** Participant demographics (N=178)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>% (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57.3% (102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42.1% (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.6% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>% (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 – 29</td>
<td>40.4% (72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 – 39</td>
<td>42.1% (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 – 49</td>
<td>11.2% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 or above</td>
<td>6.2% (11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>70.2% (125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African-American</td>
<td>11.2% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>6.7% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>9.6% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.2% (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** List of LIWC variables studied and description/example words (Pennebaker et al., 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description / Example words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytical thinking</td>
<td>A high number reflects formal, logical and hierarchical thinking; lower numbers reflect more informal, personal, here-and-now, and narrative thinking (p. 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clout</td>
<td>A high number suggests that the author is speaking from a position of high expertise and is confident; low numbers suggest a more tentative, humble and even anxious style (p. 22).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negations</td>
<td>No, not, never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion</td>
<td>Hurt, ugly, nasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social words</td>
<td>Mate, talk, they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend-words</td>
<td>Buddy, neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family-words</td>
<td>Daughter, dad, aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive processes</td>
<td>Cause, know, ought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>Should, would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative</td>
<td>Maybe, perhaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation words</td>
<td>Ally, friend, social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Results and Discussion

Following the LIWC extraction of feature frequency from each text, we ran t-tests on all variable results for each hypothesis and report the obtained p-values in parentheses. In addition, we performed a linear regression of social words, family words and friend words on social media and authenticity for Hypothesis 4.

**H1:** Recall of authentic experiences will reflect greater analytical thinking and cognitive complexity than recall of inauthentic experiences.

Our results only partially support H1. We find that authentic recall scored higher in analytical thinking in LIWC than inauthentic recall \((p = 0.0548)\), reflecting greater formal, logical and hierarchical thinking (Pennebaker et al., 2015). However, inauthentic recall scores were higher than authentic recall for cognitive processes \((p < 0.01)\) and for one of its sub-variables, discrepancies \((p < 0.01)\).

In addition, inauthentic recall showed higher occurrence than authentic recall of other variables which Tausczik and Pennebaker have linked to thinking style and cognitive complexity (2010). First, inauthentic recall responses used more negative emotion words \((p < 0.01)\) and negations \((p < 0.01)\) than authentic recall responses. This is plausible given that inauthentic experiences involve acting in ways that are incongruent with one’s beliefs, and can thus result in
feelings of discomfort. In addition, Tausczik and Pennebaker find that negative emotion words and negations are positively correlated with each other, and indicate immersion in the event being described (2010). Second, inauthentic recall responses used more exclusion words than authentic recall responses ($p < 0.01$). Tausczik and Pennebaker write that exclusion words capture one of two components of cognitive complexity – the extent to which someone differentiates between multiple competing solutions (2010). They also find that exclusion words are used at higher rates among people telling the truth (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). These results point to possibly interesting findings regarding how individuals process and relate experiences of inauthenticity, which are discussed further in the next section.

Other significant findings show a greater past focus ($p < 0.01$) and relativity ($p < 0.05$) in inauthentic recall responses than in authentic recall responses, which we link to psychological distancing. In a similar vein, Cohn, Mehl and Pennebaker found in their study of participant journal entries following the September 11 attacks of 2001, that psychological distancing increased in the first two weeks after the attacks and remained elevated for the subsequent 6 weeks. However, their study measured psychological distancing in terms of use of present-tense verbs, articles of more than six letters, first-person singular pronouns, and words indicating discrepancy from reality (2004). Likewise, Hancock, Woodworth and Porter have found that psychopaths use more past tense and less present tense in narratives of their crimes, indicating greater psychological detachment from the incident (2011). Combined, these could suggest an increased desire to achieve resolution and psychological distance following a negative experience – in particular, an experience centered upon doing things that are at odds with one’s personal beliefs.

Overall, even though authentic recall elicits responses with higher analytical thinking, inauthentic recall elicits more cognitively and emotionally complex responses. We reason that
experiences of authenticity are more psychologically comfortable and straightforward to mentally process and relate, whereas experiences of inauthenticity require much more processing to address the participants’ intentions and mismatched behavior.

![LIWC Scores: Inauthentic vs. Authentic Recall](image)

**Figure 1.** Mean and standard error for LIWC categories across authentic and inauthentic recall

**H2:** Recall of authentic experiences will reflect higher confidence than recall of inauthentic experiences.

Our findings support H2. Authentic recall responses score higher on clout than inauthentic recall responses ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that the author is speaking with higher expertise and confidence. In addition, authentic recall responses use fewer tentative words ($p < 0.01$), which are associated with uncertainty about one’s story. These suggest that individuals describing an experience with authenticity write in the manner of higher-status individuals, reflecting higher confidence and self-assurance.
**H3:** Recall of inauthentic experiences will reflect greater social concern than recall of authentic experiences.

Our findings only partially support H3. Inauthentic recall responses mentioned friends to a greater degree than authentic recall responses ($p < 0.05$), but no significant results were found for other social words (family-words, female references and male references). We speculate that participants who were recalling authentic experiences were acting in accordance with their own values and preferences, while experiences of inauthenticity may have been driven by peer pressure from friends.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2.** Mean and standard error for LIWC categories across authentic and inauthentic recall
**H4:** Recall of social media experiences will reflect greater social concern than recall of offline experiences, across both authentic and inauthentic events.

Our findings only partially support H4. Linear regression found that social media had a negative link with family-words ($p < 0.05$) and a weak positive link with friend-words ($p < 0.1$). T-tests showed that social media-authentic responses used more social words than offline-authentic responses at a level that approached significance ($p < 0.1$), with no other significant results; this was supported by an interaction effect between social media and authenticity approaching significance ($p = 0.0527$). However, offline-inauthentic responses used more family-words than social media-inauthentic responses ($p < 0.05$), pointing to differing social concerns depending on the actors involved.

| Table 3. Linear Regression of Social Words on Social Media and Authenticity. | Estimate | Standard error | t-value | Pr(>|t|) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social media | 0.6528 | 0.9796 | 0.666 | 0.506 |
| Authenticity | -0.5423 | 1.0862 | -0.499 | 0.618 |
| Social media x Authenticity | 0.9296 | 1.3566 | 0.685 | 0.494 |

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Residual standard error: 4.31 on 174 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.0188, Adjusted R-squared: 0.001879
F-statistic: 1.111 on 3 and 174 df, p-value: 0.3461

| Table 4. Linear Regression of Family Words on Social Media and Authenticity. | Estimate | Standard error | t-value | Pr(>|t|) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social media | -0.6087 | 0.2440 | -2.495 | 0.0135* |
| Authenticity | -0.2364 | 0.2705 | -0.874 | 0.3834 |
| Social media x Authenticity | 0.6592 | 0.3379 | 1.951 | **0.0527** |

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Residual standard error: 1.074 on 174 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.04041, Adjusted R-squared: 0.023879
F-statistic: 2.443 on 3 and 174 df, p-value: 0.06584
Table 5. Linear Regression of Friend Words on Social Media and Authenticity.

|                      | Estimate | Standard error | t-value | Pr(>|t|) |
|----------------------|----------|----------------|---------|----------|
| Social media         | 0.4649   | 0.2573         | 1.807   | 0.0725   |
| Authenticity         | -0.2786  | 0.2853         | -0.977  | 0.3301   |
| Social media x       | -0.2461  | 0.3563         | -0.691  | 0.4907   |
| Authenticity         |          |                |         |          |

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Residual standard error: 1.132 on 174 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.05369, Adjusted R-squared: 0.03737
F-statistic: 3.291 on 3 and 174 df, p-value: 0.02199

In authentic recall, social media responses were more pro-social in focus than offline responses, with stronger drive for affiliation \((p < 0.05)\) and greater concern for leisure \((p < 0.05)\). In comparison, offline responses were more pragmatic in nature than social media responses, with stronger drive for achievement \((p < 0.01)\) and power \((p = 0.01129)\), and greater concern for work \((p < 0.01)\). This result makes sense given that social media is mainly used for socialization and leisure purposes, while work and the pursuit of material attainments tend to manifest offline in the real world.

In a similarly pragmatic bent, offline responses in inauthentic recall show more concern for money than social media responses \((p < 0.05)\). Again, material concerns are also more likely to manifest in real life than on social media, which is associated with socializing and leisure.
Figure 3. Mean and standard error for LIWC categories across offline-authentic and social media-authentic recall

Figure 4. Mean and standard error for LIWC categories across offline-inauthentic and social media-inauthentic recall
6. General Discussion

Our analysis of participants’ described experiences largely affirms Kernis and Goldman’s conceptualization of authenticity as comprising 1.) awareness, 2.) unbiased processing of information, 3.) behaving according to one’s values and preferences, and 4.) genuine relational orientation (2002). At the same time, we gained further insight into authenticity as applied in everyday life.

While we had considered awareness and unbiased processing as a merged concept involving processing of internal and external information, our text analysis re-surfaced the distinction between the two. We found that authentic recall responses showed more objective processing of information than inauthentic recall responses in the form of higher analytical thinking, while inauthentic recall responses showed more interpretive distortions than authentic recall responses with greater emotional and cognitive complexity. However, if we consider Kernis and Goldman’s definition of awareness as involving knowledge and acceptance of one’s “multi-faceted and potentially contradictory self-aspects” (2002, p. 295), inauthentic recall responses in fact show more awareness and engagement with personal contradictions, especially if the use of exclusion words is indeed linked to greater honesty as suggested by Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010). Indeed, Newman et al. have found that truth-tellers used far more exclusive words than did liars (2003), which they attribute to the lower cognitive complexity of truth-telling compared to lying. The fact that awareness and unbiased processing are linked to inauthentic and authentic recall respectively (rather than linking purely to authentic recall) suggests a potential practical difficulty in achieving these two aspects of authenticity, requiring both confrontation of psychologically uncomfortable conflicts as well as objective and frank processing of information. In this regard, the results highlight an interesting distinction between the (in)authenticity of the
incident being described, and that of the written response itself – responses about experiences of inauthenticity in fact showed rather “authentic” cognitive and emotional engagement with the details of the event in question.

As hypothesized, we find that authentic recall responses show greater confidence than inauthentic recall responses, which we speculate reflects a greater alignment with one’s true self and behavior that is in accordance with one’s values and preferences. Kernis and Goldman have previously found that the four components of authenticity they have defined (awareness, unbiased processing, behavior and relational orientation) are related to higher life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, lower contingent self-esteem, and lower net negative affect (2002). Sheldon et al. have also previously found that felt autonomy relates to subjective well-being (2005). We postulate that these improvements in well-being reflect a stronger sense of self, that is conveyed in more confident writing. However, we recognize that clout and tentative word use are not very direct measures of self-determined behavior – subsequent analyses in this variable could benefit from customized dictionaries or text analysis methods, or possibly human coding.

Finally, while Kernis and Goldman’s idea of relational orientation focuses on being genuine in one’s ties, our analysis highlights the possible link between different kinds of ties and inauthentic behavior. Overall, inauthentic recall responses mentioned friends to a greater degree than authentic recall responses, possibly pointing to the power of peer pressure and other influences from friends. Meanwhile, offline-inauthentic responses used more family words than social media-inauthentic responses. To give a sense of the nature of the responses, we include sample responses from offline-inauthentic recall involving family as well as friends.

“I make a point of being true to myself so it is quite difficult to come up with a time when I was not. I had a rich aunt who played the relatives against each other.
She made it clear that if you do not do as she said, when she said, you could very easily get cut out of the will. She clearly preferred one of my children over the other. Once she wanted a picture with her favorite child and me. As someone was taking the picture, my other child stepped behind us to get into the shot, just as he always would for family photos. I pushed him back because I knew my aunt just wanted the picture with my other child. I was disgusted with myself and still am almost ten years later. And my son was too young to understand what I did or even notice it.” (family)

“A time in my life that I felt untrue to myself was back in high school. I was with a group of friends, and we were passing by a person that I used to be friends with back when we were little. But we had drifted apart and no longer were friends or kept in contact. My new group of friends were making fun of him and bullying him and I joined in even though I knew it was wrong and he had done nothing wrong, or anything to deserve this treatment. I felt bad about it later because I only did it to seem cool to my new group of friends and so they wouldn't think badly of me. In my core self I am not a mean person or someone that enjoys hurting someone else in a physical, mental, or emotional manner.” (friends)

Looking at the responses, one perceptible difference is that the first incident involving family uses a wider range of family-words (e.g. aunt, relatives, child, family, son), alluding to a broader network of different and interconnected relationships. In comparison, the second incident concerning friends involves social ties of differing natures, but all falling under the broad descriptor of “friend”. While it would be unfair to conclude that friendships are less rich than familial relationships, the former response shows a nuanced attention to different types and layers of familial relationships (the seniority of the rich aunt, compared to the unknown innocence of the
young son), suggesting more complex dynamics at play that could compel one to act in ways that are out of alignment with one’s own values. These results suggest that peer pressure from friends may motivate inauthentic behaviors overall, but that familial responsibilities and pressures hold special sway in offline, real-life contexts.

7.1. Limitations

As responses were originally collected across three conditions (offline, Facebook and Instagram), the offline condition has much fewer responses, which compromises the comparability of offline and social media results. In addition, the specification of Facebook and Instagram in the survey could have affected the structural features and concepts mentioned in the responses, compared to a survey that pertained broadly to social media as a whole. This is particularly so given the proliferation of other social media platforms with different features and usage norms, such as Snapchat and Twitter.

At a methodological level, while LIWC scores can surface elements present in folk notions of authenticity as well as connections to concepts in existing literature, a closer and more specific analysis of the responses is needed to truly identify psychological and social causal mechanisms, such as in the earlier findings and discussion regarding social concern.

7.2. Conclusion and Future Work

Overall, structural text analysis of participants’ responses affirms Kernis and Goldman’s four-part conceptualization of authenticity, and extend it with details that surface from application to real-life experience. Future studies in this area could use more customized dictionaries or content analysis schemes that can pay specific attention to sub-concepts within authenticity, such as concepts of conformity, core self or self-presentation. In addition, subsequent studies could compare text analysis findings across participant demographic groups.
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