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Let Me Entertain You? The Importance of Authenticity in Online Customer Engagement

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Abstract

Should all brands initiate online customer engagement activities to entertain consumers beyond informing them? This work presents the idea that (in)consistency between the nature of an engagement initiative (i.e., entertaining or informative) and the perception of the brand (i.e., warm versus competent) influences the extent to which consumers perceive the initiative to be authentic. This in turn influences consumers' evaluation of the initiative and the brand. The results show that entertaining initiatives are suited for warm brands, but backfire for competent brands, while informative initiatives are equally suited for both types of brands. These effects are driven by the perceived authenticity of the initiatives. The findings yield specific guidelines for managers about how to preserve the brand's essence in the online initiatives they launch to foster ongoing customer engagement. The effects were found in four experiments and one field study, generalizing across different online media platforms (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, brand website), products and services (i.e., shoes, groceries, and recipe deliveries), and samples (i.e., Mturk, Prolific, students).

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Keywords: Customer engagement; Brand perception; Authenticity; Brand essence; Social media; Digital marketing

In the past decade or so, brands have developed a wide variety of online efforts, aimed not only at informing consumers about their products but also at entertaining consumers, for example by providing funny videos, games, and contests (e.g., Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Eigenraam, Eelen, van Lin, & Verlegh, 2018; Hofacker, De Ruyter, Lurie, Manchanda, & Donaldson, 2018; Terlutter & Capella, 2013). Prior literature has recognized the importance of these initiatives as a tool to facilitate customer online engagement (Beckers, van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2018; Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar, & Van den Poel, 2019) and has shown that they can provide firms with financial, reputational, and competitive benefits (Kumar and Pansari 2016; Pauwels, Aksehirli, & Lackman, 2015; Gill, Sridhar, & Grewal, 2017). But not all online engagement initiatives are successful, and they have sometimes been found to even have *negative* consequences for firms (Beckers et al., 2018; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014).

Building on a sizeable literature arguing that consumers are looking for genuine and authentic experiences with brands (Gilmore and Pine 2007; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), the present research examines the role of authenticity as a determinant of consumer responses to brands' online engagement initiatives. Previously referred to as the cornerstone of modern marketing (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), brand authenticity has been shown to have great impact on consumers' reactions towards brands, such as emotional brand attachment, word-of-mouth, and brand choice (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012), and downstream consequences like sales and profit (Becker, Wiegand, & Reinartz, 2019).

Several recent examples illustrate how online customer engagement activities can backfire if they are not perceived as authentic for the brand. Campaigns like Shell's #MakeTheFuture, and IKEA's "time travel experiment" were criticized on social media for straying too far from consumers' images of these brands (Jarvis, 2018; Shih, 2016). Another example is Audi's

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#PaidMyDues online campaign, which revolved around Audi drivers instead of the cars themselves. The campaign was terminated after receiving an overload of negative comments like “Okay, more of this non car idiocy and I unfollow” (Audi, 2014). The importance of authenticity was further emphasized in a recent survey which found that 57% of consumers perceive only a minority of brand created content as authentic, and 20% of consumers have even unfollowed a brand because of its inauthentic content (Stackla, 2018).

Brand actions are perceived as more authentic when they are consistent with consumers' brand perceptions (Spiggle et al., 2012). But when is an engagement initiative consistent with brand perceptions? To provide generalizable insights into this question, we develop a framework that builds on well-established distinctions between different types of brands (warm vs. competent) and different types of engagement initiatives (informative vs. entertaining) to investigate how brands can make sure they initiate authentic engagement activities by matching the type of initiative to consumers' brand perceptions. In five studies, generalizing across different online media platforms (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, brand website), products and services (i.e., shoes, groceries and recipe deliveries), and samples (i.e., Mturk, Prolific, students), we show that consumers are more appreciative of engagement initiatives that are authentic, i.e., consistent with their perception of the brand. Specifically, we demonstrate that entertaining initiatives are more authentic and therefore more beneficial for *warm* brands than for competent brands. Informative initiatives, on the other hand, are equally authentic for warm and competent brands and thus equally suited for both brand types. We will further outline our theorizing in the next section of this paper.

This research contributes to practice by providing managers with guidelines for employing authentic engagement initiatives, and by stressing the importance of differentiating between entertaining and informative brand initiatives (e.g., Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Eigenraam et al., 2018; van Noort & van Reijmersdal, 2019). This research also makes several important theoretical contributions. First, we answer the recent call for extending research about the origins of authenticity beyond the context of advertising (Becker et al., 2019) by showing that brand authenticity is infused when the character of digital engagement initiatives is consistent with the consumers' brand perception. Second, we extend knowledge on the *Brands as Intentional Agents Framework* (BIAF; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012) by showing that brand warmth and competence have an important influence on consumers' authenticity perceptions of the engagement initiatives those brands launch for their customers. Finally, we introduce the concept of brand authenticity into the customer engagement literature: We consistently found that entertaining engagement initiatives were more authentic and beneficial for warm brands than for competent brands and thus not only differentiate between types of engagement initiatives but also provide a framework for understanding which type of initiative is best for which brand to foster customer engagement.

Theory

Entertaining and Informative Customer Engagement Initiatives

Prior literature has defined a brand's strategies to facilitate customer engagement as *customer engagement initiatives* (Beckers et al., 2018; Gill et al., 2017; Meire et al., 2019). The range of customer engagement initiatives that brands can launch is extensive and ever evolving due to the creative use of technological advancements (Eigenraam et al., 2018; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The focal content of the engagement initiatives, however, can generally be described as having either an informative or a more entertaining nature (Bellman, Potter, Treleaven-Hassard, Robinson, & Varan, 2011; Meire et al., 2019; van Noort & van Reijmersdal, 2019). The distinction between informative and entertaining media contexts has been well established in literature (e.g., Bellman et al., 2011; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Meire et al., 2019; van Noort & van Reijmersdal, 2019), and has even been regarded as “essential” in modern media research (van Noort & van Reijmersdal, 2019). This distinction is similar to other typologies used in the literature, including the distinctions between *utilitarian* and *enjoyable* experiences provided by content (Calder et al., 2009), the categorization of customer engagement practices as “for learning” or “for fun” (Eigenraam et al. (2018)), and the distinction between the classic functional vs. informational or experiential vs. transformational distinctions in advertising (Puto & Wells, 1984; Rossiter & Percy, 1997). More recently, Akpınar and Berger (2017) and Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom, and Worrying (2020) distinguished between “emotional vs. informative” appeals in online advertising. Emotional appeals, such as mood and music, are designed to elicit emotions; they can make an initiative *fun* but extend to other emotions as well (Akpınar & Berger, 2017; Eigenraam et al., 2018). Informative appeals, such as informing about a brand's attributes or benefits, are designed for learning about a brand (Akpınar & Berger, 2017). Acknowledging the similarities between the different goals and needs that branded engagement initiatives can fulfill, we adopt the terms *entertaining* and *informative* to categorize brand engagement initiatives. Entertaining initiatives are focused on creating emotional and hedonic experiences, informative initiatives are aimed at informing the consumer, providing utilitarian value.

Over the past decades, the digital media landscape has greatly developed (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Brands can target consumers on social media, but also through mobile applications or interactive websites. This research deals with the type of content created within such digital media. The expansion of the online media and social media environment has intensified consumer usage of these media, especially for entertaining purposes (Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner, 2018). Indeed, emotional appeals in social media posts seem to be especially successful in creating customer engagement (Rietveld et al., 2020) In line with this, it has been suggested that brands should use online and social media strategically to trigger consumers' engagement and enhance

enjoyment (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). We argue however that this strategy may not work for all brands and that its success depends on the extent to which entertainment initiatives are perceived as authentic for the brand.

Authentic Online Engagement Initiatives

While there have been many conceptualizations of brand authenticity, the common denominator seems to be that “authenticity encapsulates what is genuine, real, and true” (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; p. 839). To be perceived as an authentic brand, it is important to conform to consumers' mental frames of how things “ought to be” (Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), and to create a schematic fit with consumers' expectations of the brand (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2019; Morhart et al., 2013). Therefore, the concept of authenticity relates to: (1) what the brand truly and essentially is, and (2) the things that the brand does/says/advertises, and how these two factors relate to each other. We therefore postulate that online engagement initiatives are seen as more authentic when they are true to the brand's essence, and that authenticity might best be achieved by engaging in activities that are consistent with customers' brand perceptions.

Authenticity is an impactful driver of consumers' evaluations of advertising and brands (e.g., Morhart et al., 2013; Spiggle et al., 2012). For example, Becker et al. (2019) found evidence that authentic advertising directly translates into profit. Morhart et al. (2013) found that consumers have a higher likelihood to choose an authentic brand over a private label brand, compared to a non-authentic brand. Two large-scale survey studies also found that brand authenticity is positively related to consumers' purchase intentions (Fritz, Schoenmueller, & Bruhn, 2017). In line with these findings, we expect that consumers' authenticity perceptions of digital engagement initiatives will influence consumers' brand evaluation and ongoing customer engagement with the brand. Therefore, a brand's choice to move beyond informing activities, and initiate *entertaining* activities, should be guided by consumer brand perceptions, in such a way that the initiatives are consistent with these perceptions, and viewed as more authentic for the brand.

Brand Perceptions

To consumers, brands do not merely entail features and benefits of products; brands are also social entities to interact with and build a relationship with (e.g., Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004; Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Fournier, 1998). Prior research has established that consumers perceive brands as intentional agents (Kervyn et al., 2012). The BIAF proposes brand warmth and competence as two universal dimensions of consumers' brand perceptions. Brand warmth refers to perceived intentions of a brand: it evaluates to what extent a brand consistently acts with the public's best interests in mind and generally means well (Kervyn et al., 2012). A warm brand is typically characterized by traits as trustworthy, sincere,

kind, and friendly, and further relates to helpfulness and reliability. Brand competence on the other hand refers to the perceived ability of a brand. It assesses the capability, skills and effectiveness of a brand to achieve its goals, and is associated with traits like efficient, skilled, confident, and intelligent (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

Along with the perceptions of warmth and competence may come certain expectations of brand actions. Warmth, associated with friendly, social, and affective traits (Cuddy et al., 2008; Kervyn et al., 2012), may give the impression that the brand is able to fulfill *hedonic* and *emotional* needs. We therefore argue that brands that are perceived to be more warm, are more likely expected to offer entertaining engagement on top of providing information. Competence on the other hand, associated with efficient and functional capabilities (Cuddy et al., 2008), gives the impression that the brand is able to fulfill practical needs, and relates to more *functional* and *utilitarian* functions of brands (Peter & Ponzi, 2018; Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang, 2019). Competent brands may therefore be perceived to be less suitable to initiate entertaining initiatives. We expect that digital engagement initiatives that are in line with consumers' expectations of a brand are perceived to better reflect how things “ought to be,” so that the brand is perceived to behave more authentically (Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Spiggle et al., 2012).

Hypotheses

Although online engagement initiatives are often geared towards entertaining consumers, this strategy may not be optimal for all brands. Specifically, we argue that engagement initiatives should be authentic. Because warm brands are related to the fulfillment of hedonic needs (e.g., Peter & Ponzi, 2018; Tellis et al., 2019), they are more likely expected to offer entertaining engagement. Thus, entertaining engagement initiatives, are more consistent with consumer perceptions of warm brands than with perceptions of competent brands, and we therefore expect entertaining initiatives to be more authentic for warm brands, compared to competent brands (Spiggle et al., 2012). Since informing consumers has traditionally been the core goal of advertising (Kumar & Gupta, 2016), consumers may expect informing brand initiatives from any kind of brand. Such initiatives should be perceived as authentic for brands regardless of their brand perception. On the other hand, given the influential impact of authenticity on consumer responses, such as brand attitude, purchase intention, and willingness to recommend (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Morhart et al., 2013; Spiggle et al., 2012), we expect initiatives with an entertaining character to benefit warm brands more than competent brands. We thus propose the following hypotheses.

H1. The effect of initiative character on perceived authenticity is moderated by brand perception: Entertaining initiatives are perceived as more authentic for warm brands than for competent brands, whereas informative initiatives are perceived as equally authentic for warm and competent brands.

H2. There is a moderated mediation effect: An entertaining (vs. informative) initiative increases positive consumer responses towards the brand (i.e., evaluation of the initiative, brand evaluation, ongoing customer engagement) mediated by authenticity for a warm brand but not for a competent brand.

Overview of Studies

To test our propositions, we conducted four experiments and one field study. Study 1a and 1b show that consumers expect entertaining initiatives more from warmer brands than from more competent brands. In Study 2, we tested more explicitly whether an entertaining (vs. informative) interactive brand website was perceived as more authentic for a warm brand than for a more competent brand. In Study 3, we generalized these findings to another online media platform (i.e., Instagram), another brand, and another product category, while also demonstrating the downstream consequences of authenticity on brand evaluation and ongoing customer engagement. In Study 4, we replicated the findings in a field setting, using a critical incident technique on Facebook, resulting in a multitude of actual brands, variations in perceptions of the brand, and the initiative character. An overview of the studies and hypotheses is displayed in Fig. 1.

Study 1a

In Study 1 (a and b), we test to what extent participants expect a warm versus a competent brand to launch an informative or entertaining online initiative.

This measure of consumer expectations operationalizes the *expectation scheme* that people have about brands. These expectations, or how things are ought to be, are an essential part of what authenticity entails (Beverland, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). We predict that participants will expect entertaining initiatives more from warm than competent brands but will not have different expectations for informative initiatives. Study 1a and 1b make use of different brands to replicate the effect and show its' robustness (i.e., a fictitious brand in Study 1a ensuring internal validity; self-reported brands in Study 1b ensuring external validity).

Method

Study 1a had a 2 (brand perception: warm vs. competent brand; between-subjects) \times 2 (initiative character: entertaining vs. informative; within subjects) mixed design. The sample consisted of 90 North-American MTurk workers (51.1% female, 48.9% male, $M_{age} = 34.77$, $SD_{age} = 9.80$, range 18–62; 10 other workers were excluded for failing the attention check¹). We manipulated the brand perception, using a description of the fictitious shoe brand Lacey's. Participants read that Lacey's was a brand that consumers generally describe as either warm, friendly, and generous (warm condition), or

¹ Participants failed the attention check when they were unable to recall and mention the correct product category of the focal brand Lacey's (shoes).

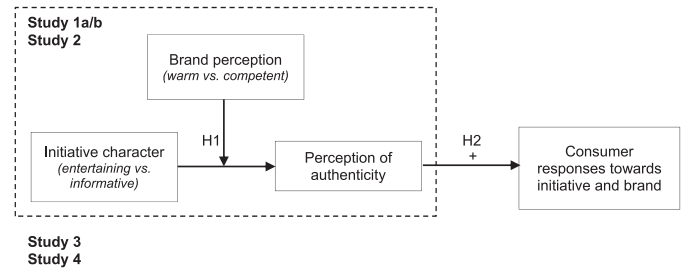


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

competent, efficient, and effective (competent condition) (adapted from Aaker et al., 2010). Next, we measured consumers' expectations about online engagement initiatives by requesting participants to report to what extent they thought Lacey's was the type of brand that would offer consumers online activities that are informative, useful, and practical (i.e., 3 items, measuring expectation of informative initiatives, $M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.11$), and exciting, enjoyable, and entertaining (3 items, measuring expectation of entertaining initiatives; $M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.26$; 7-point scales from 1 = not likely at all to 7 = very much; Voss et al., 2003). As a manipulation check, participants reported at the end of the experiment to what extent they thought Lacey's was a warm, friendly, and generous brand (three items, measuring brand warmth, $M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.28$) and, competent, effective, and efficient brand (three items, measuring brand competence; $M = 5.99$, $SD = 1.01$; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; Aaker et al., 2010; Bernitter, Verlegh, & Smit, 2015). Finally, we asked for demographics and thanked the participants.

Results and Discussion

The manipulation of brand perception was successful: participants in the warm brand condition perceived the brand Lacey's as warmer ($M_{warm} = 6.22$; $SD_{warm} = 0.86$; $t(88) = -7.06$; $p < .000$) and less competent ($M_{comp} = 5.50$; $SD_{comp} = 0.94$; $t(88) = 5.25$; $p < .000$) than participants in the competent brand condition ($M_{warm} = 4.70$; $SD_{warm} = 1.17$; $M_{comp} = 6.48$; $SD_{comp} = 0.84$).

A repeated measures ANOVA of initiative expectation with brand perception (warm vs. competent) as a between-subjects variable, and initiative character (entertaining vs. informative) as a within-subjects variable, revealed a significant main effect of initiative character ($F(1, 88) = 15.77$; $p < .000$) on initiative expectation. Overall, participants expected informative initiatives ($M_{info} = 5.83$; $SD_{info} = 1.11$) more than entertaining initiatives ($M_{entertaining} = 5.24$; $SD_{entertaining} = 1.24$). There was a marginally significant main effect of brand perception ($F(1, 88) = 3.63$; $p = .06$). Overall, consumers had somewhat stronger expectations of the initiative when the brand was described as warm ($M_{expectation} = 5.72$; $SD_{expectation} = 0.78$) compared to when it was described as competent ($M_{expectation} = 5.35$; $SD_{expectation} = 1.06$). More importantly however, there was a significant interaction between brand perception and initiative character ($F(1, 88) = 4.09$; $p < .05$).

Planned contrasts showed that participants in the warm brand condition had a significantly stronger expectation that the initiative would be entertaining ($M = 5.58$; $SD = 1.04$) than participants in the competent brand condition ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 1.38$; $F(1, 88) = 6.86$; $p = .01$). Both brand conditions did not differ in their expectation of the initiative being informative ($M_{warm} = 5.87$, $SD_{warm} = 0.90$; $M_{competent} = 5.79$, $SD_{competent} = 1.29$; $F(1, 88) = 0.12$; $p = .75$). See also Fig. 2 for a visual overview of these results. Participants who were exposed to the competent brand had stronger expectations that the initiative would be informative ($M = 5.79$; $SD = 1.29$) than entertaining ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 1.38$; $F(1, 88) = 17.97$; $p < .000$). Participants who were exposed to the warm brand did not have different expectations about the initiative being informative ($M = 5.87$; $SD = 0.90$) or entertaining ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.04$, $F(1, 88) = 1.90$; $p = .17$).

In line with the notion that informing consumers has long been the core goal of advertising (Kumar & Gupta, 2016), we found that participants generally expected brands to offer informative engagement initiatives more than entertaining engagement initiatives. More importantly, however, the pattern of results shows that entertaining initiatives are expected more from warm than competent brands, whereas no such difference occurred for informative initiatives. These findings suggest that entertaining online initiatives are more true to the essence of warm brands than competent brands, providing preliminary evidence that these initiatives are perceived as more authentic (i.e., like things “ought” to be) for warm than competent brands (H1).

Study 1b

To replicate the findings of study 1a, and rule out a potential demand effect due to the fictitious brand, we conduct a follow-up study in which participants self-reported a brand they considered warm or competent, and then described the content they expected the brand to initiate online. We predict that participants associate a warm brand more with entertaining content than a competent brand.

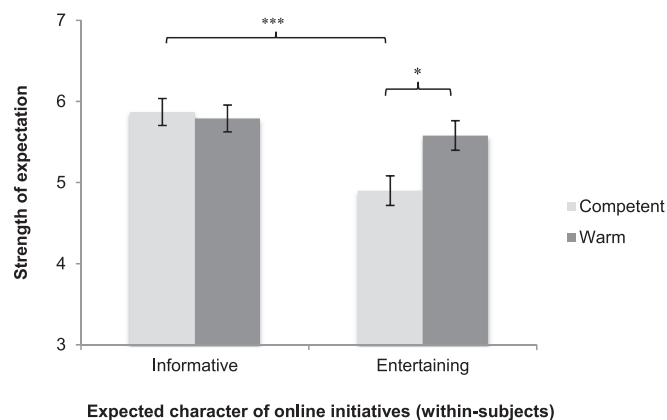


Fig. 2. Results of repeated measures ANOVA on initiative expectations. Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Method

Study 1b was an online experiment on Prolific (N = 111, U.K. residents, 63.1% female, 35.1% male, $M_{age} = 30.82$, $SD_{age} = 9.15$, range 18–58; 11 other panelists were excluded for failing the attention check)² with a one factorial between-subjects design (brand perception: warm vs. competent). We requested the participants to think of a warm, generous and friendly brand (warm condition) or a competent, efficient, and effective brand (competent condition; see Appendix A for full instructions), and write down the name of the brand. Next, we told participants that brands are often present online with websites, mobile apps, and on social media, using various types of content. We asked the participants to describe which type of content they expected from [brand name]. Afterwards they rated the described content on a bipolar scale, ranging from more informative (1) to more entertaining (4) ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.00$). To end with, we did a manipulation check of brand warmth and competence (for measures see study 1a), requested demographics, and thanked the participants for their participation.

Results and Discussion

The manipulation checks showed that participants in the warm brand condition perceived the self-reported brand as warmer ($M_{warm} = 5.96$; $SD_{warm} = 0.92$) than participants in the competent brand condition ($M_{warm} = 4.81$; $SD_{warm} = 1.62$), $t(109) = -4.63$; $p < .000$. There was no significant difference in competence perceptions between participants in the warm ($M_{comp} = 6.08$; $SD_{comp} = 0.94$) and competent ($M_{comp} = 6.17$; $SD_{comp} = 1.06$) brand condition, $t(109) = 0.49$; $p = .63$. This may be due to the self-reporting: A brand of choice is likely competent, which is reflected by the high scores of competence in both conditions.

To test our propositions, particularly the type of content expected from warm and competent brands, we conducted a t-test to compare content ratings between the two conditions. Participants in the warm brand condition rated the expected content as more entertaining ($M = 2.55$; $SD = 1.01$) than participants in the competent brand of choice condition ($M = 1.85$; $SD = 0.87$), $t(109) = -3.91$, $p < .000$. Participants in the warm brand condition described expected content for example as: “Funny videos and random acts of kindness”. Participants in the competent brand condition described expected content for example as: “Demonstration videos, product information.”

The results of Study 1b provide additional evidence that when a brand is warm (vs. competent), initiating entertaining initiatives is perceived more like things ought to be. Rather than focusing on expectations, which only hint at authenticity implicitly, the next study tested authenticity more explicitly.

² Participants failed the attention check when they were unable to correctly answer a multiple choice question about what they had done in this survey.

Study 2

In Study 1a and 1b, we found that entertaining engagement initiatives were expected more from warm than competent brands, and that informative initiatives were expected from both types of brands. Given these expectation schemes, we expect that participants will evaluate an entertaining initiative as more authentic when initiated by a warm than by a competent brand, whereas participants will evaluate informative initiatives as equally authentic (H1).

Method

We conducted a lab experiment with a 2 (initiative character: entertaining vs. informative) \times 2 (brand perception: warm vs. competent) between-subjects design, among 240 students, who received partial course credits for their participation. Out of those participants, 29 were excluded from the sample for failing the attention check,³ which resulted in our final sample of 211 students (29.9% female, 70.1% male, $M_{age} = 19.72$, $SD_{age} = 1.63$, range 18–28). Participants read a description of the fictitious shoe brand Laceys in which we manipulated brand perception (see Study 1a) and described that Laceys had recently launched an online interaction platform where they offered different engagement activities. We described the platform as offering useful videos, informative stories, and practical tips and tricks (informative initiative character), or offering exciting videos, emotional stories, and funny tips and tricks (entertaining initiative character). Subsequently, participants indicated how authentic the online platform felt to them (see Newman & Dhar, 2014), “When thinking about what it means to be truly authentic Laceys, you would have to say that the online platform is” (a) authentic, (b) genuine) (1 = I completely disagree, 7 = I completely agree; $r = 0.465$, $M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.96$). To check our manipulations, we then measured brand warmth and competence (using the same measures as in Study 1a/b). We also measured how entertaining (i.e., exciting, emotional, and fun, $M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.30$) and informative (i.e., informative, useful, and practical, $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.08$) participants evaluated the platform (six items, on a 7-point scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much; Voss et al., 2003). Finally, we asked for demographics and thanked the subjects for their participation.

Results and Discussion

The manipulation of brand perception was successful: Participants in the warm brand condition perceived the brand Laceys as warmer ($M_{warm} = 5.45$; $SD_{warm} = 0.99$; $t(209) = -6.30$; $p < .000$) and less competent ($M_{comp} = 4.55$; $SD_{comp} = 1.08$; $t(209) = 4.09$; $p < .000$) than in the competent brand condition ($M_{warm} = 4.96$; $SD_{warm} = 0.85$; $M_{comp} = 5.47$; $SD_{comp} = 0.93$). The manipulation of initiative character was also successful: Participants in the entertaining initiative condition

perceived the engagement platform as more entertaining ($M_{entertaining} = 4.81$; $SD_{entertaining} = 1.23$; $t(209) = -6.22$; $p < .000$) and less informative ($M_{info} = 3.79$; $SD_{info} = 1.16$; $t(209) = 5.21$; $p < .000$) than participants in the informative initiative condition ($M_{entertaining} = 4.65$; $SD_{entertaining} = 1.12$; $M_{info} = 5.38$; $SD_{info} = 0.91$). Furthermore, we ruled out that the manipulation of brand perception influenced participants' perception of the initiative character: Two t-tests revealed no differences between participants in the warm and competent brand conditions in entertaining ($M_{warm} = 4.40$; $M_{competent} = 4.17$, $t(209) = -1.26$; $p = .21$) and informative ($M_{warm} = 5.14$; $M_{competent} = 4.90$, $t(209) = -1.57$; $p = .12$) perceptions of initiatives.

To test our first hypothesis, we conducted an ANOVA on brand authenticity, with brand perception (warm vs. competent) and engagement initiative character (informative vs. entertaining) included as independent variables. It revealed no main effects of brand perception and engagement initiative character on brand authenticity. As expected, however, there was a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 207) = 4.99$; $p < .03$). Planned contrasts showed that participants experienced an entertaining initiative from a warm brand ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 0.13$) as more authentic than from a competent brand ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.14$; $F(1, 207) = 7.69$; $p < .01$). On the other hand, the informative initiative was equally authentic for the warm ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.13$) as for the competent brand ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.13$; $F(1, 207) = 0.13$; $p = .72$). This confirms H1. All other comparisons were insignificant (see Fig. 3).

The findings of Study 2 provide direct evidence that entertaining engagement initiatives were more authentic for a warm brand compared to a competent brand, but informative initiatives were perceived as equally authentic for warm and competent brands (H1). This is in line with Study 1a/b, where we found that entertaining engagement initiatives were expected more from a warm than competent brand. What remains unclear is how these feelings of authenticity translate into consumers' evaluation of the initiative and the brand, or even into their willingness to continue engagement with the brand (H2).

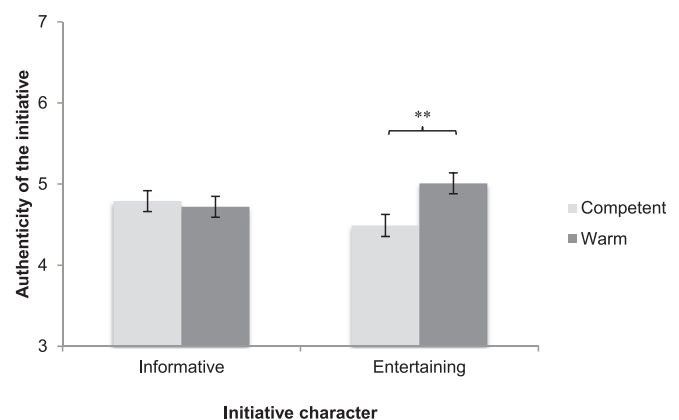


Fig. 3. Results of ANOVA on Brand Authenticity Study 2. Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

³ Participants failed the attention check when they were unable to recall and mention the correct name of the focal brand Laceys.

Study 3

In this study, we test the downstream consequences of participants' actual experiences with an informative or entertaining engagement initiative that feel (in)authentic for the brand. This study improves the external validity of our research by replicating the results with a more vivid and realistic experience of an engagement initiative. We predict that when participants experience an entertaining engagement initiative from a warm brand, they will evaluate the initiative and the brand more positively, than when participants experience an entertaining engagement initiative from a competent brand, mediated by greater authenticity (H2). We do not predict that experiencing an informative initiative will influence participants' evaluations through authenticity differently for warm and competent brands.

Method

The lab experiment had a 2 (engagement initiative character: entertaining vs. informative) \times 2 (brand perception: warm vs. competent) between-subjects design. We conducted our study among 209 students, who received partial course credits for their participation. Because 12 students failed the attention checks,⁴ our final sample consisted of 197 participants (39.1% female, 60.9% male, $M_{age} = 19.39$, $SD_{age} = 1.39$, range 18–29). For the purpose of gaining generalizability and external validity for our hypotheses, we chose to create an actual engagement initiative instead of describing one for a new brand in a new product category. Participants read a scenario about the brand Kitchen Box, a brand that delivers groceries and recipes, and subsequently watched an Instagram video-post by this brand. We manipulated brand perception by describing the brand as either a warm brand or a competent brand (see Appendix B). Then we showed participants an Instagram timeline where a video-post of Kitchen Box appeared that was either informative (i.e., instructions for making hamburgers) or entertaining (i.e., a mini hamburger that was prepared in a mini kitchen). The video-post demonstrated the making of a hamburger in a 30 s video. The informative video aimed to inform the users and displayed the steps and instructions for making a hamburger, while the entertaining video aimed to entertain the users and displayed the making of a mini hamburger, in a mini kitchen, with mini tools. The post captions either read “This week you're having hamburgers. Here's how you make them #instructions #howto” (informative condition) or “This week you're having hamburgers. Here's one for the small appetite ;) #justforfun #funny” (entertaining condition). See Appendix B for an image of the manipulation materials. Pre-testing of the materials among 196 North-American MTurk workers (45.7% female, 50.3% male, $M_{age} = 36.75$, $SD_{age} = 10.86$) revealed that the posts were perceived as intended, either entertaining or informative (see also manipulation check results below). The pretest also found that the design was perceived to be equally

attractive (three items; attractive, appealing, professional on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), $M_{inf} = 5.29$; $SD_{inf} = 1.34$; $M_{entertain} = 5.07$; $SD_{entertain} = 1.36$; $t(98) = 0.82$, $p = .42$). The same measures as in Study 2 were used to check our manipulations, after showing the manipulations. Then we measured the mediator authenticity in the same manner as in study 2 ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.12$, $r = 0.364$). We then measured the dependent variables brand evaluation ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 0.88$) and post evaluation ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.35$) using three 7-point bipolar scales (bad/good; negative/positive; unfavorable/favorable; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), and intention to continue following Kitchen Box on Instagram ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.69$; 1 = definitely unfollow, 7 = definitely remain follower). We included a measure of interest in cooking (Mittal & Lee, 1989; I am very interested in cooking; cooking is very important to me; for me, cooking does not matter; 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) as a covariate, to control for participants' involvement with the product category ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.54$). Finally, we asked for demographics and thanked the subjects.

Results

The manipulation of brand perception was successful: Participants in the warm brand condition perceived the brand Kitchen Box as warmer ($M_{warm} = 6.13$; $SD_{warm} = 0.73$; $t(183.57) = -6.44$; $p < .000$) and less competent ($M_{comp} = 5.45$; $SD_{comp} = 0.99$; $t(177.68) = 6.07$; $p < .000$) than participants in the competent brand condition ($M_{warm} = 5.37$; $SD_{warm} = 0.91$; $M_{comp} = 6.19$; $SD_{comp} = 0.69$). The manipulation of initiative character was also successful: Participants in the entertaining initiative condition perceived the Instagram post as more entertaining ($M_{entertain} = 3.99$; $SD_{entertain} = 1.10$; $t(189.92) = -2.54$; $p < .000$) and less informative ($M_{info} = 2.65$; $SD_{info} = 1.14$; $t(193.72) = 13.92$; $p < .000$) than participants in the informative initiative condition ($M_{entertain} = 3.56$; $SD_{entertain} = 1.31$; $M_{info} = 5.02$; $SD_{info} = 1.25$). Furthermore, two t-tests revealed no differences between participants in the warm and competent brand conditions in entertaining ($M_{warm} = 3.73$; $M_{comp} = 3.81$, $t(195) = 0.46$; $p = .64$) and informative ($M_{warm} = 3.69$; $M_{comp} = 4.00$, $t(195) = 1.31$; $p = .19$) perceptions of initiatives.

To test our first hypothesis, and allow comparison with the results of Study 2, we first conducted an ANOVA on brand authenticity, with brand perception (warm vs. competent) and engagement initiative character (informative vs. entertaining) as independent variables. It revealed no main effects of brand perception and initiative character on brand authenticity, but it did reveal a (marginally) significant interaction effect ($F(1, 193) = 3.83$; $p = .052$). Replicating results of Study 2, and confirming H1, planned contrasts revealed that participants experienced the entertaining initiative as more authentic in the warm brand condition ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.16$) than in the competent brand condition ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.16$; $F(1, 193) = 6.20$; $p < .02$), whereas the informative initiative was equally authentic for the warm ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.16$) as for the competent brand condition ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.16$; $F(1,$

⁴ Participants failed the attention check when they were unable to recall and mention at least one part of the focal brand name (Kitchen Box) and the product category of the focal brand.

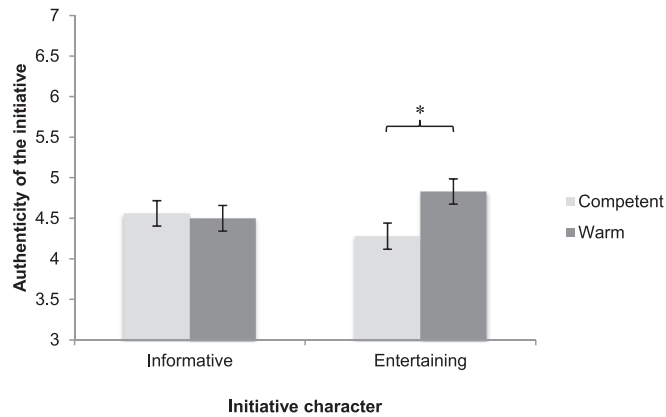


Fig. 4. Results of ANOVA on Brand Authenticity in Study 3. Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

193) = 0.07; $p = .79$). All other comparisons were also insignificant (See Fig. 4).

Next, we tested the second hypothesis in a moderated mediation analysis that uses Hayes' (2018) PROCESS SPSS macro with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (model 7), where brand perception (coded as -1 ; 1) served as predictor, initiative character (coded as -1 ; 1) as the moderator, authenticity as mediator, brand attitude as dependent variable, and interest in cooking as covariate. The results showed a significant index of moderated mediation (0.13, 95% CI [0.004; 0.284]), indicating that the effect of initiative character on brand attitude through authenticity was different for the warm and competent brand. Specifically, offering an entertaining initiative led to a more positive brand evaluation for the warm than for the competent brand, through perceived authenticity (0.12; 95% CI [0.02; 0.22]). There was no indirect effect found for informative engagement initiatives. We found similar results for post evaluation and intention to continue following Kitchen Box as dependent variables. See Appendix C for a detailed description of those results.

Discussion

In line with studies 1a, 1b and 2, we found that the entertaining initiative was seen as more authentic when the brand was a warm brand rather than a competent brand, and participants perceived an informative engagement initiative equally authentic for a competent brand and warm brand, confirming H1. Furthermore, the feeling of authenticity translated into more positive consumer responses (i.e., brand attitude, post evaluation, and intention to continue following Kitchen Box), confirming H2.

Study 4

In this study, we aim to further improve the external and ecological validity of our results and test our hypotheses in a more natural environment. We used a critical incident methodology, testing the effects of (in)authentic engagement initiatives

in a field setting (e.g., Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Folkes & Patrick, 2003; Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013).

Method

Sample and Questionnaire Design

For this study we recruited 562 U.K. participants via Prolific online panel, who received £0.75 for their participation. We excluded responses with invalid screenshot uploads and attention check fails,⁵ which resulted in our final sample of 504 participants (73.6% female, 25.8% male, 0.4% not listed, $M_{age} = 33.31$, $SD_{age} = 11.48$, range 18–71). We followed a critical incident procedure (Flanagan, 1954) asking participants to browse through their Facebook timeline until they encountered a post of a brand that they felt familiar with (either a sponsored or unsponsored post) and then to view it. We used this post as the critical engagement incident that participants further evaluated. For this brand initiative, we measured our independent variables, brand perception ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 1.67$; min = 1; max = 7), and initiative character ($M = 3.32$; $SD = 1.78$; min = 1; max = 7) on two 7-point bipolar scales. For brand perception, the scale ranged from mostly competent (1) to mostly warm (7), and for initiative character, the scale ranged from mostly informative (1) to mostly entertaining (7). We then measured the mediator, authenticity perceptions of the brand initiative (see studies 2 and 3; $r = 0.803$, $M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.34$). We measured three customer engagement behaviors that function as our dependent variable consumer responses: we asked participants how likely they were to like the post ($M = 26.84$, $SD = 31.29$), visit the brand page ($M = 43.72$; $SD = 34.09$), and follow the brand ($M = 44.13$; $SD = 35.37$) using three sliders that ranged from 0 (very unlikely) to 100 (very likely). Participants were then asked to upload a screenshot of the post, which we used as an attention check. Finally, we asked for demographics and thanked the participants for their participation.

Model Specification

We formulated and analyzed a structural equation model (SEM) using Stata SE 41.2. The model comprises of a measurement and structural part to validate our hypothesized relationships between brand perceptions, initiative character, authenticity perceptions, and consumer responses. The measurement model included two latent constructs, namely authenticity perceptions and consumer responses. To capture the interaction effect of brand perception and initiative character, we incorporated an interaction term of the two variables in the structural model. We then included paths from brand perception, initiative character, and the interaction term to authenticity perceptions (H1) and from authenticity to consumer responses (H2). We mean centered all exogenous variables and added covariate arrows between them. Table 1 shows the correlations between these constructs. See also Fig. 5 for a visual overview of the path model and unstandardized path coefficients.

⁵ We required participants to have uploaded a screenshot with a valid branded Facebook post, and to follow up on a task to click 2, to indicate their attention.

Results

First, we assessed the validity and reliability of our measurement model. We found a good fit for the measurement model ($\chi^2(4) = 2.38, p = .67, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = 0.009, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00$). All factor loadings in the measurement model were satisfactory and significant. We assessed discriminant validity by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted of the two latent constructs (i.e., $AVE_{\text{authenticity}} = 0.81$, and $AVE_{\text{consumer responses}} = 0.62$) with the correlation between the constructs ($r = 0.37$) to conclude that discriminant validity was supported. For both constructs, composite reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha_{\text{responses}} = 0.83$; $\alpha_{\text{authenticity}} = 0.89$). Finally, we used Harman's single factor score to test for common method bias and found none since the total variance for a single factor was less than 50%. These checks all indicate that our measurement model could describe the underlying latent constructs of authenticity and consumer responses well.

We then tested our structural model using maximum likelihood estimation. Fit statistics indicate a good fit for our hypothesized model ($\chi^2(16) = 51.66, p < .000, RMSEA = 0.067, SRMR = 0.058, CFI = 0.971, TLI = 0.955$). Consulting modification indices, model fit would be improved by adding another path from brand perception to consumer responses. Indeed, literature has proven brand warmth to be a very influential concept, affecting for example brand endorsements (Bernritter, Verlegh, & Smit, 2016), making this a very plausible relationship. We therefore considered a model including this path and observed an improvement of model fit ($\chi^2(15) = 15.02, p = .45, RMSEA = 0.001, SRMR = 0.017, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000$). However, since adding this path did not change the pattern of our hypothesized findings, and model fit of our hypothesized model was already good, we interpreted our initial model (See Fig. 5).

Path coefficients revealed significant direct effects of brand perception, initiative character, and the interaction term on authenticity perceptions. In line with our first hypothesis, and studies 2–3, we found a positive significant effect of the interaction term of brand perception and initiative character on authenticity perceptions ($\beta = 0.09, p < .05$), which means that the more a brand is perceived as warm, while the more an initiative is perceived as entertaining, the more authentic it was perceived to be. We further found that brand perception positively influenced authenticity perceptions ($\beta = 0.22, p < .000$), which means that the warmer a brand was perceived, the more authentic it was perceived as well. Also, we found that initiative character negatively influenced authenticity perceptions ($\beta = -0.11, p = .02$), which means that the more an initiative moves from informative to being entertaining, the less authentic it was perceived to be. We further found that these effects translate into consumer responses, as brand perceptions ($b = 1.28, p < .000$), initiative character ($b = -0.59, p = .02$), and the interaction term ($b = 0.28, p < .05$) had significant indirect effects on consumer responses via authenticity, and authenticity directly influenced consumer responses ($\beta = 0.44, p < .000$). These results confirm both our hypotheses.

General Discussion

Conclusions

This research examined the perceived authenticity of entertaining and informative online customer engagement initiatives for warm and competent brands and how this perceived authenticity affects consumers' responses towards the brand, the initiative, and ongoing customer engagement. In four experiments and a critical incident study, we showed that consumers expect and are more appreciative of engagement initiatives that are authentic for the brand. In Study 1a and 1b, we demonstrated that consumers' expectations about brands' engagement initiatives differ between types of brands: More often, they expect entertaining initiatives from warm brands than from competent brands, and they expect informative initiatives both from warm and competent brands. In Study 2, we demonstrated that the (in)consistency between brand and initiative translates into brand authenticity perceptions, such that entertaining engagement initiatives are perceived as authentic for warm brands but not for competent brands (H1). We replicated these findings in Study 3, while also demonstrating that initiating entertaining activities leads to more positive evaluations for warm brands than competent brands due to authenticity perceptions of entertaining initiatives for warm brands but not competent brands (H2). Finally, in Study 4, a critical incident study shows that consumer evaluations of a wide range of real-world engagement initiatives show a comparable pattern of effects. An overview of the studies and main findings is presented in Table 2.

Interestingly, our results consistently showed an asymmetry in the pattern of effects: While entertaining initiatives were perceived as more authentic, and in turn appreciated more for warm brands than competent brands, we find no such differences for informative initiatives. Accordingly, we find that entertaining brand initiatives are generally perceived as less authentic (Study 4), and that consumers generally expect informative initiatives from brands more than entertaining initiatives (Study 1a). Even though studies 2 and 3 did not find evidence for the default character of online initiatives being informative, overall, our findings suggest that informative engagement activities can be initiated by brands regardless of the brand perception because such activities were perceived to be equally authentic for warm and competent brands in all four studies. These results yield several implications for theory, practice, and future research.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix of key constructs Study 4.

	M	SD	α	1.	2.	4.	5.
1. Brand perception	0	1.67		1.00			
2. Initiative character	0	1.78		0.155**	1.00		
4. Authenticity	5.56	1.34	0.89	0.176**	-0.073	1.00	
5. Consumer responses	38.23	28.98	0.83	0.323**	0.018	0.372**	1.00

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

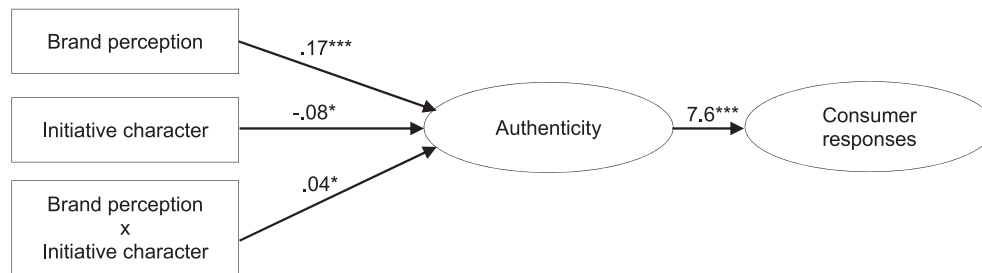


Fig. 5. Path model with unstandardized coefficients Study 4. Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Theoretical Implications

This research is positioned at the intersection of literature about customer engagement, brand authenticity, and the BIAF. Its results contribute to the understanding of how authenticity influences the success of brand engagement initiatives.

We build on the BIAF by comparing warm and competent brands (Kervyn et al., 2012) and by showing that warmth and competence drive the perceived authenticity of online engagement initiatives. In line with earlier work showing that warmth, rather than competence perceptions, is a critical dimension for consumers' assessment of brand actions (e.g., Bernritter et al., 2016; Kervyn et al., 2012), we find that entertaining engagement initiatives are seen as more authentic for warm brands.

The results of this research also have several implications for customer engagement literature. We consistently found that entertaining engagement initiatives seemed more authentic and beneficial for warm brands than for competent brands. There was no such difference for informative engagement initiatives. We thereby extend the work of Eigenraam et al. (2018), who call for more research that compares entertaining and informative engagement activities. We introduce the concept of brand authenticity into the engagement literature and confirm a central premise here that consistency between brand type and engagement activity infuses authenticity to brands (e.g., Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2013; Spiggle et al., 2012). More specifically, this research addressed the questions of whether engagement initiatives are perceived as more authentic when they are consistent with consumers' brand perceptions and how this affects consumers' responses to them. We thereby extend the work of Becker et al. (2019), who identify and test four dimensions of authenticity in advertising and call for extension of authenticity research in other contexts than that of television advertising. Our results confirm their finding that ad congruency with the essence of a brand positively influences authenticity and consumer responses in the context of online customer engagement. Previously put as “the cornerstone of modern marketing” (Brown et al., 2003), we find that, indeed, brand authenticity is an influential brand characteristic that is highly relevant to brand managers.

Limitations and Future Research

We have identified several specific directions for future research to investigate authentic engagement initiation in more

depth. First, in this research we have investigated the consistency between warm/competent brands and entertaining/informative engagement initiatives but additional factors can potentially be considered that influence the extent to which an engagement initiative will be perceived as (in)authentic. Prior research found, for example, that informative, argument-based advertising is more effective in younger markets, and emotion-based, entertaining advertising is more effective in older markets because younger consumers have less knowledge about new brands and are more motivated to process arguments and information (Chandy, Tellis, Macinnis, & Thaivanich, 2003). Small, new brands still need to build awareness and knowledge, and therefore it might be especially important for these types of brands to preserve the brand essence (Becker et al., 2019) and thus initiate informative engagement. On the other hand, when there is little knowledge of a brand there might also be little expectation of what a brand ought to do. Thus, such a brand might have more freedom as to what is authentic for this brand. Consistent implementation of a chosen path is then important in order to sustain and build strong authentic brand perceptions (Spiggle et al., 2012). While we kept brand knowledge constant in our research, future research might explore how it relates to authenticity perceptions of entertaining and informative engagement initiatives.

The current research focused on the interplay of the type of initiative and the brand perception in driving authenticity and brand evaluation, generalizing across multiple media channels (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, brand website). Future research, however, could investigate the potential interplay with media effects because different social media have previously been linked to different consumer usage experiences (Voorveld et al., 2018). For example, consumers associate the platform YouTube mostly with entertainment, while consumers associate Twitter with being informed and staying up to date (Voorveld et al., 2018). Given such differences between social media experiences, could the inherently entertaining experience of a platform worsen inauthenticity for competent brands or increase authenticity for warm brands? Future research could also explore whether the online platform, with its unique characteristics, may change brand perceptions when the brand communicates through those platforms and how.

Although engagement initiatives mostly relate to online media (Alvarez-Milán, Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2018; Eigenraam et al., 2018), engagement initiatives can also be organized offline, for example by organizing branded events

Table 2
Overview of the studies and main findings.

Study	Sample and size	Brand	Platform	Manipulations	Measures	Main finding
1a	N = 90 MTurk	Laceys (shoes; fictitious)	Online media	Brand perception (warm vs. competent)	- Expectation of informative initiatives - Expectation of entertaining initiatives	Expectation scheme confirmed
1b	N = 111 Prolific	Self-reported brands	Online media	Brand perception (warm vs. competent)	- Description of expected on-line initiatives - Rating of initiative character	Expectation scheme confirmed
2	N = 211 Student sample	Laceys (shoes; fictitious)	Branded online platform	- Brand perception (warm vs. competent) - Initiative character (entertaining vs. informative)	- Authenticity of initiative	H1 confirmed
3	N = 209 Student sample	KitchenBox (delivery of groceries and recipes; fictitious)	Instagram	- Brand perception (warm vs. competent) - Initiative character (entertaining vs. informative)	- Authenticity of initiative - Brand evaluation - Post evaluation - Intention to continue following brand	H1 and H2 confirmed
4	N = 504 Prolific	Branded posts encountered on Facebook (critical incidence technique)	Facebook		- Brand perception - Initiative character - Authenticity of initiative - Likelihood to a) like the post b) visit the brand page c) follow the brand	H1 and H2 confirmed

(e.g., Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). One might wonder if our results would hold in offline platforms: Are transformational advertisements or events (Puto & Wells, 1984; Rossiter & Percy, 1997) less authentic than informational ones for competent brands than for warm brands? Prior research shows that consumers form perceptions of authenticity offline as well (e.g., Beverland et al., 2008), thus our results might hold in offline contexts as well. However, the ease of reaching many consumers and possible virality of online engagement initiatives (e.g., Akpinar & Berger, 2017; Tellis et al., 2019) might be a reason why authenticity perceptions become more dominant in this context. While online media might have a much wider reach, offline communication has been found to be perceived as more qualitative and personal than online communication (Knop et al., 2016). Therefore, the authenticity perceptions created offline might be stronger than those online. Finally, in an omnichannel strategy, all these factors might even interact in cross-media effects (e.g., Lambertson & Stephen, 2016). Future research could investigate how these differences between online and offline media play a role in forming authenticity perceptions of engagement initiatives.

Furthermore, how do cues of credibility or brand values and heritage, in addition to warmth and competence, play a role in consumer responses to engagement initiation (Becker et al., 2019; Spiggle et al., 2012)? One could for example imagine that consumers respond more favorably towards engagement initiatives that are in line with a brand's values: An eco-check or waste-reduction app may be perceived as more authentic for Patagonia than for Zara because Patagonia has a long history of

embracing sustainability. Whereas our work focused on consistency between social perceptions of a brand and their engagement initiation on a general level, future work might look into consistency regarding such specific brand values and heritage to be able to provide even more nuanced guidelines for providing authentic engagement.

Managerial Implications

This research aimed to answer the question of whether brands should consider to initiate different kinds of engagement activities. Based on our results, we conclude that this is indeed the case. Our studies emphasize the importance of acting according to what the brand essentially is about (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Morhart et al., 2013; Spiggle et al., 2012), namely that what is authentic for warm brands is different from what is authentic for competent brands. For these two types of brands, our research provides specific guidelines regarding the initiation of engagement activities. Managers should be aware that they can initiate online activities that feel more informative versus more entertaining to consumers (Eigenraam et al., 2018). Informative engagement initiatives are perceived equally authentic for competent and warm brands. For example, launching an informative online platform (Study 2), posting instructive video posts on Instagram (Study 3), or informative posts on Facebook (Study 4) are initiatives that can be initiated regardless of perceptions of brand warmth and competence. It is crucial for the initiatives to preserve the brand's essence (Becker et al., 2019) but providing information seems essential for both warm and competent brands. As for entertaining

engagement, managers should be more careful. While social media have been identified as suitable channels for posting entertaining content because entertainment is one of the social media usage goals of consumers (Voorveld et al., 2018), our results suggest that consumers do not necessarily use social media to be entertained by brands. We found that launching an entertaining online platform (Study 2), posting a funny video on Instagram (Study 3), and entertaining Facebook posts (Study 4) were perceived as more authentic for warm brands than competent brands. Therefore, entertaining engagement initiatives, such as contests, funny social media content, or advergames (Eigenraam et al., 2018) are advised only to be adopted by warmer brands in order to remain authentic and gain optimal engagement and consumer response. Nevertheless, our recommendations should not be worrying for competent brands. Although we advise them not to use entertaining initiatives to engage customers, there remain plenty of (informative/relevant/useful) options to do so. Also, there are many advantages of being perceived as a competent brand. Highly competent brands are admired brands and receive higher purchase intent and loyalty from customers than non-competent brands (Kervyn et al., 2012). Thus, warmth and competence, both, are desirable brand perceptions, but, because competence elicits different expectations than warmth, entertaining initiatives are not as authentic for competent brands as they are for warm brands. In light of our recommendations, Audi might therefore stick to cars and refrain from emotional campaigns like the #PaidMyDues campaign in the future.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Stimulus materials, Study 1b, Warm brand condition

Think of a brand that is **warm, generous, and friendly**.
A brand that has a **personal touch**, which makes interacting with them feel **fun**.

Whenever you have questions, they are very **approachable** and always **happy to help you**.

Appendix B. Stimulus materials, Study 1b, Competent brand condition

Think of a brand that is **competent, efficient, and effective**.

A brand that is **accurate**, which makes interacting with them feel **efficient**.

Whenever you have questions, they are very **knowledgeable** and always **professional**.

Appendix C. Stimulus materials, Study 3, Warm brand condition

You are a client of Kitchen Box.

Generally, you feel Kitchen Box is a **warm, generous, and friendly** brand.

Every week, Kitchen Box delivers a box with groceries and recipes at your door. It is always a **pleasure to you**. You feel their **personal touch** makes it a very **warm** interaction.

Whenever you have questions, you find them very **approachable**. You feel they are always **happy to help you**. You can ask them anything.

You really think that their **generous** chefs make sure to select the recipes and fresh products with **great care for you**.

It makes the brand very **personal** to you.

Appendix D. Stimulus materials, Study 3, Competent brand condition

You are a client of Kitchen Box.

Generally, you feel Kitchen Box is a **competent, efficient, and effective** brand.

Every week, Kitchen Box delivers a box with groceries and recipes at your door. It is always **convenient** to you. You feel their **accurateness** makes it a very **efficient** interaction.

Whenever you have questions, you find them very **knowledgeable**. You feel they are always **professional**. You can ask them anything.

You really think that their **competent** chefs make sure to select the recipes and fresh products with **great care for quality**.

It makes the brand very **professional** to you.

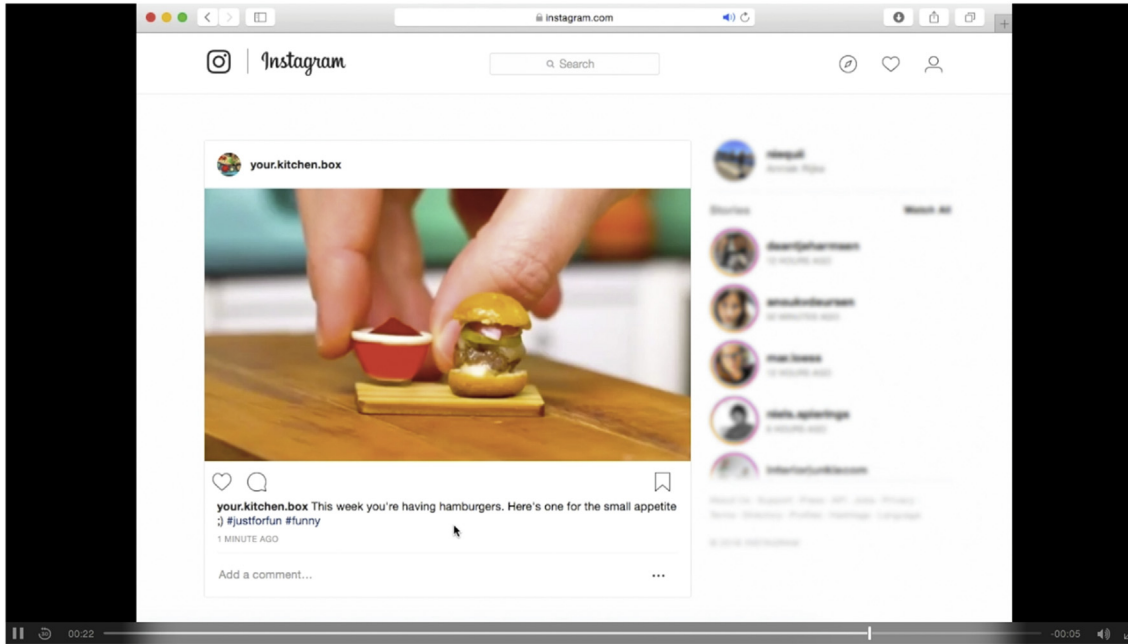
Appendix E. Stimulus materials, Study 3, Entertainment condition

Kitchen Box is also active on the social medium Instagram, just like you, and you have followed them.

You are now scrolling on Instagram, and you encounter a **funny post** of Kitchen Box, that reads:

*This week you're having hamburgers. Here's one for the small appetite;)
#justforfun #funny*

If you go to the next page, you will see the entire post on Instagram including a video. Please explore the Instagram post, and watch the video as many times as you like. Afterwards we will ask you some questions about the Instagram post.



The full video can be downloaded via <https://hdl.handle.net/10411/FUTUW3>

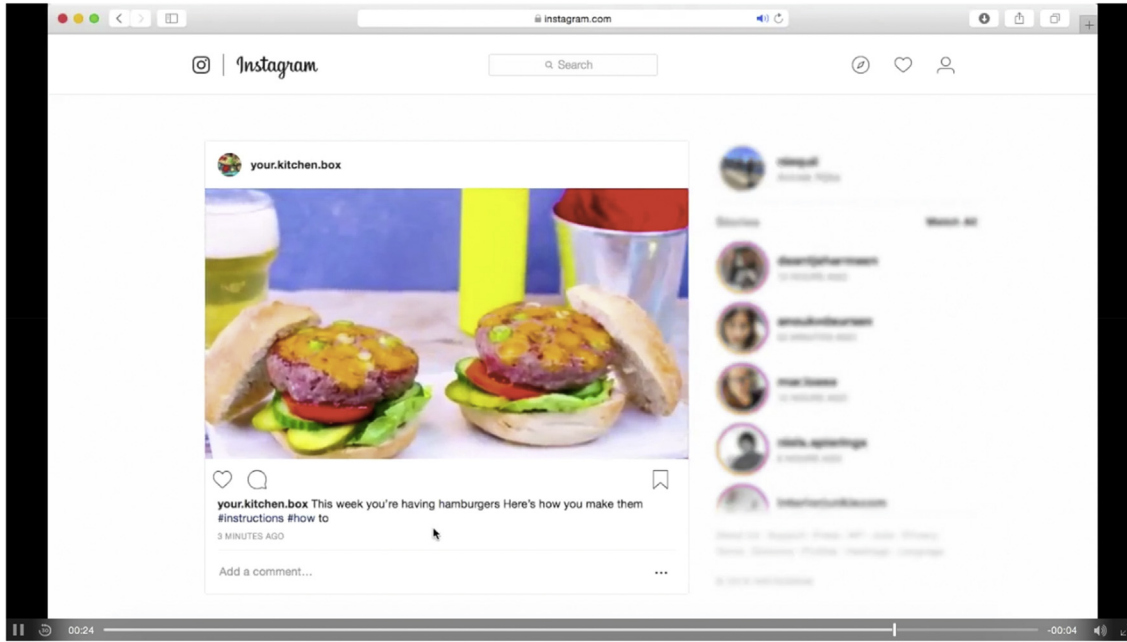
Appendix F. Stimulus materials, Study 3, Informative condition

Kitchen Box is also active on the social medium Instagram, just like you, and you have followed them.

You are now scrolling on Instagram, and you encounter **an informative post** of Kitchen Box, that reads:

This week you're having hamburgers. Here's how you make them #instructions #howto

If you go to the next page, you will see the entire post on Instagram including a video. Please explore the Instagram post, and watch the video as many times as you like. Afterwards we will ask you some questions about the Instagram post.



The full video can be downloaded via <https://hdl.handle.net/10411/FUTUW3>

Appendix G. Summary of PROCESS moderated mediation results Study 3

Predictor	Values of W	Outcome variable	
		Authenticity	Brand attitude
Brand perception		0.13	-0.01
Initiative character		0.01	
Authenticity (mediator)			0.42 ***
Brand perception x Initiative character		0.16 *	
	-1	-0.03	
	+1	0.28 *	
Brand perception → Authenticity → Brand attitude			-0.01 <i>ns</i>
	-1		0.12 [0.0247; 0.2238]
	+1		0.10 **
Interest in cooking (covariate)		-0.03	
Index of moderated mediation	0.13 [0.0038; 0.2840]		

Predictor	Values of W	Outcome variable	
		Authenticity	Post evaluation
Brand perception		0.13	-0.05
Initiative character		0.01	
Authenticity (mediator)			0.66 ***
Brand perception x Initiative character		0.16 *	
	-1	-0.03	
	+1	0.28 *	
Brand perception → Authenticity → Post evaluation			-0.02 <i>ns</i>
	-1		0.19 [0.0445; 0.3403]
	+1		0.07
Interest in cooking (covariate)		-0.03	
Index of moderated mediation	0.21 [0.0134; 0.4338]		

Predictor	Values of W	Outcome variable	
		Authenticity	Intention to follow
Brand perception		0.13	-0.15
Initiative character		0.01	

(continued)

Predictor	Values of W	Outcome variable	
		Authenticity	Intention to follow
Authenticity (mediator)			0.68 ***
Brand perception x Initiative character		0.16 *	
	–1	–0.03	
	+1	0.28 *	
Brand perception → Authenticity → Intention to follow	–1		–0.02 ns
	+1		0.19 [0.0499; 0.3478]
Interest in cooking (covariate)		–0.03	0.11
Index of moderated mediation	0.22 [0.0096; 0.4293]		

*** Significant at $p < .001$.** Significant at $p < .01$.* Significant at $p < .05$.

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