

Humanizing Handmade Brands: How Handmade Brands Are Perceived Authentic

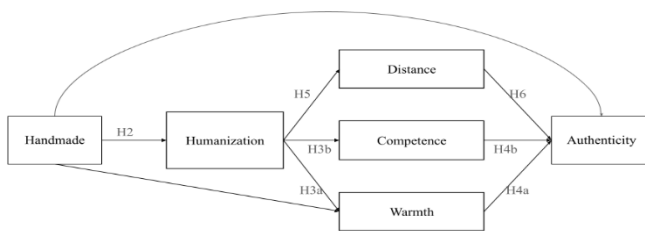
Hyumjoo Im, Terry H. Kim, & Zhanming Chen, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

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Introduction In today's saturated marketplace, brand authenticity, “a judgment about the genuineness of a brand’s image” (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020, p.42), is a crucial differentiator and a predictor of positive business outcomes such as purchase intention and willingness to pay a price premium (Fritz et al., 2017). A recent food consumption study highlighted that authenticity of a food item is increased when made by hand (Frizzo et al., 2020). As many clothing brands adopt artisanal, handmade approaches, whether the handmade effect transfers to the clothing category and to the brand level is an important question. Therefore, we investigated how the handmade claim of a clothing brand can influence perceived brand authenticity. Drawing upon brand authenticity, psychological distance, and anthropomorphism literature, we tested a theoretical model delineating the psychological process of the connection between handcraft and authenticity.

Literature review & hypotheses development Research has shown that handmade, artisanal production methods are linked to authenticity because handcrafted products are perceived as genuine and true (Boisvert & Ashill, 2018; Frizzo et al., 2020). Thus, *it is likely that consumers perceive a handmade brand as more authentic than a brand utilizing machines (H1)*. Brand anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits to brands, frequently happens (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Consumers humanize a brand when the brand activates human schema through humanlike cues or self-brand similarity (Jeong & Kim, 2021). Evidence or knowledge of human touch increases the accessibility of human schema and allows consumers to apply it to the target (Schroll et al., 2018). Because handmade production methods likely will increase human presence in consumer’s mind, *handmade production methods likely foster the humanization of the brand (H2)*.

When brands are humanized, warmth (sociability, friendliness) and competence (ability, agency), two critical social judgment dimensions, are likely to be used for brand perception. Because humanized brands are perceived as possessing more humanlike characteristics and in-group traits (Zhang et al., 2020), *the humanization of the brand will increase (a) warmth and (b) competence (H3)*. Moreover, warmth and competence of a brand were shown to be positively related to brand authenticity because consistent performance and sincerity which comprise authenticity are closely related to warmth and competence (Portal et al., 2019). Thus, *(a) warmth and (b) competence will be positively related to brand authenticity (H4)*. Anthropomorphism literature demonstrated that people find humanized targets as more similar and as psychologically closer to them (Ahn et al., 2021). Thus, *the humanization of the brand will*



decrease psychological distance (H5).

Brand authenticity is a multi-component construct (Nunes et al., 2021), and feeling connected (closeness, intimacy) is an integral component (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). As this perception of closeness can be interpreted as psychological distance,

psychological distance will be negatively associated with brand authenticity (H6).

Methods & Results A single-factor 2-level (handmade vs. machine-made) between-subjects online experiment was conducted. Participants read the short description of the knitwear brand using either hand- or machine-made and answered the survey questionnaire containing items adopted from previously validated instruments. 378 participants recruited from Amazon MTurk (Mean_age=37.75; 51.1% male; 67.7% white/16.1% black/11.6% Asian) completed the online experiment. Manipulation was successful ($F=919.402, p<.001$; mean=1.78 vs. 6.05). The knitwear brand was perceived to be more authentic when they used handmade methods (H1: $F=69.02, p<.001$; mean=4.62 vs. 5.55). Handmade methods positively affected humanization ($\beta=.481, t=10.639, p<.001$), accepting H2. The serial mediation through humanization and warmth/competence were both significant (warmth: effect=.276[.136;.437], competence: effect=.174[.099;.261]) providing support for H3 and H4. The serial mediation through humanization and psychological distance was also significant (effect=.080[.022;.150]) supporting H5 and H6. Additionally, the direct effect of handmade on authenticity remains significant (effect=.271, $p=.016$).

Discussion & Implications Our findings contribute to the scarce handmade effect literature by revealing the psychological mechanism focusing on the connection between human touch/presence and humanization. Handmade effects and brand authenticity were rarely studied in the fashion brand context. Existing literature is focused on luxury brands or individual product perceptions, constraining the applicability of their findings. This study addresses the question in a broader context, providing insights applicable to many small fashion handcraft businesses. Our study uncovers the important psychological mechanism triggered by humanization and its downstream effects on social judgments (warmth and competence) and psychological distance. The findings imply emphasizing human touch and human presence explicitly in communications will benefit the brands using handmade methods. Our results revealed that the serial mediation effect through humanization and warmth was the largest among the three mediation paths. Moreover, warmth was the only mediator that mediates the handmade effect on authenticity without brand humanization (effect=.100[.031;.194]), implying its crucial role in forming brand authenticity. This finding is consistent with the handmade effect literature that found love was infused in the making process (Fuchs et al., 2015). It is advisable that business owners and marketers articulate warmth in their communications. A future study investigating moderators to amplify or diminish the warmth effects (e.g., warm vs. cold logo designs) will deepen our knowledge.

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