Understanding the authentic:
A critical & empirical analysis of the complexities of authenticity

Although the modern world may be obsessed with the authentic, defining and understanding authenticity is not a straightforward task. Theorists such as Charles Taylor and Andrew Potter have attempted to tackle this question: their analyses make broad claims regarding the nature of the authentic. This paper takes empirical evidence obtained through brief interviews with college-aged students in conjunction with the theories of Taylor and Potter to understand the nuances of how authenticity is popularly perceived and understood.

Taylor understands authenticity in a dialogical context, emphasizing that meaningful authenticity is a social pursuit. In his argument, individual identity is generated inwardly but takes shape through relationships and requires recognition by others. His greatest concern is that of individualism overtaking society leading to the loss of a broader vision: specifically, he fears that subjectivism and relativism will erase the cultural value placed on morals. His belief that authenticity requires dialogue is an attempt to push back on the individualistic and self-absorbed tendencies of modernity and encourage communication between differing groups and individuals.

Potter’s view of authenticity is far more pessimistic. While Taylor believes that dialogue will remedy the downward spiral of subjectivism, Potter argues that the modern sense of authenticity is a hoax and finding true authenticity is impossible. Rather, modernity is permeated by “fake authenticity”, and the omnipresent notion of the quest for authenticity is, in actuality, nothing more than a form of status-seeking. Following Potter’s argument, this quest creates a culture of conspicuous authenticity, where each person tries to be more visibly “authentic” than the next, eventually breeding resentment and destroying social ties. Drawing in Rousseau’s argument that pride was the fall of humankind, Potter emphasizes the danger of comparison. A culture of authenticity that has become commodified through advertising and marketing regimes and that emphasizes status-seeking and conspicuousness is, Potter emphasizes, definitively inauthentic.
Popular views of authenticity paint a more positive picture. Being authentic is considered being yourself, genuine, or different from others. Authenticity means having a core identity or a “true self”. To understand popular definitions and views of authenticity, I conducted three separate interviews. One took place in a conversational context, and the following two were semi-structured, designed to analyze the concept in more detail (see Appendix 1). I then analyzed the interviews using coding techniques to extrapolate major themes. Three core ideas emerged. 

1. **True authenticity comes from within.** Authenticity is found individually and judged subjectively rather than by using objective measures. The appearance of authenticity can be faked but being truly authentic is much more important than appearing authentic. This emphasis on the individual works against Taylor’s ideal of authenticity as formed in a social context. 

2. **Authenticity varies and is desired.** Individual authenticity varies by person and over time and is something controllable. Additionally, authenticity is something to be strived for: it is a desirable trait both in oneself and in others. These ideas may help us to understand some of Potter’s theories regarding the culture of authenticity. 

3. **Authenticity has a social component** and can be defined and used in a social context. For example, respondents indicated that authenticity is measured as a comparison between individuals. Additionally, they mentioned that they judge others who are seemingly inauthentic and tend to trust those who they perceive as authentic. This view speaks to the ideas of both theorists. 

### I. True authenticity comes from within

In defining authenticity, all respondents agreed that it is found individually and is an individual pursuit. One respondent emphasized that being authentic is being one’s true self. She went on to say that “living authentically is to have your real emotions and your real reactions [visible] to the people around you”. Potter’s summary of Rousseau’s idea that “the authentic person is someone who is in touch with their deepest feelings, whose emotional life is laid bare” (Potter 2010:73), is essentially a restatement of this respondent’s idea. Taylor would add on that being true to oneself and finding one’s own way of being human is an important component of authenticity. Another respondent stated, “I want to be myself, I don’t want to be anyone else, I want to be different, I want to stand out.” His idea that being authentic means being different from other people parallels Potter’s view of conspicuous authenticity. Again bringing in Rousseau’s views, this time on “invidious comparison”, Potter warns that comparison between oneself and others will lead to resentment; this notion of comparison arose primarily when
respondents described the social component of authenticity and will be analyzed further. Taylor, on the other hand, could agree that finding one’s authenticity by differing oneself from others is a form of dialogue. He would also emphasize, to a certain extent, originality and being true to one’s own individuality, as long as that individuality is not isolated from a social context.

Because respondents saw authenticity as individual, they measured it elsewhere in a subjective manner. Perhaps adding to Taylor’s concern with an individualist approach, statements such as “I perceive authenticity as being true to yourself, so that’s very individual to me” can easily lead to an extreme level of subjectivity. Authenticity in others was measured by personal opinion, “gut feeling, … instinct” and not by an objective scale. Rather than adding to Taylor’s fear, these statements may indicate something about the nature of authenticity itself: it cannot be measured objectively. This perhaps speaks to Potter’s argument that the modern quest for authenticity is a hoax; if there are no objective measures of authenticity, modern individuals should not all be searching for the same path towards the authentic.

In tackling Potter’s view of “fake authenticity” respondents were able to nuance his answer:

“You could probably lie about whatever you want and come off as however you want to come off as to other people. You could still be authentic but you wouldn’t really like who you are.”

“You can fake an identity, an authentic identity, I think people gradually catch on… but I don’t think you can fake being true to yourself.”

Statements such as these indicate that an authentic appearance is possible to fake, a concept in agreement with Potter’s theory that those pursuing authenticity are trying to maintain a certain image by appearing conspicuously authentic. However, both respondents would say that one can recognize false authenticity in others or even in oneself due to a visible absence of true happiness. This idea speaks back in contrast to Potter, indicating that perhaps his decrying of fake authenticity entirely replacing true authenticity has been extrapolated too far and that individuals can still differentiate the fake from the real. While later both respondents will say they have done certain things to look authentic or validate their own authenticity, they place the basis of authenticity on subjective, internal feelings. Following their ideas, it is more important to be authentic than to look authentic, despite the fact that one is only authentic if others see that
authenticity. This concept was of the greatest complexity in the responses, and outlines a precariously balanced authentic between the individual and society.

II. Authenticity varies and is desired

The subjectivity of authenticity lends itself to its variability: “I think people go in and out of living an authentic lifestyle”. While the end goal is true authenticity, one’s authentic state of being is often in flux. Adding on to the possibility of faking the authentic, authenticity is controllable. One of the main examples of this is the possibility of purchasing things to appear authentic or to validate one’s own authenticity. The following two quotations indicate the desire to demonstrate authenticity and “stand out” by buying a specific product:

“This bike company Ritte is really creative with their design, they stand out completely. They’re way different from every other bike company and everyone notices it. You see someone riding that bike, someone will say something about it. Other bikes, everyone has a Specialized or a Trek or a Giant, but if you see a Ritte it’s like ‘whoa’.”

“My friend’s skateboard company, I bought one of his skateboards… I just thought it would be cool because the skateboard is made out of metal and not the standard plywood … it has cutouts in it, it’s very artistic and different from every other skateboard out there and very few people have them. It was cool to be one of the ten people to have one of those skateboards … It was totally worth it.”

Perhaps these quotes are an affirmation of Potter’s argument that authenticity has become commodified. He sees products marketed to be “authentic” as decidedly inauthentic, and that purchasing these items will not lead to true authenticity. As the respondent above stated, these types of goods make one “stand out”, akin to Potter’s notion of conspicuous authenticity. Potter would argue that buying items to stand out is only a form of status-seeking and does not represent true authenticity. The difficulty of critiquing either the views of the respondent (“It was totally worth it”) or Andrew Potter’s cynical theory is the notion of subjectivity. Without objective ways of measuring authenticity, it is impossible to say that, in all cases, buying a product either makes one authentic or its opposite. As with the idea of being able to recognize fake authenticity, respondents troubled Potter’s matter-of-fact criticism of conspicuous authenticity.

Another respondent added an entirely different perspective, that of buying products to follow one’s “true desire” or to help one become one’s “true self”. For example, she “buy[s] things to validate [her] authenticity … like Wellesley things are validating your authenticity as a Wellesley student”. Potter may argue that this type of consumerism is still commodified
authenticity, but if being authentic is finding one’s true self, is that pursuit possible without any form of consumption? Again, respondents’ emphasis that being authentic in one’s heart is more important than appearing authentic, alongside their view that purchasing certain items allow them to feel subjectively authentic, it is difficult to say whether consumption of the types described above is merely a status-seeking pursuit.

Potter claims that most people want to be authentic, and respondents agreed. As authenticity varies, positive results also vary. If one is authentic, “you’re free to do whatever, live your life how you want”, and “it really helps to be authentic if you’re trying to be happy”. If authenticity gives freedom and leads to happiness, these benefits help explain Potter’s emphatic statement that the quest for authenticity is one of the focal points of the modern era. The desire to be authentic, as a means of obtaining freedom and happiness, is an incredibly powerful movement. Not only did all respondents say that they themselves tried to be authentic, they conceded that most people also try to be authentic.

III. Social contexts of authenticity

Just as the individual finds identity both subjectively and in relation to those around them, authenticity is defined and used in a social context. Taylor writes on the idea of identity as created dialogically, and one respondent agreed: “I think there’s dialogue in terms of the authenticity of an identity, like identifying with a certain group… it’s decided upon that this is certain behavior that’s authentic to this identity.” In every social context or group, people collectively decide upon vocabularies of authenticity. Being an authentic Protestant requires following different sets of norms than does being an authentic Catholic. Likewise, being considered an authentic Wellesley College student requires certain behaviors that are both similar to and different from those required to be considered an authentic University of California at Santa Cruz student. This idea of having an authentic identity is one almost exclusively defined in a social context.

Additionally, the subjective aspect of authenticity bleeds into the social realm: “I think you are authentic to your inner feelings when you share those with other people”. Taylor’s emphasis on engaging in dialogue as a means of finding true authenticity is reflected in this point of view. Taylor’s view that identity requires recognition by others is echoed again in the respondents’ ideas on authenticity. One stated, “You can exercise your own authenticity and know in your core, but others have to perceive you as authentic”. This statement, mentioned
earlier, seems counterintuitive to the emphasis respondents placed on the subjective, individual character of authenticity. They also agreed that changing one’s behavior to please others is inauthentic: “A lot of people pursue things… to please somebody else, or they try to stifle their emotions or reactions based on what they think they should be acting like, and I don’t think that’s authentic”. This dichotomy – needing one’s authenticity to be recognized by others but simultaneously not orienting one’s behavior around others to avoid being inauthentic – is another central paradox in understanding authenticity and again underlines the notion of a balance between the subjective and objective.

Potter, drawing on Rousseau’s theories on human nature, claims that comparison breeds resentment, which will in turn poison social relationships. Both respondents claimed they did not compare themselves with others, but admitted jealousy and the ease of potential comparison. Statements such as “If you have regional affiliations, it’s easy to compare, like are they more Southern than I am?” along with “I feel like I judge other people, like is this a fake person, is this someone that I can’t trust” indicate that authenticity is something we evaluate and look for in others. This could have negative consequences, as Potter argues, such as jealousy or a dismantling of social ties, but being found authentic is a pathway to potential social benefits. Along with their views that authenticity can lead to freedom and happiness, respondents saw social benefits to being considered authentic:

“People will trust you more if you seem like you belong, if you seem like you are doing what you are supposed to be doing, you have authority to be doing what you’re doing and if you’re not telling them lies, you’re being true and you’re not two-faced. There is benefit to that.”

“If someone was going to hire someone for this job… they can see the difference between the people they have working there now and it may be nice to have someone that’s different, that stands out”

Being socially recognized as authentic validates one’s own authenticity, following Taylor’s theory, and brings other social benefits such as the possibility of being hired and earning the trust of others. These add to the belief that authenticity is a desirable trait. Potter decryes the search for authenticity as being a form of status-seeking, but if authenticity truly does provide social status, which in itself is valuable, then perhaps the quest for authenticity is also valuable.

Discussion and Conclusion
Potter and Taylor, as theorists, provided clear cut assessments of the modern obsession with authenticity. Potter, specifically, criticized the cultural phenomenon and argued that it has been polluted by capitalism and the search for visible status markers. Empirically, however, respondents’ views troubled those of Potter with a series of potential paradoxes regarding their understanding of what it means to be authentic. The first was the emphasis on the subjectivity of authenticity. The idea of subjectivity and being true to oneself stands in agreement with Potter’s theory in the sense that not all individuals should be searching for the same path towards the authentic. With that being said, in contrast to Potter’s complete rejection of consumption as a path towards authenticity, respondents’ ideas indicated that without objective measures of authenticity, buying a product cannot make an individual authentic or inauthentic in all cases. Furthering that idea, if being authentic is finding one’s true self, that pursuit may be impossible without any form of consumption. While Potter is quick to reject the compatibility of authenticity and capitalism, respondents had a different idea of using consumption as a means to the end goal of becoming authentic.

The second paradox was the interplay between being authentic and looking authentic. Respondents’ agreed that being authentic was more important than appearing authentic, but at the same time argued that one can only be authentic if others are able to perceive that authenticity. Even knowing that true authenticity requires recognition, they also agreed that changing one’s behavior to please others is inauthentic. In essence, to be authentic an individual must be true to herself and others must find her authentic without her orienting her behavior outwardly. Third, my interviews revealed a belief that being found authentic leads to tangible social benefits. While Potter may criticize those who search for authenticity as a means of obtaining status, the status that authenticity provides is socially beneficial. This paradox along with the previous two indicate how human experience and understanding are able to trouble sociological theory. To conclude, combining ideas from interviews and from social theorists, finding authenticity requires a fragile balance between oneself and others, prioritizing the subjective while accommodating objective influences and impacts.

**Bibliography**


Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1. What does it mean to be an authentic individual?
   a. Do you try to be authentic?
   b. Do you think most people try to be authentic?
   c. What is the end goal of being authentic?
2. What does it mean to live an authentic lifestyle?
   a. Do you try to live an authentic lifestyle?
   b. Do you think most people try to live an authentic lifestyle?
   c. Is living authentically a constant state of being or does it change?
3. How do you know something is authentic?
   a. Is there an objective measure of authenticity?
   b. Or only subjective?
4. Does buying/consuming a certain product make you authentic? Appear authentic?
   a. Have you ever bought/consumed something to appear authentic?
5. Is it important to appear authentic?
   a. Are there social benefits that go with being perceived as authentic?
   b. Do you compare your own authenticity to that of others?
      i. Do you resent others for their authenticity?
6. Can you find authenticity on your own?
7. Does authenticity involve dialogue?
8. Can you fake authenticity?