Unpacking the Authenticity Gap in Corporate Social Responsibility: Lessons learned from Levi's 'Go Forth Braddock' Campaign.

Abstract:

Brands often do good through the vehicle of Corporate Social Responsibility. However, some implementations may still be viewed with cynicism leading to consumer backlash and stakeholder disengagement. Wicki and Kaaij (2007) propose that this arises due to an Authenticity Gap between the image an organization is pursuing and the actual perceived identity of the organization during and following CSR campaigns.

This paper explores the nature of the Authenticity Gap through making an examination of Levi's award winning and widely praised CSR campaign. Employing expert practitioner focus groups it makes a contribution to knowledge by unpacking the constituent dimensions of the Authenticity Gap. It identifies eight factors comprising brand heritage, unpolished realism, collaboration, timing, tangibility, subdued approaches, situatedness and the media is the message. The research suggests that brands that take account of these factors have the potential to ward off paradoxical negative associations that can be experienced when attempting to do good.

Key words: Brand Authenticity, Branding, Authenticity Gap, CSR, Focus Group

Introduction

Organizations attempt to portray that their brands 'do good' through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Chavez, 2011). As CSR has become a mainstream business practice, understanding its application has become an essential management activity in order

to ensure appropriate stakeholder responses. Hildebrand *et al,* (2001.1360) suggest that if a CSR strategy is implemented correctly it can not only result in *'societal and environmental returns'* but can also build long-term brand *'devotion, respect and loyalty'* from its stakeholders.

Introducing the Authenticity Gap

To achieve this enviable position, it is posited that CSR campaigns need to be determined as 'authentic' by all stakeholders (see for example the work of Boyle (2004), Brickson (2007), Morsing and Schultz (2006) and Wicki and Kaaij (2007)). Poor implementation can lead to cynicism and disengagement amongst stakeholders (Renard, 2003; Illia *et al,* 2013), resulting in what has been termed an Authenticity Gap (Wicki and Kaaij, 2007).

Wicki and Kaaij (2007) propose that the Authenticity Gap arises between the image an organization is pursuing and the actual perceived identity of the organization during and following CSR campaigns (Figure 1). They suggest that the wider the gap between actual and perceived identity, the less plausible and thus the less authentic that CSR campaigns are deemed to be. If this gap remains too wide, it can damage the organization by presenting an image associated with such things as 'greenwashing'. Consequently, they suggest that by closing the Authenticity Gap between the perceived and the desired projected identity, CSR campaigns can become more authentic and thus resonate 'good' with consumers and other

stakeholders.
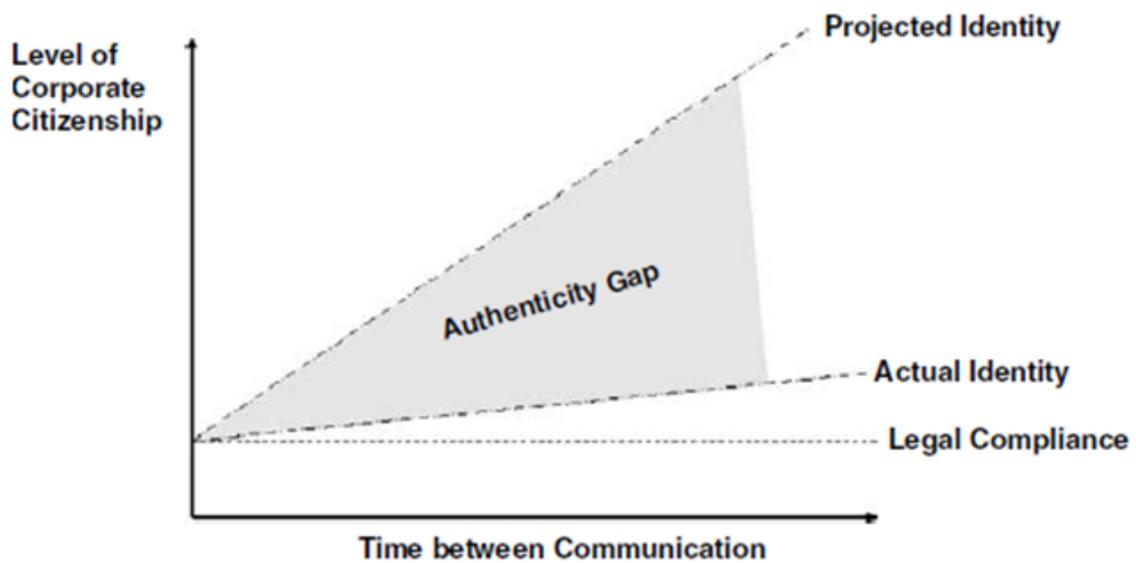
Figure 1. Source Wicki and Kaaij (2007, p.317) Authenticity Gap.

The constituent dimensions that create and perpetuate an Authenticity Gap have received some attention in the literature. Wicki and Kaaij (2007) recognized four factors that contribute to an authenticity gap while Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) conducted a structured literature in order to identify d*istinctiveness* and *social connectedness* as primary determinants. However, while the existence of an Authenticity Gap has been recognized for nearly a decade, its precise nature within the context of a CSR initiative has not been explored adequately (Alhouti *et al,* 2016).

In order to address this gap, this paper undertakes an examination of a CSR campaign by Levi's. Employing focus groups consisting of expert practitioners it makes a contribution to knowledge by unpacking the dimensions that contribute towards the presence of an

Authenticity Gap. In doing this it identifies those factors that brands are required to consider in order to engender a sense of mutual good.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, a review of the brand CSR literature is conducted and presented according to the dominant themes. Following this, the research context is discussed before the methodological approach of the study is outlined. Finally, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. The paper closes with a review of its contribution to knowledge around the constituent dimensions of the brand Authenticity Gap, along with a statement of its limitations and suggestions for future research.

1.0   Literature Review

Wicki and Kaaij (2007) recognised some ways in which companies may fall into a CSR Authenticity Gap. The four factors that they identified comprise the notion that all CSR communication begins with employees, that progress must be communicated to stakeholders through 'small incremental steps', only key CSR performance measures must be monitored and benchmarked, and that prolonged CSR activity needs to avoid initiative fatigue. While these are laudable and valid factors they are intraorganisational and neglect the influential heterogeneous wider social system.

Later work by Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) recognized the importance of the extraorganisational environment. Through adopting a stakeholder perspective they identified the twin dimensions of distinctiveness and social connectedness. Distinctiveness largely reflects the internal perspective of Wicki and Kaaij (2007) which relates CSR activities to the 'mission, values and vision of the organization' (Mazutis and Slawinski, 2015, p.137). Social connectedness reflects the needs of the wider society within which the organization operates.

Most recently, Alhouti, *et al,* (2016) were the first to make an empirical examination of CSR authenticity. They identified three factors comprising, 'impact', relating to the perception that

the CSR campaign delivers tangible benefits to society, 'reparation', referring to the way organizations handle misdemeanors, and 'fit', that considers the importance of alignment between the brand and the CSR campaign.

While these studies collectively identify a number of important factors that may contribute to the Authenticity Gap, no single study encapsulates the totality of issues that have been proposed. For instance, while Alhouti *et al's,* (2016) study confirms the importance of the internal and external environment, it neglects to consider the temporal dimension of CSR initiatives that Wicki and Kaaij (2007) note. Examination of the contemporary CSR literature, discussed next, identifies further potential contributory factors that may influence the authenticity of brand CSR campaigns.

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility

Parguel et al (2011) stated that CSR communications are becoming a tool commonly used to strengthen brand image, creating challenges for stakeholders to try to differentiate between those brands that authentically implement CSR activities and those that use it superficially. Morsing and Schultz (2006) remind us that the messages disseminated about an organization's CSR are likely to evoke compelling positive and/or negative brand reactions. With this in mind, their work, like *Parguel et al,* (2011), found that consumers are more skeptical of CSR campaigns that use less discrete and more overt communication media and messages. CSR campaigns that utilize mass media communication are thus argued to put brands at risk from being perceived as unauthentic and even unbelievable in the consumers' eye. Wicki and Kaaij (2007) additionally discovered that boastful CSR communication can harm corporate images, stating that both the general public and NGOs are becoming more and more dubious about CSR claims reported via mass media communications. These findings support Boyle (2004) who argued that brand authenticity is achieved via producing

and disseminating truthful 'unspun' messages. Possibly it is from such overt 'spin' that a number of derogatory, inflammatory and damaging words have emerged from observing brands that have implemented ill managed CSR campaigns; terms such as 'Greenwashing', 'Whitewashing' and 'Fairwashing'. Illia *et al,* (2013, 16) argued that these terms are growing in use and indicate a cynical view towards CSR which *'gives a false impression that a corporation is genuinely engaged in CSR'.* Renard (2003, p. 93) refers to such 'spun' CSR messages as *'image laundering',* a derogatory term that could lead to associating brands with illegal practice and stakeholder deceit.

Illia et al (2013, p.17) found that because most stakeholders cannot witness organizations CSR actions first hand their reliance on organizations' self-reporting of CSR activities can further stoke cynicism. They argued that if organizations communicate honestly about their CSR activities they will have *'little to fear'.* The communication of 'non-spun' truth appears to be viewed by stakeholders as an essential facet of CSR authenticity, making a significant contribution to narrowing the authenticity gap. The open and honest reporting of environmental initiatives and errors has even been found to lead to increased business activity (White *et al,* 2012). Lyon and Montgomery (2013) added to this by indicating that social media has improved the availability of information to stakeholders thereby increasing the levels of scrutiny that organizations now face. Their work argues that if social media is used to generate greater stakeholder involvement the media offers organizations the potential to gain 'greater legitimacy' through third party and stakeholder endorsement.

The literature therefore clearly indicates that greenwashing can lead to profound negative effects for business as it has the potential to, at a very minimum, reduce consumer and investor confidence. Thus, the need for authenticity in communicating CSR emerges as imperative for brand managers. It may be achieved by brands that communicate their

initiatives, honestly and truthfully, in a low-key fashion with limited 'noise' (Wicki and Kaaij, 2007; Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

Stakeholders

The role of stakeholders in determining brand authenticity has received considerable attention. Walter (2014) posited that they must be involved in the strategic planning of CSR initatives in order to help discover common ground and to establish achievable goals to the benefit of all concerned. Lyon and Montegomery (2013) argued that greater stakeholder involvement offers the potential for greater legitimacy of a brand, while Morsing and Schultz (2006) maintained that it can lead to the networked effect of third party and external stakeholder brand endorsement. According to Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2007) CSR awareness and consumer buy-in requires continuous dialogue with relevant stakeholders to develop and champion appropriate CSR goals. Consumers and other stakeholders will not be convinced of a brand's dedication towards CSR unless they can demonstrate that the campaign delivered beneficial environmental, social and ethical outcomes for all concerned (Collier and Esteban, 2007). Kotler and Lee (2005) support these ideas, showing that collaboration with the community helped CostCo understand and deliver CSR outcomes that had a tangible, desirable community impact, while also helping to significantly reduce the total cost of the campaign.

To achieve these stakeholder requirements, Waddock and Bodwell (2007) suggested brand management needs to provide direction and guidance to clarify the impact that they would like to make on the environment around them. The act of embedding a vision that doesn't focus all company activities on shareholder profits can provide employees and stakeholders with more meaning and value when executing their relative roles within the organization. As Hodge (2006, p.102) stated, *'a growing number of companies are recognizing that greater*

transparency is vital in building trust and reputation'. Trust and reputation are subsequently two systemic consequences of delivering an authentic CSR campaign.

In addition to the issue of stakeholder engagement, Martin (2003, p. 95) proferred that globalization had led to an increase in *'public anxiety'* about how organizations conduct their business. This presents an interesting challenge for organizations when faced with the question of what type of CSR engagement should they consider. A multinational enterprise's (MNE) CSR initiatives, or lack of CSR initiatives in relation to their size and activity, dictate the impact that will occur within the environment in which they operate since a company's decision to implement CSR programs is of great interest to the worker, community and nation in which they pursue investment (Detomasi, 2008). Rousseau and Batt (2007) described the threat that globalization casts over American workers, helping identify an MNE's responsibility to their domestic employees and communities. There is a CSR dichotomy being faced by global organizations, as overseas expansion into developing nations has rewarded organizations with increased profits and shareholder returns while creating economic viability to the local foreign economy. However, domestic communities resent the outward transfer of operations and CSR activities to the global market since this affects them adversely (Teegen, 2003).

Place(ing) Corporate Social Responsibility

At this juncture it proves pertinent to turn to the work of Tuan (1977) who recognized the importance that humans attribute to place. Place, he argued, offers us security and as we attach meaning to it, and organize it, we imbue it with value and thus perceive the places we socially construct as 'ours' and as authentic. Of specific interest to this study, therefore, is how stakeholders view place and how these views offer a sense of belonging built on memories and achievements that Tuan (1977, p.154) claims *'inspire the present'*. Place can

therefore represent the authentic as its permanence reassures us in a world that is constantly in a state of flux. Perkins and Thorns (2013, p.13) suggested that place should be viewed as '*social special interactions of everyday life*' that facilitates who we are. Given people's profound attachment to place, CSR campaigns that engage with place have the potential to e perceived as authentic. However, the literature warns us that authenticity through place must come from the perspective and understanding of the stakeholder groups who hold such places dear to them. Subsequently, one's attachment to place, if managed appropriately through stakeholder engagement, has the potential to play a role in closing the authenticity gap in CSR campaigning. This view further highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement in CSR. As Beverland (2009, p.157) said;

> '*at a time when consumers find that traditional markers of identity make less and less sense in a globalized, borderless, multicultural world, brands that allow them to connect to national traditions and identity (even if they are stereotypes), regional place and traditions, industry, cultural ideals and subcultures are critical for achieving self-authentication in the marketplace. Authentic brands may operate globally, but they never forget the local.*'

Research Summary

The extant literature clearly identifies the complex nature of brand CSR authenticity and highlights the importance of managing stakeholder perceptions of initiatives that attempt to do good. While the nature of the Authenticity Gap has received some little attention it is evident that the factors that is comprises require much deeper investigation in order that they can be understood by scholars and addressed appropriately by practitioners. The nature of communications, potential negative impact of self-promotion, along with the location and social relevance of initiatives, all conspire to create and inflate a gap between the intended

and perceived images of brand's CSR initiatives. This paper addresses the need to unpack the component factors of the Authenticity Gap.

Research Context

This research is based upon a case study of Levi's 'Go Forth; CSR campaign. Case study technique is a useful technique for testing or building theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) and has become regarded as almost "*an essential form of research in the social sciences and management*" (Chetty, 1989, p.73). There is a view that multiple case analysis improves the validity of findings (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt, and Graebner, 2007; *Barratt et al,* 2011), however, Voss *et al,* (2002) and Dyer and Wilkins (1991) argue, in accord with this study's approach, that fewer numbers of cases provides opportunity of depth of observation. Levi's 2010 'Go Forth Braddock' CSR campaign took place over two years with them investing over one and a half million dollars into the rust belt town of Braddock Pennsylvania. These investments included social and physical infrastructure initiatives and culminated in the town's landscape and people being used as cast in Levi's 'go forth' promotions. This CSR campaign was specifically chosen as the subject of this research for several important reasons:

Firstly, the campaign was identified by Forbes magazine (2010) as 'the most imaginative CSR campaign of the year'. Secondly the campaign presented a unique approach to CSR by linking Levi's Jeans and the 2009 recession to the physical, social and economic place of a post-industrial rust belt *'broken town struggling to reinvent itself'* (Levi's, 2010). It therefore presented a unique form of place-based CSR, moving away from the dominant cause-based CSR paradigms pursed by many globalized corporations (Smith, 2003). Thirdly the resulting post campaign 'reimaging' of Braddock has gained substantial mainstream interest with

Mayor Fetterman and the activities of the Town being thrust into the limelight. Braddock's post Levi's CSR campaign has received attention from a number of sources for example;

- The New York Times (2011) reports on the impact of Mayor Fetterman and his partnership with Levi's to redevelop historic parts of Braddock with funding from the 'Go Forth' Campaign;

- The National Public Radio (2010) focusses on Levi's giving the town the '*Cinderella treatment*' as part of its campaign. When talking about the redevelopment of the old community center and library, in his interview with NPR, Mayor Fetterman stated "*It's a space that didn't exist in town before Levi's came in. The level of services it's going to provide for the next 30 or 40 years — that's invaluable and priceless*."

- Pittsburgh Magazine, (2013) report talks of '*Braddock Rising*' and attributes a number of the more recent developments in the town back to the initial investment of the Levi's campaign;

- In a 2013 TED talk, Mayor Fetterman talks about the impact that generosity has had on the redevelopment of the town. Specifically, the partnership with Levi's was the kickstarter for not only the community center redevelopment, but subsequent developments throughout the town. Fetterman (TED, 2013) additionally went on record to say that *"the critical mass and infusion Levi's brought to Braddock has made a difference"*.

Methodology

Focus groups were adopted within this study for their ability to effectively elicit the responses of a large number of participants during interpretive inquiry (Easterby-Smith *et al,* 2008). Such an approach allows participants to build upon each other's views and opinions and

thereby provide revealing insight into complex issues that the researcher has not yet considered (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996).

The manageable size of a focus group has been widely described in the literature as being between 6 to 12 individuals (Fern, 1982; O'Donnell, 1988; Sink, 1991; Krueger, 1988; Byers and Wilcox, 1991, Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Large groups may result in less input from individuals but this can be overcome by good facilitation (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998; Asquith, 1994) and group size is less of an issue when the discussions are based around issues that have low emotional content or are not controversial (Agan *et al,* ; 2008; Morgan, 1996). Conducting focus group research requires careful balance between adopting a group size that is manageable yet informative, and between achieving a representative sample without incurring burdensome administration of excessive numbers of groups.

This research utilized seven focus groups to collect rich data of the opinions and expert insight of one hundred and fifty-four marketing / business practitioners (Moran, 2008). The sample comprised graduate and postgraduate educated practitioners employed in a range of roles within marketing, sales and retail oriented organisations. The expert practitioners were attending a two-day event at the University of South Wales that aimed to disseminate current CSR practice. The brief availability horizon of the sample necessitated a demanding research strategy comprising a subject-orientation exercise on day one and data capture on day two.

On day one the participants were asked to view the Levi's 'Go Forth Braddock' campaign comprising: mass media communications of the flagship television/cinema advert and supporting press and billboard advertising, a series of documentaries developed by Levi's that 'drove deeper' into the social and economic stories of Braddock, and a link to the materials at the 'Braddock reinvention is the only option' web site (http://www.15104.cc/).

On day two the participants were divided into seven focus groups and each group took part in a discussion around the Braddock campaign that lasted around sixty to ninety minutes.

Capturing complete and accurate data is a challenge when using focus group technique and Kidd and Parshall (2000) recommend that two or more investigators are used. Given the large size of the focus groups in this study, four investigators were employed: one facilitated the group discussion around the planned questions (facilitator), two made notes of salient discussions and non-verbal behaviors (scribes) to maintain continuity of discussions (Vinten, 1994), and one aided in identifying emergent themes and formulating new questions (observer). The cyclical identification and pursuit of emergent lines of enquiry is one of the key strengths of interpretive inquiry (Bositis, 1988; Miles, 1979; Sanday, 1979; Becker, 1958; Schwartz and Schwartz, 1955).

Prompting questions were operationalized from the literature to explore participants' perceptions of the factors that underpinned the campaign's success. The questions followed the recommendations of Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) by being open ended and acting as general guidelines for the enquiry (Charmaz, 2006). Data were captured using a dictaphone and instantaneously sampled field notes (Paolisso and Hames, 2010) and analysed using thematic analysis (Guest *et al,* 2012).

Following the two-day event the facilitator and each of the two scribes were provided with a copy of the recordings of the discussions. In phase one of the analysis each individual investigator undertook a thematic analysis by coding dominant phrases, statements and discussions, and inserting illuminating and confirming sections of their own fieldnotes where required (Table 1). This enabled the rapid identification of repetitive discussions and the swift comparison of themes between investigators in the next stage of analysis.

Focus Group	Key Discussion topic	Emerging Focused Codes
1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7	Familiarity with the landscape industrial decline	• Familiarity
1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7	Recognisable fall out of industrial decline in certain places	• Familiarity
2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Lots of places look like this and need the same help	• Familiarity
1, 5, 6, 7	Representation of reality because lots of places look like this and would benefit from this type of CSR	• Reality
1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Good to see how the Town both physically and socially has benefited	• Visible Improvement
3, 4, 5, 7	It's becoming a better place	• Visible Improvement • Localised Community Development
1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7	This looks like many places across the UK even though it's in the USA	• Familiarity
2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Familiar buildings that need attention	• Familiarity • Problems of places
3, 4, 7	Good to see old buildings get a new life and a new reason for existing	• Visible improvement
1, 5, 6, 7	A real sense of community development started by Levis	• Localised Community development • Reality
1, 2, 5	Good to see people caring about forgotten places.	• Visible improvement • Problems of places
1, 2, 5	Economic decline can be devastating for communities.	• Problems of places • familiarity
1, 2, 4, 5, 6	A good example of how CSR can help a town get over economic problems.	• Visible improvement • Localized Community Development
2, 3, 5, 6, 7	Real people in real places	• Reality • Localised Community development
2, 3, 4, 5, 7	Good to see a legacy that lives beyond the campaign.	• Visible improvements • Localised Community development

2, 3, 4, 5, 7	The place looks much better	• Visible improvements
2, 3, 4, 5, 7	Reinvention of the purpose of the town	• Localised Community Development • Problems of Places • Reality

Table 1: Mapping Repetitive Discussions for Thematic codes: The Emergence of 'Situatedness'

The themes of discussion were compared with those identified within the literature review to identify those issues that had previously not been recognized. Drawing upon the works of Samuel and Peattie (2016) and Iglesias et al (2011): an example of the process of generating core themes from the rich data is depicted in Figure 2.
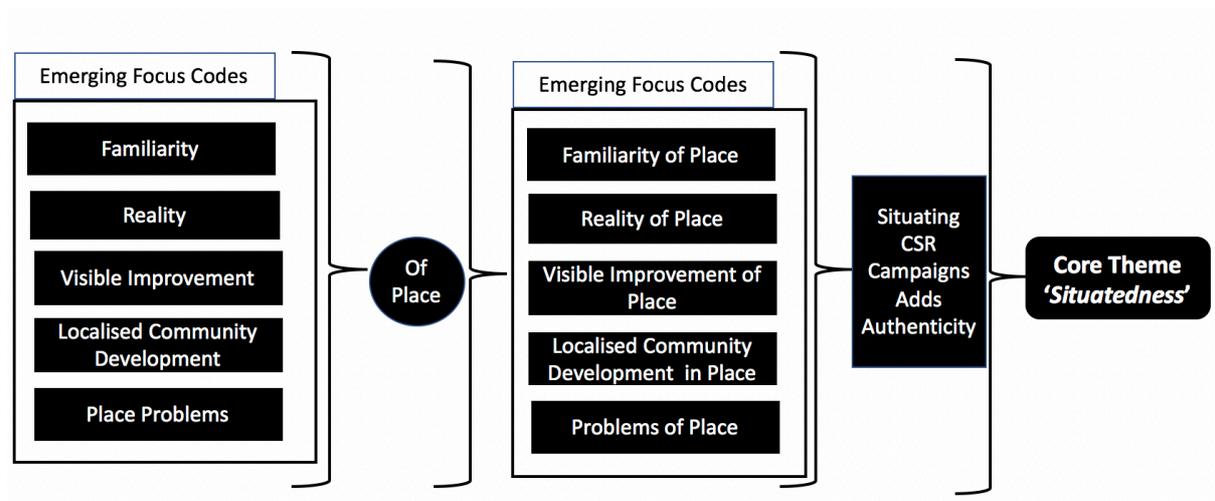

Figure 2: Thematic Coding Process

Phase two of the analysis consisted of a cross-comparison of each of the three investigator's findings. Where differences occurred, the investigators reviewed and compared their analyses and fieldnote evidence to reach consensus.

Maintaining reliability and validity within interpretive research is a subject of much discussion (Miles, 1979). Even the use of such positivistic terms has been argued to be inappropriate (Johnson *et al,* 2006; Checkland and Howell, 1998). Some argue that rigor in interpretive study may be assured through positivistic measures such as Cohen's kappa (McHugh, 2012; Light, 1971) while others claim it is achieved through adherence to declared-in-advance process (Whittemore *et al,* 2001; Gronhaug and Olson, 1999). In this study, member validation was utilized to confirm the final ordering of discussion themes (Sandelowski, 1993) whereby fourteen expert practitioners that attended the two-day even, two from each focus group, were contacted via email and asked to comment upon the order of the discussion themes. All fourteen responded that the themes accurately reflected the discussions.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the data analysis. It is structured according to the themes that emerged from the focus group data and comprise 'brand heritage', 'unpolished realism', 'collaboration', 'timing', 'tangibility', 'subdued approach', 'situatedness' and 'media is the message'.

1: Brand Heritage

A considerable proportion of participants recognized the importance of CSR campaigns 'doing good' in the organization's country of origin, in this case, CSR that does good in the USA. Participants were keen to explore the foundations of Levi's brand being built upon association to its country of the United States of America (USA). Interestingly, however, many agreed that 'America' in Levi's brand has been slowly eroded. Levi's actions over the past two decades or so, of embracing the globalization of supply chains and moving a

significant proportion of their manufacturing to the Far East, was suggested to compound this feeling.

> *'They have struggled in recent years in identifying itself as an American brand with overseas production. This gives them an opportunity to associate itself with America post -recession. Highlighting an area and city with people who fit their image, it's very pro-American.'* Focus Group 2

Focus group participants were in agreement that for Levi's to maintain its authenticity the brand must recapture its association with the people and places of America. The conclusion was that the Braddock campaign presented an opportunity for Levi's to *'re-associate itself with the real North America'* through displaying what *'many people are experiencing'* there.

> *'It may be risky for the company to align themselves with such a deprived city and how that affected their brand, but the positives came out. They are trying to contribute to a deprived area. Back to work wear shows that they still have quality and a strong link to America.'* Focus Group 1

Authenticity in Levi's brand was thus ameliorated through their recognition and engagement in an American problem (urban and social deprivation) that was, and still is, receiving attention in the press throughout the world. The campaign's concentration on an American problem, viewed through the economic, social and physical plight of a *'recognizable'* rust belt town, was viewed as a positive. Participants expressed a fatigue with CSR campaigns that took an internationalized cause-related path. Many participants were of the mindset that cause-related CSR was the activity of the mainstream and failed to act as a significant authentic differentiator for most brands since, *'that's what everyone is doing'*. As a consequence of *'so many'* cause-related CSR consumer campaigns being in existence, it was suggested that consumers were no longer able to identify which companies are doing what.

For example, the groups indicated that doing something different to mainstream CSR campaigns can develop authenticity by standing out from the crowd and taking risks.

> *'A domestic focus can be seen as something different.'* Focus Group 4

> *You can go to Africa or South America and help out and that's ok for companies, it can be seen that going to a 3ʳᵈ world country is good but often forgotten. There is so much improvement in their own countries which needs to be done. This benefitted Levi's in the long run by focusing on their core country. This made it more unique and authentic.* Focus Group 1

It was suggested that internationalized, cause-based CSR was *'being done'* by many organizations, but that not many organizations were willing to recognize that problems exist within the developed world and, more specifically, their 'home countries'. Such a unique focus on Levi's attempting to good in its *'core country'* was suggested to help the campaign connect the brand once again to its country of origin.

2. Unpolished Realism

While participants were keen to express the importance of Levi's CSR happening in the USA there was also a great deal of admiration for the campaign's sense of pragmatism. This was commended for its capacity to build a *'genuine'* belief that what Levi's was doing was a 'good thing'. Participants frequently aired their respect for Levi's involvement in Braddock and felt that engaging the people of Braddock in the campaign, through developing their personal life stories, added a sense of realism to the CSR engagement. Despite some arguments that the sense of realism in the campaign was *'a little boring on times'* it was still suggested to be engaging because the unadulterated messages used in the campaign were suggested to further its authenticity.

> *'They showed the untidiness of real life which are normally glossed over, this made it feel sincere'* Focus Group 4

The very fact that Levi's approached Braddock with the intent to provide opportunities for individuals to share their stories throughout the campaign was also viewed as important. The potential to tell real stories from the perspective of people from within a place was suggested to be a powerful tool for authenticating a CSR campaign, as it can be trusted because it comes *'straight from the horse's mouth'*.

> *'There is support from the people of Braddock for the campaign on the campaign website. Follow up videos do not mention Levi's so much and focus on the story from the angle of the people from the town.'* Focus Group 2

> *I like the follow-up campaign of profiles of local people and enterprises it made it more real. The language used felt real and authentic, more realistic I suppose'* Focus Group 1

Presenting the voice of *'real people'* in *'real places'* in *'real situations'* was suggested to help strip away the *'gloss'* that was argued to be ubiquitous in CSR and brand management. Using and reporting 'unpolished realism' is therefore suggested to be capable of facilitating the authenticity of CSR campaigns pursued by brands.

> *The people are genuinely emotional about the impact of the campaign, in a positive way. And it could attract far more interest in the town from outside with its history. The troubles they have had make it more real and evoke those emotions.*

3. Collaboration

Stakeholder involvement when designing and implementing CSR campaigns was deemed as a necessity if brands wish to present their good intentions as authentic. Participants felt that

this showed a respect for the views of the stakeholders and would result in realistic and achievable goals for both the company and the place.

> *The campaign united the community a little more and galvanized them a little to help themselves. It helped to build a stronger community, doing things together.* Focus Group 3

The fact that CSR goals were developed through collaboration with representatives of Braddock was also praised and the importance of Levi's not *'taking over the place'* and changing Braddock to suit the commercial goals of the organization was viewed as part of the brand's good intentions towards helping the town.

> *It was a little vague as to what Levi's wanted to achieve at the start, but the people in the town saw it as support coming from the outside and it is up to the people within the community to take the campaign forward. Levi's were a catalyst for the community helping themselves.* Focus Group 4

A suitable community figurehead for the campaign was also identified by the focus group as key to getting the people of Braddock to buy into the campaign and thus helping the place help itself to 'go forth'. The mayor of Braddock, John Fetterman (see figure 3), was identified as figurehead and a community leader that could be imagined getting his '*hands dirty'* while '*wearing Levi's Jeans'*. The significance of having a well-educated, yet unconventional looking Mayor who set the Braddock reinvention torch alight prior to Levi's arriving in town, was also commended. Fetterman's look, that is built from his exposed tattoos (including a prominent one of Braddock's Zip code), beard and worn blue jeans rolled up to expose knee length workman boots, was suggested to differentiate him from how most participants viewed a mayor of an American town. This look was viewed positively, with participants indicating

that Levi's had empowered a Mayor whose integrity and intentions could not be compromised when it came to helping the town of Braddock.

> *'He has good qualifications and has a passion for the place and what he is doing. I would trust him to do the right thing for my town'* Focus Group 5

Whilst Fetterman's image appeared to be interpreted as a symbol of authenticity for the campaign, his emotional commitment to Braddock was also respected. Participants indicated that the CSR campaign, if led by Fetterman, would give Braddock the best possible outcomes. Levi's, therefore, was commended for empowering Fetterman, informing us that the right figurehead with the right image and an emotional connection can play a role to play in authenticating CSR campaigns.

Figure 3: John Fetterman, The Mayor of Braddock (Photo taken by Matthew Hodgman)

4. Timing

Personal familiarity with the consequences of the recent recession was used by many as a benchmark to evaluate the authenticity of the campaign. The recession, despite being

associated with many negative economic and social issues, managed to manifest itself positively in this campaign.

>*'Because of the recession people can relate to the hardships of the town from outside. We haven't had it as hard as Braddock but we can identify with it.'* Focus Group 2

Levi's appear to have benefited from understanding the relevance of a point in time where people and places need help, in this case as the result of economic decline and government cutbacks. Many suggested that this period had left a vacuum for organizations to fill, thereby presenting an opportunity and an appropriate time to *'help places like Braddock'* through *'real'* CSR campaigns that can *'Kickstart hopes and aspirations'*. The authenticity of this CSR campaign appears to draw upon people's familiarity with the time and place they are living in. A campaign would seem to be perceived as authentic if it can be associated with a point in time that is relevant to stakeholders' experiences and needs.

5. Tangibility

The importance of visual representation of the output of CSR campaigns was a pertinent subject in the discussions. A desire to actually see tangible evidence as proof that *'something has happened'* appears to have positive influence when perceiving CSR authenticity.

>*'It is a more fresh approach of tangible benefits for the community. Levi's have more of a commitment to the town than a simple donation'* Focus Group 1

Participants expressed that the re-development of Braddock's community hall and the Carnegie Library contributed to their belief and confidence in the authenticity of the campaign. Seeing the rebirth of these buildings were suggested to bring the *'whole campaign to life'* and help consumers understand the significance that this campaign had on the Town's landscape. In addition, the significance of Levi's helping the people of Braddock save

Americas first Carnegie Library was suggested to be a catalyst for other community development events. Subsequently, the development of such a significant historic building was identified as a flagship output that appeared to magnify Levi's 'authenticity' in helping Braddock.

> *'The community center development anchors the whole campaign around the community, which symbolizes the rebirth of the town, more so than any other part of the development of the town. The history and emotion of this building has made the campaign more real. It tells the story of the town and how much it means to the community, something that the community are very passionate about.'*

The significance of developing Braddock's landscape was spoken about in great lengths with many indicating that it symbolized a sense of hope and demonstrated that *'things can get done'* in a time of recession. While participants suggested that having a CSR campaign that has a tangible output can give the campaign a real sense of getting things done, it also demonstrates a sense of authenticity through not only having a physical position in the landscape but also via the social stories these places can tell. This campaign was also suggested to have been important in helping to preserve the history of Braddock. When considering closing the CSR authenticity gap the development or redevelopment of physical places has the ability to resonate with stakeholders, reminding them of how the campaign *'got things done'* for the good of the community.

> *They have kick started something in the town. There is talk of hope and inspiration so they have instilled that into the people of the town to keep going.* Focus Group 3

6. Subdued Approach

The lack of conspicuous labeling throughout CSR campaigns is suggested to help maintain stakeholders' focus on the good of the CSR initiative before the amplification of brand identity. While the campaign has received criticism of its content and branding integration, Levi's subdued approach to branding and lack of conspicuous labeling throughout the campaign was praised by participants. It was suggested that this approach helped maintain focus on the message of the people and the town of Braddock.

> *'Levi's don't use their brand too heavily, it is in the background and is not pushed into your face. It is far more subtle, which a positive is for me.'* Focus Group 4

Limiting the corporate distractions, along with the reluctance of Levi's to distribute mass amounts of products and promotions within and about Braddock, was also praised. This indicates that the quieter organizations are about their CSR, the more authentic it potentially becomes.

> *'I think it's good that the brand is not in your face. There is little mention about what they are selling.'* Focus Group 3

> *'It is more of an association with the company than being advertised. They haven't shouted about helping the town alongside their brand.'* Focus Group 3

7. Situatedness

It appears that the troubled town of Braddock was a landscape that many participants recognized, and as such, they welcomed the portrayal of 'real life' in the campaign. The campaign's use of Braddock as a 'place' was recognized for its ability to connect with audiences through the natural connection that people have with places and their roles as part of the social infrastructure.

> *Yes, people identify with it because there are a number of towns across America and wider who can see it as similar to 'our town'.* Focus Group 5

Therefore, situating CSR campaigns in recognisable 'living' landscapes appeared to be another worthy suggestion to help close the CSR authenticity gap. The findings indicate that 'situating' CSR campaigns in 'real' places (in this case Braddock) aid authenticity because they are familiar, worthy and tangible. The 'situatedness' of this CSR campaign and its efforts to support community engagement/development in order to improve the physical urban landscape and assist with the development of social/economic infrastructures, and thereby address 'localised' social problems such as unemployment and anti-social behaviour, were observable outcomes of the campaign that substantiated its authenticity.

> *'We all know a church or town hall that looks like that, I mean there is this old church down the road from me it's derelict now so it's strange because I've just joined a group of locals who are looking for funding to redevelop it.'* Focus Group 2

8. **Media is the Message**

This study leads us to suggest there is an emerging role that social media can play in authenticating CSR campaigns. Levi's ability to bring social conversations into the public eye was suggested to help provide more visibility to issues and potential solutions. It was suggested that Levi's community engagement in the CSR campaign through social media improved its authenticity by letting conversations organically develop without Levi's promotional *'interference'*. This created a social dialogue that had a focus on the community interest in the desired good of the campaign, that is, upon the reimagining of Braddock and not on the promotion of Levi's jeans.

> *'Allowing normal people to talk about Braddock on Facebook and suggest ideas about what the town could do made it feel like it was more than a campaign'* Focus Group 4

While the importance of the Mayor of Braddock (Fetterman) as figurehead and community leader has been explored earlier in the findings (see section 3 Collaboration), his physical being and presence as a personification of both Braddock and Levi's, were also commented upon. Fetterman's unorthodox look was suggested to be a media in its own right, with some participants suggesting his look was 'rugged', 'cool' and 'uncompromising'. This was thought to give him an air of fundamental sincerity as a media, delivering a message of hope and community regeneration.

> *'I like the fact that he has tattoos it makes him look like somebody from Braddock. Does he have Levi's Jeans on in the clips I seen? I think he really cares about the place.'* Focus Group 5

The importance of adopting appropriate channels of communication such as social media and charismatic individuals for the dissemination of the CSR message appears to also help the authenticity of a brand when attempting to do good.

Discussion

CSR activity is a rapidly emerging component of brand management theory and practice. Subsequently, understanding how CSR actions and activities are perceived by stakeholders is of paramount importance. Developing authentic CSR campaigns is viewed by many as a means to augment a brand's image and value. As this paper demonstrates CSR literature dedicated to authenticity has made positive strides towards developing theory and practice in this area, much of which this paper supports and augments. The finding support the views of Parguel *et al,* (2011), affirming that brand image can be strengthened through CSR

communications that participants view as authentic. Additionally, they further reinforce the conclusions of Morsing and Schultz (2006), sustaining the notion that CSR messages are a way of evoking profound brand reactions.

The importance of timing (Becker-Olsen *et al*, 2006), communication (Wicki and Kaaij, 2007; Lyon and Montgomery, 2013; Mazutis and Slawinski, 2015) and tangibility (Alhouti, *et al*, 2016) in developing CSR authenticity all emerge as contributors to CSR authenticity. This paper reaffirms the work of Alhouti *et al*, (2016) through finding that CSR campaigns that are aligned to a brand's identity can help to close the CSR authenticity gap. Additionally, the study highlights the value of brand alignment via linking CSR campaigns to the brand's country of origin. The subjects of brand alignment and country of origin link together the theme of brand heritage to the extant literature of Tuan (1977) and Perkins and Thorns (2013). Tuan's (1977) recognition of the importance that humans attribute to place, coupled with Perkins and Thorns' (2013) suggestions that people have a profound attachment to place, indicates that CSR campaigns that engaged with specific places have the potential to be perceived as more authentic. Collaboration and engagement with the local community in campaigns supports the stakeholder literature dedicated to CSR. For example, Walter (2014), Lyon and Montgomery (2013) and Kakabadse and Kakabadse (2007) all suggest that CSR campaigns should involve a wide spectrum of stakeholders in CSR planning, decision making and legacy building. This paper furthers these suggestions by indicating systemic stakeholder involvement can help advance CSR campaign's authenticity. In addition, Becker-Olsen's (2006) suggestion that 'unspun messages' authenticate CSR campaigns is enhanced in this study by suggesting that CSR messages can become more authentic if delivered through the voices of real people that are touched by the good of the campaign. This paper also furthers Wicki and Kaaij (2007) and Mazutis and Slawinski's (2015) findings on the importance of

communicating the CSR campaign with stakeholders by noting that authenticity can be advanced through greater stakeholder engagement via collective goal setting.

It is also be suggested that brands that are less overt when communicating their CSR campaigns have the potential of being deemed more authentic. Embracing a *'subdued approach'* to communicating CSR may be achieved by using '*quieter'* methods of communication that are capable of letting the stakeholder speak, and resisting the temptation of excessively branding the physical landscape of the CSR campaign (Kline, 2000) can potentially help authenticate CSR campaigns. Given that place can play a role in authenticating people's identity (Tuan, 1974) it can be seen from the Levi's Braddock campaign that it can also act as a valid 'organic' asset in supporting CSR authenticity. Thus the *"Situatedness"* of CSR campaigns in stakeholders' living, physical and social landscapes also prove to have potential for brands seeking to close the authenticity gap. A summary of this papers findings and contribution are presented in Table 2.

Literature	Confirmed Factors	Extensions to Factors	Novel Factors
Alhouti, et al. (2016)	Fit, Brand alignment.	*"Brand Heritage"* Alignment with brand's country of origin	
Boyle (2004) Alhouti, et al. (2016) Becker-Olsen (2006)	Handling misdemeanours, Reparations, Unspun messages.	*"Unpolished Realism"* Using the voices of real people, in real places, in real situations	
Wicki and Kaaij (2007)	Communication with stakeholders,	*"Collaboration"* Collective goal setting	

Mazutis and Slawinski (2015)	Social connectedness.	Utilizing a suitable figurehead	
Alhouti, et al. (2016)	Campaign impact and benefits	*"Tangibility"*	
Wicki and Kaaij (2007) Lyon & Montgomery (2013) Mazutis and Slawinski (2015)	Incremental communications	*"Media is the Message"*	
Becker-Olsen et al. (2006)	Time can legitimise engagement with CSR	*"Timing"*	
			"Subdued Approach" Utilize less overt / quieter methods of communication
			"Situatedness" Placing the CSR campaign within the stakeholders' living landscapes.

Table 2. Summary of Findings and Contributions

The combination of existing literature, developments upon it and the emergence of two novel insights demonstrate eight individual factors that are capable of closing the CSR authenticity gap. These have subsequently been used to present an enhanced authenticity gap model (see Figure 4).
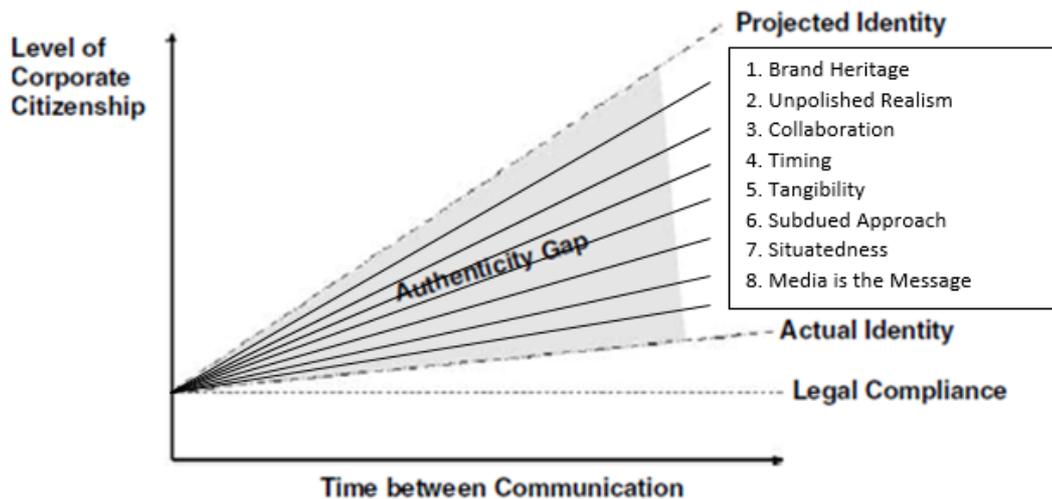
Figure 4. Enhanced Authenticity Gap Model

Conclusion

This paper examines the challenges that are faced when brands attempt to 'do good' through CSR campaigns. Such initiatives can be baulked by a perception of lack of authenticity by a wide range of stakeholder groups. Consequently, both the brand and the stakeholder groups may not benefit from the maximal results that the CSR initiative had been capable of delivering.

The subject of CSR authenticity has received some attention in the literature. However, as noted by Alhouti *et al,* (2016), there is a need for more empirical examination of this field in order to further our understanding of how CSR initiatives can become more authentic. In accord, this study makes an examination of Levi's highly successful Braddock campaign in order to more fully understand what has enabled it to become perceived as authentic and 'doing good'. Through a series of focus groups with expert marketing practitioners new

insight is gained into the factors that comprise the CSR Authenticity Gap (Wichi and Kaaj (2007).

This paper makes important contributions to both theory and practice. The CSR Authenticity Gap model is extended through the addition of two new factors. Firstly, organisations that adopt a quieter approach to communicating their CSR initiatives, lead by their communities of stakeholders, may be perceived as being more authentic. This 'Subdued Approach' may appear counter-intuitive to many organisations and is contra to much of the established practice. However, it must be noted this has been observed in a large, globally recognized brand and this effect may be observed differently in smaller, less well established brands. Future research should endeavor to establish whether a 'Subdued Approach 'to CSR is both practicable and effective in other organisations. Secondly, CSR campaigns that are geographically and socially embedded appear to be another way in which brands may be able to close the Authenticity Gap. The 'Situatedness' of the initiative, engendered through peoples' sense of place, offers them security, permanence and value that results in a perception of authenticity. Future research into CSR authenticity should draw for instance upon the role of social geography, in particular Tuan (1977), Massey (2005), Mansvelt (2005; 2008) and Creswell's (2004) notions of place.

The findings of this study have implications for practice and may assist in arming brand managers with a toolkit from which they may identify the most significant factors to address that would improve the authenticity of their CSR campaigns. It confirms much of the literature in finding that this may be achieved through: careful alignment of the CSR campaign with its country of origin; using unpolished realism through the voices of real people, in real places, in real situations; setting CSR goals in collaboration with key stakeholders and establishing a suitable community figurehead; visual representation of the

output of the campaign; the importance of adopting appropriate channels of communication; and designing CSR campaigns that respond to current economic and sociopolitical events.

In addition to this, the two novel factors that have been identified by this study are important aspects of CSR campaigns that need to be taken into account. A 'Subdued Approach' requires brand managers to utilize less overt methods of communication and to utilize more organic means such as word of mouth and social media. The 'Situatedness' of any CSR campaign, within the living landscapes of stakeholders, can also be a determinant of its ultimate degree of perceived authenticity. Ultimately, the research suggests that brands that attend to these dimensions of CSR authenticity have the potential to ward off the paradoxical negative associations that some brands experience when trying to do good

Despite the positive message and practical implications that this paper develops, there are some limitations that suggest avenues for further research. The study examines a single CSR campaign, albeit one which has been identified as 'the most imaginative campaign of the year'. Further research should investigate other successful campaigns to confirm and refine these findings. This research also focuses upon a fashion brand and consumer good and future research should attempt to ascertain whether the factors that comprise the Authenticity Gap are generalisable across different products and industries.

During the process of this investigation, new investment in the form of a major feature film, a microbrewery and a developing art scene are building momentum for the town of Braddock. Elevating the problems of CSR fatigue (Wicki and Kaaij, 2007) and dveloping upon the success of the Levis partnership Mayor Fetterman still makesoutward calls to investors and philanthropists to insure Braddock's re-imagination continues.

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