

Fakes and Forgeries in Consumer Research: “Coping with the Past” between Material Culture, Digital Artefacts, and “Cultural Analytics”

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Abstract

This work introduces a “semiotics of fakes” (*à la* Eco) to suggest alternative conceptualizations of the role of the materiality of digital objects in marketing studies and on consumer processes. The concept of *cultural analytics*, expression of the materiality of digital media, emerges from the theme of authenticity around: (i) a pragmatics of forgery as “*a process of False Identification*” (involving three actors: *Judge, Claimant, and Authors*); (ii) four criteria for the recognition of authenticity (*material support, linear text manifestation, content, external evidences*). Marketing studies on materiality “reflect” these processes by confronting different research traditions (*ANT, Assemblage Theory, Theories of Practice*) that “model/problematicize” the role of digital artefacts in consumer processes.

Keywords: *semiotics of fakes, digital artefacts, cultural analytics, consumer culture*

Introduction and Evidences

[1] «The painting in San Giorgio [Veronese’s *Wedding at Cana*] was clearly labeled: “*A facsimile*”. There was even a small exhibition that explained in some detail the *complex digital processes* that Factum Arte had used to *de- then re-materialize* the gigantic Parisian painting: laser-scanning it, A4 by A4, photographing it in similarly sized sections, scanning it again with white light to record the relief surface, and then somehow stitching together the digital files before instructing a purpose-built printer to deposit pigments onto a canvas carefully coated with a gesso almost identical to that used by Veronese. Is it possible that the Venice version, *undeniably a facsimile, is actually more original than the Paris original?* “[And] why waste your time with a *fake Veronese*, when there are so many true ones in Venice?”. Without question [...] *the aura of the original had migrated from Paris to Venice: the best proof was that you had to come to the original and see it*» (Latour, Lowe 2011, p. 277).

[2] Palermo, 1969. On the rainy night of the 16th October an unknown group of people entered the St. Lawrence oratory through the flimsy entrance door, secured only with an old latch lock. Once inside the building, in front of them rose the big canvas of the *Nativity*. It was rapidly taken from its frame, detached from the framework and rolled up to disappear forever (*lostpaintings.net*).

Palermo, 2015. «A replica of the lost Caravaggio is being brought back to the spot where the original once hung [...]. The initiative was introduced by the TV broadcaster Sky, which also commissioned a Madrid-based company, Factum Arte, to create a replica of the piece. The group is known for using hi-tech methods to create facsimiles of major works of art or other works of cultural heritage. The replica was produced by a team of architects and computer engineers at Factum Arte who had precious little to go on: just a slide of the painting by

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photographer Enzo Brai, which did not even capture the entire painting, and some black and white photographs of the Caravaggio work from the 1950s that were recently discovered in the archives of the Restoration Institute in Rome» (*The Guardian*, 10 December 2015)

[3] Amsterdam, 2016. «This morning, The Next Rembrandt has been unveiled in Amsterdam: a 3D printed painting, made solely from data of Rembrandt's body of work. Thus bringing the Master of Light and Shadow back to life to create one more painting. Only this time, data is the painter, and technology the brush. A group of art historians, material researchers, data scientists and engineers [...] spent 18 months to take on a controversial challenge: how to teach a machine to think, act and paint like Rembrandt. The painting consists of over 148 million pixels and was created using deep learning algorithms and facial recognition techniques, based on 168,263 painting fragments from Rembrandt's oeuvre. [...] Blurring the boundaries between art and technology, this artwork is intended to fuel the conversation about the relationship between art and algorithms, between data and human design and between technology and emotion» (website thenextrembrandt.pr.co)

How can alternative conceptualizations emerge regarding the role of materiality of digital objects in marketing studies? Each of the three episodes discuss the *digital reproduction* of many works of art: the "reproduction" of a facsimile from an *existing original* [1]; the "rematerialisation" of a copy of a missing original [2]; the "production" of a *new original* using the "codification of aesthetic characteristics" of the historical specimens by the same Author [3]. Starting from the studies on media technologies (Bartscherer, Coover 2011; Fox Harrell 2013; Manovich 2013; Gillespie *et al.* 2014) and in the hypothesis that *originality* and *authenticity* are defined based on the current notions of replicability and forgery (Eco 1990), this work introduces a "semiotics of the false" as a conceptual key to reflect on materiality of consumer culture (Mullins, in Kravets *et al.* 2018). These reflections allow alternative theories on the role of *digital materiality* not only "as a social structure or as symbolic objects", but also in terms of "artefacts" considered as "*things* which are necessary components of social networks or *practices*" (Reckwitz 2002).

Tables 1a and 1b (see *Appendix*): (i) introduce the concepts of replicability and forgery, (ii) the process of false identification and the categories of actors involved (Judge, Claimant, and Authors) (iii) the four criteria for the recognition of authenticity (material support, linear text manifestation, content, external evidences). Marketing studies on materiality "reflect" these processes by confronting research traditions (integrating Actor-Network Theory, Assemblage Theory and Theories of Practice) that "model/problematize" the role of objects in consumer processes differently (e.g., digital collecting, interobjectivity, materiality & institutions, authentication as institutional work, markets dynamics).

What is a (digital) fake?

A Pragmatics of False Identification. Natural language negatively connotes the notion of fake/*counterfeit*. The technical artefacts in the introduction have a relationship with their materiality that is not based on lies and deception, so much so as to question their very status as *replicated objects* (table 1a). In everyday consumption processes, replicability is an ordinary phenomenon: (i) two objects are

interchangeable due to their intrinsic material similarity, (ii) the recognition of replica depends on the consumer's *cultural assumptions* who assesses whether the copy suits his needs. The category of replicas includes mass products and forms of mass customization, including industrially produced fakes. A closer look (Manovich 2013): "a new media object may be a still digital image, a digitally composed film, a 3D environment, a computer game, a self-contained hypermedia DVD, a hypermedia Web site, or the Web as a whole"; and the *softwarisation* process is the ability to combine different techniques in order to effectively *assemble and simulate* a range of traditional media languages, "creating cultural objects in order to uncover a new cultural logic at work". For consumers, a *pseudo-double* assumes a different value for one or more characteristics (table 1a): priority (temporal or legal) and association (obvious, presumed or pseudo) are quite common situations in consumption processes on collecting, gift-giving or sharing (Belk 2013), desire, loss of possession or *aggregate possessions* (Ferreira, Scaraboto 2016; Mardon, Belk 2018), brand communities (on- and off-line: Belk, Llamas 2012; Kravets *et al.* 2018), visual and digital consumption (Watkins *et al.* 2015; Kravets *et al.* 2018). Finally, the *unique objects with irreproducible characteristics* concern a broad "aesthetic" category which revolves around the concept of *authorial authenticity* (table 1a). Belk has described processes of "contamination/contagion" and possession rituals around the aura of objects (2013); emphasising how "for virtual possessions that are endlessly replicable, it is difficult to regard them as perfectly unique, nonfungible, and singular" (Belk 2013, p. 481); and wondering, "if digital objects are abundant and ubiquitous, why should consumers pay for, much less collect them?" (Mardon, Belk 2018). In terms of "replicability", pseudo-double and unique objects suggest a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition of forgery (table 1a): the presence of the *Author* (human or "non-human") capable of "replicating/producing" an *indiscernible* object compared to the unique original; the declaration (not necessarily "malicious") of a *Claimant* on the *indiscernibility* between the two objects.

Criteria for Acknowledging Authenticity. The replication processes in the three paintings problematise different characteristics of the typology of *forgeries* proposed by Umberto Eco (table 1b: *downright*, *moderate* and *ex-nihilo*). For example, reproductions of the *Wedding at Cana* and the *Nativity* relate to the respective architectural contexts within which they have been relocated. *The Next Rembrandt* case, "a fascinating exercise in connoisseurship" (*The Guardian*, 5 April 2016), is rather unique to highlight the role of the *Judge*: besides proving a case of forgery in which, therefore, "the identification is impossible, [*The Judge*] must provide a *proof of authentication* for the supposed original" (Eco 1990). Taking into account that Author, Claimant and Judge are "abstract" actors of the process of false identification (and can potentially coincide), what emerges in general is that: "something is not a *fake* because of its internal properties, but by virtue of a *claim of identity*. Thus forgeries are first of all a pragmatic problem" (Eco 1990).

Methodologically, "any effort to make a 'correct' authentication is a clear case of *abduction*" based on (Eco 1990): 1) material support: "a document is a fake if its material support does not date back to the time of its alleged origin"; 2) *linear text manifestation*: "[a document] must conform to the normative rules of writing,

painting, sculpturing, holding at the moment of its alleged production; 3) *content*: “it is necessary to determine whether the conceptual categories, taxonomies, modes of argumentation, iconological schemes, are coherent with the semantic structure (the form of the content) of the cultural milieu of the alleged authors”; 4) *external evidences*: “a document is a fake if the external facts reported by it could not have been known at the time of its production”.

In the case of the three paintings, the criteria of authenticity that an “external observer” (*The Judge*) should use to discover a false identification (table 1b), coincide with the problems that the *Authors* had to overcome for the digital reconstruction of the material properties of three paintings, justifying a “claim of identity” of their artefacts. In this perspective, for example, *fake news* is an interesting “digital object” and a “form of replicability”: “not just in terms of the form or content of the message, but also in terms of the mediating infrastructures, platforms and participatory cultures which facilitate its circulation. [This perspective] encourages a shift from focusing on the formal *content* of fabrications in isolation to understanding the contexts in which they *circulate* online” (Bounegru *et al.* 2017).

Discussion and Conclusions: Implications for Consumer Research

The *Wedding at Cana*, the *Nativity* and *The Next Rembrandt* bring out the topology of the “semiotics of the fake” (replicability of objects, identification process and proof of authenticity) questioning the concept of *authoring* (“human and non-human”), the properties that *users* (in various capacities) are willing to recognize them, and their very “logical structure” as “in hybrid media the languages of previously distinct media come together”. Conceptualising digital objects in terms of *material culture* involves taking into account that currently: “the unique properties and techniques of different media became software elements that can be combined together in previously impossible ways” (Manovich 2013, p. 336).

Cultural analytics and “Software Culture”. A hypothetical history of “technological media” seems to proceed in linear steps (Manovich 2013): movable type printing (1500), broadcasting (1920), the use of personal computers for media creation (1981), the Web as a publishing and distribution platform (1993), and social networks and media sharing sites (2004). In fact, new technologies and subsequent practices have never completely replaced the previous ones. As Lev Manovich (2018) points out: (i) whether these steps involve “new technologies and practices for creating, storing, distributing, and using [media contents]”; (ii) the current evolution of technological media does not seem to affect traditional languages, so much so that “the core of this new stage is *automatic computational analysis* of the content of all media available online”. The “software culture”, capable of *assembling* and *integrating* different traditional media in a “common (digital) environment”, in fact produces a “new object” in terms of *cultural analytics* (a phenomenon that some decline in terms of *digital humanities*: Burdick *et al.* 2012; Fox Harrell 2013): “computational analysis of massive numbers of cultural artefacts, their online ‘lives’, and people’s interactions with these artefacts and each other has redefined dynamics and mechanisms of culture” (Manovich 2018).

The copies of the three paintings are forms of *cultural analytics* in a dual sense. As “digital(ised) artefacts”, the “replicas” are “hybrids” produced by the innovative combination of techniques and practices capable of “assembling” different media (design, photography, 3D graphics, artificial intelligence, etc.). As “cultural objects”, the paintings themselves allow the representation, memorisation, organisation and access to complex “knowledge” that they incorporate and which later becomes possible to “extract” (in an evolved logic of information retrieval, the term “access” summarises different practices: “navigating, browsing, viewing, listening, reading, interacting”). *Cultural analytics* produces knowledge with logical structures that are not attributable to *big data* alone (Manovich 2018, p. 474; Fox Harrell 2013; in consumer research: Humphreys 2016; Humphreys, Wang 2018; Thompson 2019): «(a) traces of users’ online behavior (i.e., digital footprints: visiting websites, following links, sharing posts and “linking”, viewing and clicking) on ads; (b) traces of physical behavior (geographical location, date and time when a user posts to social networks, location of a user computer connected to the Internet); (c) media content created by companies (songs, video, books, and movies); (d) media content created by users of social networks (posts, conversations, images, video)».

Materiality and Theoretical Implications. These reflections suggest investigating the “production” of *cultural analytics* as the latest evolution “in the history of human media, human semiosis, and human communication” (Manovich 2013): in other words, *cultural analytics* are the key aspect in which the materiality of digital artefacts manifests. Marketing studies therefore need to (re)conceptualise the phenomena that revolve around the role of digital artefacts in *consumer culture* (Mullins, in Kravets *et al.* 2018; Belk, Sobh 2019). Thompson recently (2019) proposes the concept of the “analytics of market assemblages” to promote an “ontological shift in the dominant theoretical and analytical vernaculars of marketing discourse and practice”, p. 223). In particular, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT: Latour, Law, Callon) constitutes an interesting bridge between the introduction of the *Theories of Practice* (Schatzki, Shove) and the *Assemblage Theory* (Deleuze/Guattari; DeLanda) in marketing studies (Araujo *et al.* 2010; Canniford, Bajde 2016).

Several contributions (Nicolini 2012; in consumer research: Warde 2014) have highlighted the links between *Theories of Practice* and ANT, summarized in these terms (Reckwitz 2002, p. 209): on the one hand, “within practices [objects] are socially and culturally interpreted and handled”; on the other, “[they] are definitively more than the content of cultural “representation”, they are used and have effects in their materiality”. In a rather interesting interdisciplinary interpretation of object-oriented approach, the concept of “symmetrical archaeology” takes into account “what things actually have to offer us and how they act as indispensable mediators in constructing those entities often thought of as self-sufficiently cultural and social” (Olsen 2013, p. 38). In the *Assemblage Theory* (in consumer research: Canniford, Bajde 2016; Hoffman, Novak 2018) *object-oriented ontology* (OOO: Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Timothy Morton) outlines an evolution of the ANT which Canniford and Bajde (2016, pp. 12-14) take back to these concepts: a) *openness* (between “the broader material-semiotic webs of global consumer cultures [...] and re-constructed in localized, everyday practices”); b) *inter-subjectivity*

(“consumption and markets reveal hybrid networks of narratives, objects, devices and practices”); c) *renewable ontologies* (the “hybrids” put the same “operational tools” of marketing into question); d) *micro-macro* (in consumption assemblages, “no level of analysis constitutes either a definitive starting-point or an analytic stopping-point”); e) *performative and political* ([researchers and marketers] “are embedded in assemblages with consumers, [and] the manner in which we configure knowledge of market distributes significant responsibilities [...]).

Materiality and Research Problematization. These perspectives do not exhaust the possible theoretical formulations on materiality but allow to develop a research program on digital artefacts and *consumer cultures* in two directions connected to each other: (a) combining different *practice-based* perspectives (boundary, epistemic, activity and infrastructure objects: Nicolini 2012) with “a socio-cultural approach to language, literacy and technology” (around the concept of *new media literacy*), with the aim of conceptualizing digital materiality in terms of *interobjectivity*; (b) framing materiality in terms of *market system dynamics* (Marketing Theory 2017), for example considering the process of “authentication” as a form of *institutional work*.

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APPENDIX: 1a) Fake and Forgeries as False Identification:			
Replicability of Objects	1. Doubles	2. Pseudo-Doubles	3. Unique Objects with Irreproducible Features
	«A physical <i>token</i> which possesses all the characteristics of another physical <i>token</i> [...], insofar as both possess all the essential attributes prescribed by an abstract <i>type</i> »	«[...] a single <i>token</i> of a type acquires for some users a particular value»	«There are objects so complex in material and form that no attempt to reproduce them can duplicate all the characteristics acknowledged as essential. [...] In such case a unique object becomes its own type»
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> not identical (in the sense of indiscernibility) objects considered to be interchangeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> temporal priority legal priority evident association alleged association pseudo association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> concept of <i>authorial authenticity</i>
Forgeries and False Identification	NB: «From a legal point of view, even doubles can be forged. But forgeries become semiotically, aesthetically, philosophically, and socially relevant when they concern irreproducible objects and pseudo-doubles»	<p>«The <i>necessary</i> conditions for a forgery are that:</p> <p>(i) given the actual or supposed existence of an object O_a, made by A (be it a human Author or whatever) under specific historical circumstances t₁</p> <p>(ii) there is a different object O_b, made by B (be it a human Author or whatever) under circumstances t₂</p> <p>(iii) which under a certain description displays strong similarities to O_a (or with a traditional image of O_a).</p> <p>The <i>sufficient</i> condition for a forgery is that it be claimed by some Claimant that O_b is <i>indiscernibly identical</i> with O_a»</p>	
Cases excluded from a topology of False Identification		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pseudonymity plagiarism aberrant decoding historical forgery 	
Counterindications		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «the question whether B, the author of O_b, was guilty of <i>dolus malus</i> is irrelevant (even when B is a human author). B knows that O_b is not identical with O_a, and he or she have produced it with no intention to deceive» «however, not even Claimant's <i>dolus malus</i> is indispensable, since he or she may honestly believe in the identity he or she asserts» 	
Judge, Claimant, Authors		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> «[...] a forgery is always such only for an external observer, the Judge, who, knowing that O_a and O_b are two different objects, understands that the Claimant, whether viciously or in good faith, has made a false identification» N.B.: «The Judge, the Claimant, and both Authors are abstract roles, or actants, and it can happen that the same individual can play all of them at different time» 	
1b) Categories of False Identification and (Philological) Proofs of Authenticity:			
	(1) Downright Forgery	(2) Moderate Forgery	(3) Forgery Ex-Nihilo
Definitions	«the Claimant claims, in good or in bad faith, that Ob is identical with O_a , which is known to exist and to be highly valued»	«the Claimant does not claim that [O_a and O_b] are identical but claims that they are interchangeable , since for both the Claimant and the addressees the lines between identity and interchangeability are very flexible»	«the Claimant claims in good or bad faith that Ob is identical with O _a . [...] The Claimant falsely attributes Ob to a given author »
Assumptions	«We must presuppose that O_a exists somewhere, that is the unique original object , and that O_a is not the same as O_b (we are dealing with what the Claimant knows, and we must take such knowledge for granted)»	«We assume that O_a exists or existed in the past, and the Claimant knows something about it»	«We must assume that O_a does not exist or, if according to uncertain report it existed in the past, it is by now irremediably lost"; one must know of a set 'a' of different objects (O _{a1} , O _{a2} , O _{a3} ...) all produced by an author A who is famous and well regarded»
Additional requirements:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> the Claimant knows that O_a exists and knows or presumes to know (on the grounds of even a vague description) what O_a looks like; Claimant's addressees must share a more or less knowledge of O_a 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> the addressees know that O_a exists, or existed, but not necessarily have clear ideas about it; the Claimant knows that O_a and O_b are different but decides that in particular circumstances and for particular purposes they are of equal value" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> From the whole set <i>a</i> can be derived an abstract type, which does not take into account all the features of the individual members of <i>a</i> but, rather, displays a sort of generative rule and is assumed to be the description of the way in which A produced every member of <i>a</i> Since O_b looks as if it has been produced according to this type, it is the claimed that O_b is a previously unknown product of A.
Categories:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deliberate false identification naïve false identification authorial copies alteration of the original 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> confusional enthusiasm blatant claim of interchangeability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diplomatic forgery deliberate ex-nihilo forgery false ascription in error
Criteria for Acknowledging Authenticity	<p>«It seems that the crucial problem for a semiotics of fakes is not the one of the mistakes of the Claimant, but rather of a list of the criteria by which the Judge decides whether the Claimant is right or not. [...] The task of the Judge (if any) is to verify or falsify the claim of identity made by the Claimant (as if [the object] were a document)»:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> proofs through Material Support proofs through Linear Text Manifestation proof through Content proof through External Evidences (Referent) 		
	from Eco 1990, "Fakes and Forgeries", in <i>The Limits of Interpretation</i> , Indiana University Press, chapter 12, pp. 174-202		