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Article

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MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of brand authenticity on word-of-mouth for tourism souvenirs

Shoji Tanaka^{1*}, Changju Kim², Hiroyuki Takahashi³ and Akihiro Nishihara⁴

Abstract: Although prior studies have shown that consumers who perceive brand authenticity are more likely to spread word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations, the underlying explanatory mechanism in the context of souvenir products in tourism remains unclear. To fill this gap, this study presents a hypothetical framework that elucidates the mechanisms through which brand authenticity influences positive WOM and identifies the boundary condition that enhances its effects, drawing on consumer inference theory. Through a survey conducted on a fictitious food souvenir brand in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, a prominent tourist destination in Japan, we confirm that a company's commitment to the brand's roots, as inferred from brand authenticity, mediates the relationship between brand authenticity and positive WOM. Additionally, we show that this indirect effect is strengthened by consumers' perceptions of the craftsman's passion. These findings offer novel insights into marketing communication strategies aimed at amplifying positive WOM for future food souvenirs in a tourism context.

Subjects: Japanese Business; Japanese Culture & Society; Consumer Behaviour; Brand Management; Tourism Marketing

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Keywords: brand authenticity; word-of-mouth; company's commitment to the brand's roots; craftsman passion; tourism; food souvenir

1. Introduction

Consumer demand for authentic brands has increased because of deceptive corporate practices and the proliferation of brands that are difficult to discern (Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2021; Napoli et al., 2014). Brand authenticity has been defined as a “judgment about the genuineness of a brand’s image” (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020, p. 42). As such, some brands appeal to authenticity through advertisements and product packaging. Examples include Adidas’ promise to be “once innovative, now classic, always authentic;” Coca-Cola professing to be “the real thing;” and Nike claiming “authentic athletic performance” (Safeer & Liu, 2023, p. 333; Schallehn et al., 2014, p. 192).

It is not only luxury brands such as luxury wines (Beverland, 2005) and luxury hotels (Manthiou et al., 2018) that have been the focus of brand authenticity research, but also everyday product brands such as jeans (Newman & Dhar, 2014), fast food (Tran & Nguyen, 2022), and energy drinks (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Additionally, studies on brand authenticity have been applied to services including tourist destination experiences (e.g., Chen et al., 2020). Previous research has shown the positive impact of brand authenticity, demonstrating its influence on consumer attitudes and emotions, such as perceived quality (Moulard et al., 2016), brand trust (Portal et al., 2019), and brand attachment (Assiouras et al., 2015), as well as its impact on purchase intentions (Napoli et al., 2014), WOM (Morhart et al., 2015), visit intentions (Chen et al., 2020), and behavioral intentions (Nunes et al., 2021). Marketers have considered positive WOM as a key element in branding strategies (Kumar & Kaushal, 2021; Luo et al., 2019), because positive WOM is believed to be beneficial for recovering services (Maxham, 2001), establishing brand equity (An et al., 2019; Kumar & Kaushal, 2021), and influencing customer decision-making (Ng et al., 2011).

However, research on the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM has two major limitations. First, although some studies have provided insights into the direct impact of brand authenticity on WOM (e.g., Safeer et al., 2021), little research has been conducted on the mechanisms explaining why brand authenticity positively impacts WOM (see also Table 1). For example, while psychological brand ownership for automobiles has been analyzed by Kumar and Kaushal (2021) and emotional attachment for celebrities by Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016), limited knowledge exists regarding the variables that connect brand authenticity and WOM when viewed through the lens of a company’s commitment to the brand’s roots.

Second, in the context of the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM, while little attention has been paid to research models that incorporate inferences from the constituent elements of brand authenticity (see also Table 1), the boundary conditions under which the effects of brand authenticity on WOM are intensified remains ambiguous. For example, Safeer et al. (2022) suggest that in the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM, consumers exhibiting higher levels of perceived uncertainty avoidance experience a stronger influence of brand authenticity on WOM than consumers with lower levels of perceived uncertainty avoidance. Conversely, Safeer and Liu (2023) report that brand image strength does not influence the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM. However, prior investigators have been silent on the crucial role of craftsmen as employees who make the brand’s products. Thus, further research is needed to investigate the boundary conditions and contexts in which brand authenticity influences WOM in terms of craftsmen’s role in brand authenticity.

Against this background, this study aims to empirically examine the mechanism of the influence of brand authenticity on positive WOM and boundary condition under which this effect is enhanced in the tourism context. Specifically, this study employs two approaches to advance the existing literature by focusing on food souvenirs as specialty products at tourist destinations. Food

Table 1. Empirical research on the relationship between brand authenticity and word-of-mouth

Study	Study context	Theoretical perspective	Authenticity aspects	Explanatory mechanism(s)		Outcome variable	Key findings related to our study
				Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)		
Morhart et al. (2015)	Survey of 196 US consumers regarding celebrities	Self-determination theory; Attribution theory; Attachment theory	Celebrity authenticity	Emotional attachment	N/T	WOM	• Direct effect of celebrity authenticity on WOM (+) is mediated by emotional attachment (+).
Kowalczyk and Pouders (2016)	Survey of 932 consumers from North America, Russia, and Europe regarding global brands	Branding theory	Consumers' perceived brand authenticity	N/T	N/T	WOM	• Direct effect of consumers' perceived brand authenticity on WOM (+).
Chen et al. (2020)	Survey of 521 Chinese adult tourists regarding tourism destination	Self-congruence theory	Destination brand authenticity	Destination brand engagement	N/T	Recommendation intention	• Direct effect of destination brand authenticity on recommendation intention (+) is mediated by destination brand engagement (+).
Gupta and Sajani (2020)	Survey of 263 foreign tourists visiting Delhi regarding tourism destination experience	N/A	Tourists' perceived food authenticity	N/T	N/T	WOM	• Direct effect of tourists' perceived food authenticity on WOM (ns) is mediated by tourists' perceived overall experience (+).
Khan and Fatma (2021)	Survey of 438 consumers from multiple cities ^a regarding online destination brand experience	Sensations-perceptions theory	Destination brand authenticity	N/T	N/T	WOM	• Direct effect of destination brand authenticity on WOM (+).
Kumar and Kaushal (2021)	Survey of 407 Indian consumers regarding automobile brands	Psychological ownership theory	Perceived brand authenticity	Psychological brand ownership	N/T	Positive word of mouth (PWOM)	• Direct effect of perceived brand authenticity on PWOM (N/T) is mediated by psychological brand ownership (+).
Safeer et al. (2021)	Survey of 409 Chinese consumers regarding global brands	Relationship theory	Perceived brand authenticity	N/T	N/T	WOM	• Direct effect of perceived brand authenticity on WOM (+).
Xu et al. (2021)	Survey of 292 online respondents regarding a green brand	Trust theory and self-determination theory	Green brand authenticity	Brand trust	Self-concept consistency	Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)	• Direct effect of green brand authenticity on eWOM (+) is mediated by brand trust (+) and moderated by self-concept consistency (–).

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)						
Study	Study context	Theoretical perspective	Authenticity aspects	Explanatory mechanism(s)		Key findings related to our study
				Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	
Markovic et al. (2022)	Survey of 1101 Spanish consumers regarding health insurance brands	Theory of planned behavior	Brand authenticity	N/T	N/T	Customers' positive word-of-mouth (CPWOM) • Direct effect of brand authenticity on CPWOM (+).
Saefer et al. (2022)	Survey of 804 Chinese and 834 Pakistani consumers regarding local and global brands	Signaling theory	Brand authenticity	N/T	Uncertainty avoidance	WOM • Direct effect of brand authenticity on WOM (+) is moderated by uncertainty avoidance (+) in Pakistan.
Girardin et al. (2023)	Survey of 470 consumers from France and Switzerland regarding higher education institutions	Entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity	Perceived brand authenticity	N/T	N/T	Positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) • Direct effect of perceived brand authenticity on PWOM (+).
Saefer and Liu (2023)	Survey of 734 Pakistani consumers regarding durable and non-durable global brands from the manufacturing and service industries	Attribution theory	Perceived brand authenticity	N/T	Brand image	Positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) • Direct effect of perceived brand authenticity on PWOM (+) is moderated by brand image (ns).
Our study	Survey of 210 Japanese consumers regarding food souvenirs	Consumer inference theory	Brand authenticity	Company's commitment to the brand's roots	Craftsmen's passion	Positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) • Direct effect of brand authenticity on WOM (+) is mediated by company's commitment to the brand's roots (+). The positive indirect effect of brand authenticity on WOM is moderated by craftsmen's passion (+).

Note: This table provides an overview of the brand authenticity literature in terms of the empirical context and explicit focus of the examination to test the link between brand authenticity and WOM; "Bangkok, Dubai, Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, London, New York, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo, and Others; N/A = Not applicable; N/T = Not tested; ns = Non-significant relationship. We gathered the target articles by searching the Web of Science database. Our search criteria involved selecting articles that included the keywords "authenticity," "word-of-mouth" or "recommendation," and "brand" in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. This process resulted in the extraction of 72 articles. Among these, we identified 11 that specifically explored the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM. Furthermore, we included an additional paper obtained from EBSCO Host, which is distinct from the articles sourced from the Web of Science database.

souvenirs not only contribute to the revitalization of the local economy but also attract tourists by enhancing the appeal of the region (Elomba & Yun, 2018; Park, 2000). Therefore, studying the relationship between food souvenir authenticity and WOM is theoretically and practically significant.

First, we empirically demonstrate a research model in which a company's commitment to the brand's roots mediates the relationship between brand authenticity and positive WOM, thereby revealing the mechanism through which brand authenticity influences WOM. A company's commitment to the brand's roots refers to consumers' perceptions that a company firmly believes in its brand and preserves its tradition. For Japanese brands, we often find that maintaining the founding principles or traditional manufacturing methods, despite being inefficient, earns high evaluations from consumers. For example, Toraya, a traditional Japanese confectionery manufacturer, emphasizes its unchanging management philosophy and approach to manufacturing techniques on its website while showcasing its history of more than 500 years.

Brand authenticity is based on consumers' evaluation grounded in their knowledge of how things ought to be, which is constructed through knowledge networks (Beverland, 2006; Bruhn et al., 2012). This implies that a company's commitment to the brand's roots can be inferred from the main concepts of brand authenticity, such as continuity or heritage. Whereas few studies have analyzed the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM based on the consumer inference theory (Kardes et al., 2004), the findings of our study provide evidence that creating brand authenticity is linked to consumers' positive WOM via the enhanced company's commitment to the brand's roots.

Second, the study seeks to elucidate how differences in consumers' perceptions of a craftsman's passion affect the relationship between brand authenticity and positive WOM. This refers to consumers' perception that the craftsman is dedicated and passionate about the manufacturing process of the brand, exhibiting intrinsic motivation (Moulard et al., 2016, 2021). We argue that consumers who infer the craftsman's passion involved in the manufacturing of the product from the target brand may exhibit more positive behavior such as recommending the brand to others than those who do not make such inferences. Consequently, by clarifying the mechanism that connects a company's commitment to the brand's roots with brand authenticity and positive WOM, and simultaneously identifying the boundary condition in which a craftsman's passion influences this effect in the tourism context, this study expands the understanding of the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Brand authenticity

Specialty products at tourist destinations, such as food souvenirs, have been extensively studied (e.g., Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021; Wilkins, 2011; Yuan et al., 2022). Food souvenirs are believed to evoke memories of tourist destinations, including their scents, sounds, and landscapes (Yuan et al., 2022). Once tourists return home, they consume food souvenirs to evoke memories of the taste and aroma experienced during their trip. Thus, the emotional value of food souvenirs can enhance and enrich tourists' travel experiences (Swanson & Horridge, 2006; Yuan et al., 2022). Previous studies on souvenirs emphasized the importance of perceiving authenticity (Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021; Torabian & Arai, 2016), because authenticity serves as a countermeasure to commodification and imitation. For example, for the convenience of tourists, portable souvenirs are mass-produced and have become widely available (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019; Thirumaran et al., 2014). Furthermore, popular souvenirs are frequently subjected to imitation by non-original producers or substituted with imported goods (Cohen, 1988; Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019). As a result, research on the significance and worth of souvenirs in tourism has centered around tourists' perceptions of souvenir authenticity (Peters, 2011; Torabian & Arai, 2016) and the impact of this on their purchasing behavior (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019; Wilkins, 2011).

However, few studies have attempted to elucidate the mechanism through which the perception of authentic souvenirs influences WOM. As tourists can purchase souvenirs via the Internet without visiting the tourist destination (Huang et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2022), recommending souvenirs to others can contribute to expanding the opportunities for souvenir purchases and revitalizing the local economy (Elomba & Yun, 2018; Nofrizal et al., 2022; Park, 2000).

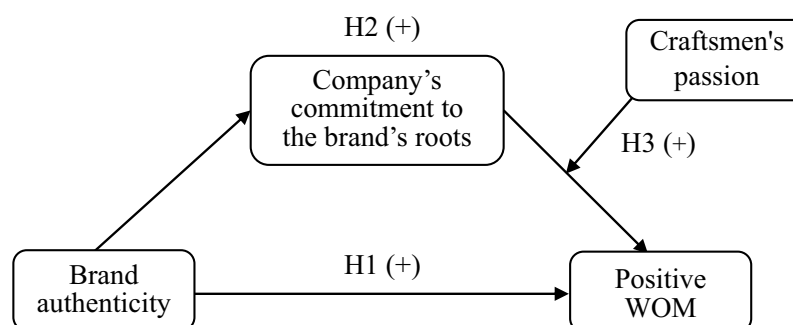
Authenticity, derived from the Greek words *autos* (meaning “self”) and *hentes* (meaning “doer”), originally referred to authority, but was later associated with genuineness (Spiggle et al., 2012). In marketing research, a precise definition of authenticity is rarely found (Bruhn et al., 2012). However, brand authenticity is commonly understood to be based on consumers’ evaluations rather than solely on the inherent attributes of the brand. Therefore, following Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020), brand authenticity is defined here as a “judgment about the genuineness of a brand’s image” (p. 42). Many researchers have examined the antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity from different perspectives (Fritz et al., 2017; Oh et al., 2019). Specifically, early studies on brand authenticity focused on identifying the cues consumers used to evaluate a brand as authentic. For example, Bruhn et al. (2012, p. 572) identified continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness as cues. Napoli et al. (2014, p. 7) highlighted quality commitment, sincerity, and heritage, and Morhart et al. (2015, p. 205) emphasized credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity.

Additionally, previous studies have identified WOM as one of the consequences of brand authenticity. WOM refers to “any information about a target object (e.g., company, brand) transferred from one individual to another, either in person or via some communication medium” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 125). As consumers tend to rely more on information from people close to them than on that from companies (Kim et al., 2023), marketers are interested in leveraging positive WOM in their branding strategies (Gaber et al., 2021; Kumar & Kaushal, 2021; Ledikwe et al., 2020; Li & Jaharuddin, 2021). Therefore, marketers must understand the antecedents of WOM.

Table 1 provides an overview of key studies that have empirically examined the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM. Nearly all previous studies have shown that brand authenticity has a positive direct impact on WOM, although it seems that these applied different theoretical perspectives such as attribution theory (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), self-determination theory (Xu et al., 2021), signaling theory (Safeer et al., 2022), and the theory of planned behavior (Markovic et al., 2022). Further, some studies have examined the mediating variables in this relationship, which have identified emotional attachment (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016) and psychological brand ownership (Kumar & Kaushal, 2021) as mediating variables. Additionally, research has revealed the moderating effect of self-concept consistency on the relationship between brand authenticity and trust (Xu et al., 2021). However, managerial guidelines rarely emphasize the importance of a company’s commitment and craftsman’s passion in brand authenticity.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Note: H1, H2, and H3 indicate the direct, indirect, and moderated mediation effects, respectively.



2.2. Consumer inference theory and conceptual framework

Our research advances the literature on the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM by using consumer inference theory in the context of tourist souvenirs. Specifically, our study draws on Kardes et al. (2004) well-established consumer inference theory to understand how consumers react to brand authenticity cues. Consumers often perceive brand characteristics based on the information provided. However, to obtain further information or characteristics, consumers must engage in inferences (Kardes et al., 2004). This consumer inference theory has been applied in various contexts such as brand authenticity (Lude & Prügl, 2018), store branding (Shahid et al., 2022), tourists' green purchasing behavior (Galeazzo et al., 2021), and tourists' trust (Kapeš et al., 2022).

There are various types of inference formations that consumers employ when confronted with situations where information is scarce or limited, depending on the context (Kardes et al., 2004; Lude & Prügl, 2018). We focus on memory-based comparative inferences, specifically, schema-based deductions. According to Kardes et al. (2004), schemas are structured knowledge frameworks derived from past experiences that encompass categorical knowledge, associative networks, implicit theories, and narrative representations. Story or narrative representations are particularly effective in filling gaps in understanding and spontaneously forming narrative-based inferences to explain the reasons underlying actions, events, or states (Kardes et al., 2004).

In this study, we investigate a food souvenir product, namely sweets made from matcha, which is a finely ground green tea powder used in traditional Japanese tea ceremonies. Consumers with schemas related to brand authenticity for these matcha sweets create a narrative that the companies involved in their production have been dedicated to preserving the brand roots and adhering to traditional methods, despite knowing their inefficiency. Therefore, we predict that the company's commitment to the brand's roots will be inferentially formed as a narrative from the schema regarding brand authenticity for matcha sweets.

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 summarizes the main claims of this study, which are as follows: 1) the company's commitment to the brand's roots plays a mediating role in the baseline relationship (i.e., the relationship between brand authenticity and positive WOM); and 2) the impact of the company's commitment to the brand's roots on positive WOM is contingent on the craftsman's passion.

We believe that perceived brand authenticity is not only directly linked to behavioral intentions such as positive WOM, but also leads consumers to infer other concepts based thereon. Furthermore, we propose a route through which these inferred concepts mediate the effects on positive WOM. Consumers are predicted to generate new concepts based on their knowledge of brand authenticity through story-based inferences. In this study, we conceptualize a company's commitment to the brand's roots as a mediating variable. In the marketing context, it represents the thought of a company toward its roots, where the company adheres to traditional manufacturing methods despite the availability of more efficient production methods through new technologies. This study defines a company's commitment to the brand's roots as the extent to which consumers perceive that the company believes in and upholds its brand and preserves its roots.

The reasons for using the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots are twofold. First, it is based on theoretical considerations. Continuity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015) and heritage (Napoli et al., 2014) are cited as the major dimensions of brand authenticity. Both continuity and heritage imply not only stability over time and the brand's history, but also the potential for continuity in the future (Morhart et al., 2015). Thus, continuity and heritage are similar concepts (Morhart et al., 2015) that can be considered essential for brand authenticity. Based on consumer inference theory, consumers perceive authenticity in the target brand using continuity or heritage as clues. In addition, they create stories related to continuity and heritage, such as the company cherishing its founding principles or persisting with traditional production methods

despite their inefficiency. Therefore, we predict that consumers infer the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots regarding the essence of brand authenticity.

Second, there are practical reasons for using the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots. This commitment is predicted to receive positive evaluations from consumers, because they are likely to appreciate the attitude of a company that respects its founding principles and traditional production methods, considering it as a demonstration of consistency, stability, and trustworthiness in its business activities. However, there is limited research analyzing a company's commitment to the brand's roots in predicting WOM regarding food souvenirs in tourism.

Furthermore, this study investigates whether consumers' perceptions of a craftsman's passion influence the positive impact of a company's commitment to the brand's roots on positive WOM. This passion is defined as the perceived intrinsic motivation of craftsmen who dedicate themselves passionately to the brand's manufacturing process (cf. Moulard et al., 2016, 2021). The reason for focusing on a craftsman's passion is that craftsmen, who are affiliated with the company, are the ones who exhibit attachment to the brand. Prior studies have shown that employees' passion and dedication to their company's brand has a significant impact on consumers' positive responses in various industries including banks (Park & Tran, 2018) and food businesses (Otieno & Nyikal, 2017; Rivaroli et al., 2020). Thus, we highlight that consumers' perception of a craftsman's intrinsic motivation to brand authenticity will influence their positive WOM regarding food souvenirs in tourism.

2.3. Hypotheses development

2.3.1. Direct effects

Building on the findings summarized in Table 1, this study postulates that brand authenticity directly impacts positive WOM. This has been demonstrated in various categories such as for celebrities (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), tourism (Chen et al., 2020), global brands (Safeer et al., 2021), green brands (Xu et al., 2021), health insurance brands (Markovic et al., 2022), and higher education institutions (Girardin et al., 2023). Evidence from prior research consistently supports the notion that as brand authenticity increases, consumers are more likely to communicate the brand's merits to others and recommend its usage. The rationale behind this argument is underpinned by several theoretical perspectives as summarized in Table 1.

For example, while some researchers apply self-determination theory (i.e., explaining individual motivation regarding personality, development, and social processes) to explain brand authenticity through the lens of the intrinsic motivation of consumers' innate self (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Xu et al., 2021), others argue that such authenticity stems from intrinsic motivation as the cause of WOM by using attribution theory (i.e., explaining the motivations or reasons behind individual behaviors or occurrences) (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Safeer & Liu, 2023). Furthermore, applying the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which explains previous planning as the psychological processes of human intention and behavior, Markovic et al. (2022) found that when consumers have favorable attitudes toward a brand based on its authentic attributes, they are more likely to take positive actions to support the brand by spreading positive WOM. However, few studies have specifically examined the influence of authentic perceptions of food souvenirs on WOM in a tourism context. Therefore, based on insights from previous research in Table 1 and the aforementioned theories, we propose the following:

H1. Brand authenticity directly increases positive WOM.

2.3.2. Mediating effect of a company's commitment to the brand's roots

Drawing on consumer inference theory, we extend the current understanding of the direct link hypothesized in H1 by examining a company's commitment to the brand's roots. We argue that

brand authenticity serves as a cue that triggers the formation of the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots, thereby increasing consumers' perception of that commitment (Lude & Prügl, 2018). When evaluating a brand, consumers do not have all the relevant information. Therefore, they inherently engage in inference formation beyond the available information (Kardes et al., 2004).

According to consumer inference theory, inference formation involves generating "if—then" links between cues and associated conclusions (Kardes et al., 2004; Lude & Prügl, 2018). As mentioned, this study is based on schema-based deduction (Kardes et al., 2004). The constituent elements of brand authenticity, such as continuity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015) and heritage (Napoli et al., 2014), have been confirmed in numerous studies as essential aspects of brand authenticity. Therefore, when consumers perceive brand authenticity, they use it as a cue to infer that the company is dedicated to preserving the brand's roots, even if it means adhering to inefficient traditional manufacturing methods. In other words, consumers infer the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots based on the essence of brand authenticity.

Furthermore, as consumers who infer a company's commitment to the brand's roots respond positively to the brand, we also predict the positive effect of such commitment on positive WOM. This is because consumers' perceptions of a brand's story, such as dedicatedly preserving the brand's roots and adhering to traditional manufacturing methods despite their inefficiency, are likely to lead to favorable consumer evaluations. Positive WOM is a crucial consumer response to marketing activities (Maxham, 2001). Hence, we posit that consumers, beyond their brand responses, are inclined to publicly express their commitment to an authentic brand through positive WOM, as also suggested by Morhart et al. (2015).

Applying these insights from prior studies and based on the consumer inference theory, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to integrate the two direct relationships between a company's commitment to the brand's roots derived from brand authenticity and the effect of a company's commitment to the brand's roots on positive WOM. Therefore, we propose the following:

H2. The positive link between brand authenticity and positive WOM is mediated by the company's commitment to the brand's roots.

2.3.3. Moderating effect of craftsmen's passion

Building on consumer inference theory, this study further investigates the concepts of a company's commitment to the brand's roots and craftsmen's passion to better understand consumers' positive WOM regarding food souvenirs in tourism. Specifically, by considering the moderating role of a craftsman's passion, H3 extends the indirect effect of a company's commitment to the brand's roots. The rationale behind this is as follows.

We postulate that while a company's commitment to the brand's roots and a craftsman's passion are theoretically distinct concepts, the positive impact of that commitment on positive WOM is positively influenced by consumers' perception of the craftsman's passion. This is because the craftsman's passion is closely related to consumers' favorable perceptions and evaluation of the craftsman's intrinsic motivation toward the brand (Moulard et al., 2016, 2021). Applying consumer inference theory to our research context, we argue that consumers interpret craftsmen's passion as meaning that they are passionate and devoted to maintaining the brand's roots and manufacturing methods (Moulard et al., 2016, 2021). Furthermore, when consumers' perception of company's commitment to the brand's roots is evident, consumers who can infer a craftsman's passion from the brand are more inclined to recommend that brand to others (Park & Tran, 2018). Thus, it is plausible to hypothesize that the indirect effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM can be positively moderated by the craftsman's passion. Therefore, we propose the following:

Table 2. Profile of the sample (n = 210)

Gender	Age				
	20s (n = 29)	30s (n = 37)	40s (n = 50)	50s (n = 39)	60s (= 55)
Male (n = 89)	13	16	24	15	21
Female (n = 121)	16	21	26	24	34

H3. Craftsmen's passion strengthen the positive indirect effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM through the company's commitment to the brand's roots.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context and data collection

Following Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020), we used scenarios to manipulate the authenticity of a fictitious brand called Matcha Sweets Q. The scenario used for manipulation is as follows: "Since the late Edo period in Japan, we have been engaged in the tea industry in Uji, Kyoto. As a tea manufacturing company, we now produce the 'Matcha Sweets Brand Q.' Using the traditional tea-making methods passed down through generations, we strive to bring out the inherent charm of carefully selected tea leaves (ingredients) and pursue authentic taste (quality). We also inherit the design of the packaging from the old days, and devote ourselves to providing unique 'Matcha Sweets' that cannot be found elsewhere."

We chose matcha sweets as our focal product for three reasons. First, food souvenirs inherently require a relatively high level of brand authenticity. Food souvenirs are intrinsically linked to the place of production, as they represent the history and origin of the tourist destination (Ellis et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). Given the association between brand authenticity, history, and origin, we considered food souvenirs particularly important products for studying brand authenticity.

Second, we selected matcha sweets because they align with the focus of this study on WOM. After returning home, tourists consume food souvenirs such as matcha sweets to evoke the tastes and aromas of the destination, thereby enhancing and extending their tourism experience (Swanson & Horridge, 2006; Yuan et al., 2022). As WOM is based on tourists' memories, we deemed food souvenirs that are significantly memorable for tourists as suitable for this study.

Third, we emphasized the strong connection between tourist destinations and food souvenirs (Yuan et al., 2022). In our hypothetical scenario, we surveyed matcha sweets produced by a traditional company headquartered in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, which is a representative tourist destination in Japan. Uji City is renowned for its production of high-quality green tea, which is strongly associated with matcha. Matcha has a long history and tradition in Japan, with craftsmen passing down their production methods over generations, further emphasizing its connection to the place of production. Additionally, matcha sweets are popular souvenirs among Japanese and international tourists visiting Japan, making them an appropriate subject for this study.

We collected data through an online survey administered to a market research panel by a marketing research company in Japan. The survey was conducted between March 4 and 8 March 2022. As summarized in Table 2, 210 valid responses were obtained (female: 121 samples, age range: 20s = 16, 30s = 21, 40s = 26, 50s = 24, and 60s = 34; male: 89 samples, age range: 20s = 13, 30s = 16, 40s = 24, 50s = 15, and 60s = 21).

3.2. Measurement

All constructs were multi-item and reflective. We used a five-point scale (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Table 3 lists the scale items used for each construct. The scale items for measuring

Table 3. Constructs and measurement results

Constructs and scale items	Factor loading ^a	CR	AVE
<i>Brand authenticity</i>		0.86	0.67
The brand feels authentic.	0.86		
The brand is truly genuine.	0.83		
It is a venerable brand.	0.76		
<i>Company's commitment to the brand's roots</i>		0.87	0.63
To strictly comply with the startup motivation of the founder, the brand chooses not to change anything.	0.84		
The brand intentionally manufactures without considering efficiency.	0.79		
To retain its roots, the brand chooses not to change anything.	0.78		
The brand could do business in other fields, but the brand sticks to the current field.	0.75		
<i>Craftsmen's passion</i>		0.90	0.75
I feel the craftsman's passion.	0.88		
I feel the craftsman's pride.	0.88		
I feel the craftsman's professionalism.	0.84		
<i>Positive WOM</i>		0.94	0.83
I would recommend sharing the benefits of this brand with others.	0.93		
If given the chance, I would like to introduce this brand to as many people as possible.	0.91		
I would like to recommend this brand to my friends and acquaintances and encourage them to use it.	0.89		

Note: ^aStandardized factor loading; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted.

brand authenticity were based on the study by Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020), which directly measured the level of authenticity using two items. Similarly, the scale items for measuring positive WOM were adapted from Morhart et al. (2015), and those for measuring craftsmen's passion from Moulard et al. (2016). Each scale item was modified to fit the context of matcha sweets. The scale item for measuring a company's commitment to the brand's roots was newly developed for the purposes of our study based on Japanese dictionaries and consumer interviews. This item measured the extent to which consumers perceive that the company values its founding principles, maintains traditional production methods despite their inefficiency, and protects the brand's roots.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Constructs	Mean	SD	X1	X2	X3	X4
X1 Brand authenticity	3.90	0.70	<i>0.82</i>			
X2 Company's commitment to the brand's roots	3.40	0.76	0.44*	<i>0.79</i>		
X3 Craftsmen's passion	3.78	0.71	0.79*	0.52*	<i>0.86</i>	
X4 Positive WOM	3.43	0.81	0.62*	0.58*	0.61*	<i>0.91</i>

Note: SD = Standard deviation; Italic numbers in the diagonal row are the square roots of the AVE values; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 5. Results of the model fit indices

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	χ^2 difference (p-value)
One-factor model	662.13	65	0.21	0.60	0.71	–
Four-factor model	104.08	59	0.06	0.93	0.98	$\Delta\chi^2(6) = 558.05$ ($p < 0.001$)

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Construct validity

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the validity of the constructs. The results indicated that the fit indices of the four-factor model conceptualized in our study were satisfactory ($\chi^2(59) = 104.08$, $p < 0.001$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, Goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.93, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98).

As Table 3 shows, the factor loading scores of all items of the study variables were higher than 0.6 (i.e., the threshold value according to Hair et al., 2014). For our data, all scores were higher than 0.7. The values for composite reliability (CR = 0.86 ~ 0.94) and average variance extracted (AVE = 0.63 ~ 0.83) were higher than the accepted threshold of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (see Table 3) (Hair et al., 2014; Kumar & Shah, 2021), suggesting satisfactory convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using the method proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As Table 4 shows, the results for our study confirm that the square roots of the AVE values of all constructs (AVE = 0.79 ~ 0.91) were greater than the correlation between any observed constructs ($r = 0.44 \sim 0.79$) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Kumar & Kaushal, 2021). Therefore, discriminant validity was supported. Taken together, there is no major concern regarding construct validity in this study.

In addition, Harman's single factor test was conducted to check for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The findings showed that one factor accounted for 49.74% of the variance, which was below the recommended 50% threshold. To further validate our findings, we adopted the approach proposed by Malhotra et al. (2006). The recommended method involves comparing the fit indices of the proposed model to those of a single-factor model to assess the presence of common method variance in the research (Kumar & Shah, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2006). The results in Table 5 revealed that the fit indices of the four-factor model conceptualized in our study are significantly superior to those of a single-factor model ($\chi^2(65) = 662.13$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.21,

Table 6. Results of hypotheses testing						
Hypothesized directions	Model 1 (without demographics)			Model 2 (with demographics)		
	B	95% CI		B	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
Direct effect						
H1: Brand Authenticity → Positive WOM	0.54	0.41	0.67	0.57	0.44	0.69
<i>Control variables</i>						
Gender dummy (men = 1, women = 0) → Positive WOM				-0.12	-0.29	0.04
Age dummy 1 (30s = 1, others = 0) → Positive WOM				0.16	-0.13	0.45
Age dummy 2 (40s = 1, others = 0) → Positive WOM				0.07	-0.20	0.35
Age dummy 3 (50s = 1, others = 0) → Positive WOM				-0.26	-0.54	0.03
Age dummy 4 (60s = 1, others = 0) → Positive WOM				-0.17	-0.44	0.10
Indirect effect						
H2: Brand authenticity → Company's commitment to the brand's roots → Positive WOM	0.20	0.12	0.31	0.19	0.11	0.30
Conditional indirect association at different values of craftsmen's passion						
- 1 SD below the mean	0.09	-0.00	0.22	0.09	-0.00	0.22
Mean	0.15	0.07	0.25	0.14	0.07	0.25
+1 SD above the mean	0.21	0.12	0.31	0.20	0.11	0.30
H3: Index of moderated mediation	0.08	0.01	0.14	0.07	0.01	0.13

Note: B = Unstandardized coefficients; 95% CI = Lower/upper limit of the 95% percentile bootstrap confidence interval with a dataset of 5,000.

GFI = 0.60, CFI = 0.71) at the significance level of 0.01% ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 558.05$, $p < 0.001$). As such, it is confirmed that there are no significant issues with common method bias.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

We employed Hayes' PROCESS macro (Models 4 and 14) to assess the proposed hypotheses, following a moderated mediation approach (Hayes, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Togawa et al., 2019). Before creating an interaction term, all predictor variables were mean-centered, and percentile bootstrapping was conducted on a bootstrapped dataset of 5,000 to test the mediation hypotheses. Table 6 summarizes the findings of our baseline model (i.e., Model 1 without demographic variables in Figure 1).

First, H1 proposed the positive direct effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM. The results of Model 4 (independent variable (IV) = brand authenticity, mediator = company's commitment to the brand's roots, dependent variable (DV) = positive WOM) indicated that the link of brand authenticity to positive WOM (H1: unstandardized coefficients (B) = 0.54, standard error (SE) = 0.07, t-value (t) = 8.19, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.41, 0.67]) is significant. Hence, H1 is supported.

Second, H2 proposed the positive indirect effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM via a company's commitment to the brand's roots (i.e., brand authenticity → company's commitment to the brand's roots → positive WOM). The results of Model 4 showed that the direct links from brand authenticity to the company's commitment to the brand's roots (B = 0.47, SE = 0.07, $t = 7.05$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.61]), and from the company's commitment to the brand's roots to positive WOM (B = 0.42, SE = 0.06, $t = 6.89$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.54]) are significant. Based on these findings, we confirmed a significant and positive indirect effect (B = 0.20, SE = 0.05, 95% CI [0.12, 0.31]). Hence, H2 is supported.

Third, H3 proposed that the craftsman's passion positively moderates the positive indirect relationship between brand authenticity and positive WOM via a company's commitment to the brand's roots. The results from Model 14 demonstrated that the craftsman's passion strengthens the positive indirect relationship (index = 0.08, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]). These results support H3. Specifically, we found that the conditional indirect effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM is significant for participants whose craftsmen's passion score is one standard deviation above the mean (B = 0.21, SE = 0.05, 95% CI [0.12, 0.31]) and non-significant for those whose score is one standard deviation below the mean (B = 0.09, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.0007, 0.22]).

Finally, as an ad hoc analysis, we checked the findings of our baseline model with those in Model 2, which controlled the demographic variables of gender and age. Model 2 in Table 6 indicated that the results of our study were not affected by the exclusion and inclusion of control variables. Additionally, we plotted the interaction effect by showing the simple slopes of the company's commitment to the brand's roots on positive WOM at ± 1 SD from the mean of craftsmen's passion (see Figure 2), suggesting that the craftsman's passion strengthens the positive WOM effect of a company's commitment to the brand's roots.

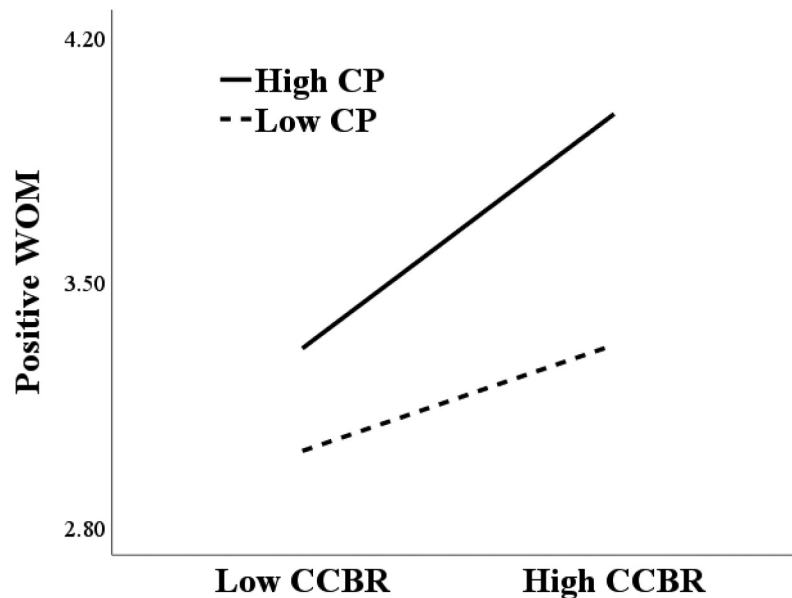
5. Implications and discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study has two significant theoretical implications by reexamining the relationship of brand authenticity and WOM in tourism. First, it provides a detailed explanation of the mechanism by which brand authenticity influences positive WOM through the lens of company commitment to the brand's roots. Although prior studies have largely offered initial insights on the direct impact of brand authenticity on WOM in various contexts (Gupta & Sajani, 2020; Khan & Fatma, 2021), in the field of tourism, which includes destination marketing and souvenirs, there is a lack of understanding of the mechanisms through which brand authenticity affects WOM, despite the accumulation of authenticity research. Specifically, studies focusing on authentic souvenirs have

Figure 2. Results of the interaction effect.

Note: CCBR = Company's commitment to the brand's roots; CP = Craftsmen's passion.



highlighted the importance of perceived authenticity (e.g., Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021; Torabian & Arai, 2016). However, the mechanisms by which this perception of authenticity influences WOM remain largely unknown. Given the acknowledged importance of positive WOM in branding strategies, it makes sense to develop a nuanced understanding of the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM, especially in the context of tourism souvenirs (Kumar & Kaushal, 2021; Luo et al., 2019).

To address this research gap, our study attempts to unravel the mechanism by which brand authenticity influences positive WOM based on consumer inference theory, focusing on memory-based comparative inferences and schema-based deductions (Kardes et al., 2004). Through our analysis, we explicitly identify the crucial role of a company's commitment to the brand's roots as mediating factors that connect brand authenticity and positive WOM, as inferred from the schema constituting brand authenticity, continuity, or heritage. By first introducing the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots and highlighting its mediating role, which signifies consumers' perceptions of a company's strong belief in and preservation of its brand and roots, we advance current understanding of the direct link of perceived authenticity as souvenir brands to positive WOM in the tourism context.

The second important implication of this study is its contribution to improving understanding of the boundary condition under which the effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM intensifies, which is unclear in the literature (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Kumar & Kaushal, 2021). Previous literature on motivation by craftsman or employees has provided initial insights into consumers' positive responses (Otieno & Nyikal, 2017; Park & Tran, 2018; Rivaroli et al., 2020). In contrast, this study examines the moderating effect of a craftsman's passion, which is a theoretically distinct concept from a company's commitment to the brand's roots.

Specifically, by first uncovering the mechanism of how a craftsman's passion interacts with a company's commitment to the brand's roots, we show that consumers who infer this passion in the production process of the tourist souvenir exhibit more positive consumer attitudes and/or behaviors regarding recommending the brand to others than those who do not make such inferences. This finding is important, because a craftsman's intrinsic motivation characterized by passion and dedication to the brand's manufacturing process strengthens the positive indirect impact of authentic souvenirs as brands on positive WOM via the enhanced company's

commitment to the brand's roots in the tourism context. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that the insights gained are not limited to tourist souvenirs, and can be applied to numerous product categories where authenticity is sought.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings of this study have two implications for managers of companies dealing with tourist souvenirs with a long history and tradition of craftsmanship techniques spanning generations and for other companies in various industries seeking to strengthen their brands.

First, managers should devise effective marketing communication campaigns that make it easier for target consumers to infer a company's commitment to the brand's roots from brand authenticity. Recently, the importance of brand authenticity has been recognized, leading many companies and brands, which aim to be perceived as authentic by consumers, to engage in marketing communications. However, simply being conscious of brand authenticity makes it challenging to differentiate between brands. Therefore, as revealed in this study, we propose more effective marketing communications that leverage the essence of brand authenticity, namely continuity and heritage.

We strongly advise that companies involved in manufacturing the target brand should create a narrative dedicated to preserving the brand's roots and adhere to traditional production methods, even if they are aware of their inefficiency. We believe that this can lead to differentiation from other brands and generate more positive WOM. For example, in the case of tourist souvenirs, it is important to not only convey the founding year and location, but also engage in efforts to tell a historical story about how the company has strived to preserve the founder's intentions and roots. When this story resonates with tourists, it is likely to result in positive recommendations for souvenir products and brands through their authentic WOM.

Second, managers should appeal to consumers about the passion that craftsmen have for their crafts as brands. Craftsmen's passion is the result of dedicating themselves to their work. However, given that consumers often do not have direct clues for evaluating craftsmen's intrinsic motivation including their passion, we argue that consumer inferences are crucial for understanding this. The results of this study show that high consumer evaluation of the craftsman's passion increases the impact of the positive WOM of perceived brand authenticity. Therefore, in addition to the company's commitment to the brand's roots, we believe that marketing communications should focus on the craftsman's passion. Taking tourist souvenirs as an example, managers need to interview craftsmen about their inner motivations such as how they feel when manufacturing the target souvenirs, how they acquired their skills, and how they strive to pass on these skills to future generations. Sharing these stories through platforms such as the company website or social media can be an effective method to communicate with consumers and enhance their understanding of the craftsman's intrinsic motivation.

Overall, brand managers of souvenirs in tourist destinations need to actively communicate not only consumer interpretations, but also their own perspectives on the brand's roots and passion of the artisans involved in its production. We believe this information is processed by consumers as intended and generates stronger positive WOM. Furthermore, this positive WOM contributes to increased sales of souvenirs with a good reputation of the company, thereby leading to the enhanced attractiveness of tourist destinations and ultimately, more tourists. We anticipate that such marketing communication is effective not only for souvenirs in tourist destinations, but also for brands in various categories or industries.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has three major limitations that should be addressed in future studies. First, there are limitations regarding the research object using the experimental material. We conducted a survey using fictional brands to eliminate potential consumer biases. However, focusing on multiple and

real existing brands can enhance the accuracy of our findings. Second, although our original four-factor measurement model was superior to the one-factor model, we found the value of Herman's single-factor test was marginally below the threshold of 50%. To mitigate concerns regarding common method bias, future studies should devise data collection procedures while increasing the sample data in different periods and/or different settings.

Third, another limitation lies in the concept of a company's commitment to the brand's roots. In this study, we set a company's commitment to the brand's roots, which can be inferred from brands with a long history and tradition, as a mediating variable based on consumer inference theory. However, new brands that are now well-known may not have a strong connection to a long history or tradition. Therefore, if future researchers investigate newly developed brands in our research context, there may be a need to identify other important and appropriate mediating variables such as brand trust (Portal et al., 2019) and brand experience (Zhang et al., 2021). Accordingly, future research can strengthen the explanatory power of the mechanism addressing the mediator in the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM to generalize the implications of our findings.

This study also presents two future research directions. First, this study focused on craftsmen's passion as a moderating variable. However, consumers cannot directly observe this passion for manufacturing, and thus must infer it. Conversely, for service brands, consumers can directly experience the services provided by service providers, making it easier for them to infer the craftsman's passion. Therefore, when we investigate service brands, we may need to identify other important moderating variables such as brand familiarity (Park et al., 2019) and personalization (Longoni et al., 2019).

Second, another future direction pertains to the scale items used for the survey. Scale items related to a company's commitment to the brand's roots were not confirmed in previous studies; therefore, we developed this construct based on definitions in Japanese dictionaries as well as findings from consumer interviews. The scale items used in this study consisted of four items, and we confirmed their convergent and discriminant validity. However, by adapting this measurement into various product categories in different industries, we believe that further refinement and elaboration of the scale items is possible in future research.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the relationship between brand authenticity and WOM and to uncover the mechanism of the impact of brand authenticity on positive WOM and the boundary condition under which this impact is moderated. We extend our knowledge on this baseline relationship while examining the company's commitment to the brand's roots as a mediating variable and the craftsman's passion as a moderating variable. Previous studies have not fully clarified these aspects in the context of souvenirs in tourism. Using a fictional scenario, we perform a survey focusing on matcha sweets manufactured by a traditional company based in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, which is a representative tourist destination in Japan.

The analysis reveals that when consumers perceive authenticity in these matcha sweets, they infer the company's commitment to the brand's roots using brand authenticity as a cue. They demonstrate dedication to preserving the brand's roots and adhering to traditional production methods, even though they are aware of their inefficiencies. Furthermore, we suggest that the indirect effect of brand authenticity on positive WOM via a company's commitment to the brand's roots is stronger for participants who infer the craftsman's intrinsically motivated passion for the brand than for those who do not. The findings of this study contribute to the literature by showing the mechanisms by which brand authenticity is linked to positive WOM, as well as the boundary condition under which the effect is strengthened, using a moderated mediation analysis based on consumer inference theory.

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Supplementary material

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