



Three-Layer Model of Brand Authenticity Formation in Artisan Businesses: Perspectives of Loyal Customers

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Abstract

Background: Brand authenticity is increasingly relevant to the sustainability of artisan enterprises, yet empirical research offers limited insight into how loyal customers come to perceive a brand as authentic, particularly in Indonesia's artisan sector.

Objective: This study investigates how loyal customers construct perceptions of brand authenticity through a single-case examination of Alazkalogy, an artisan brand located in Ponorogo, East Java.

Methods: The research used a qualitative single-case design and applied the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). Evidence was obtained from in-depth interviews with ten loyal customers whose relationships with the brand averaged seven years; the interview data were examined through open, axial, and selective coding.

Results: The findings reveal a three-layer model of brand authenticity formation, consisting of experience-based authenticity, process-based authenticity, and decision-based authenticity. These three layers represent a cumulative and temporal process in which customers develop deeper perceptions of authenticity as their relationship with the brand evolves over time. Customers with longer relationships accessed more advanced layers of authenticity, whereas newer customers primarily experienced the initial layer.

Conclusion: This study extends the brand authenticity literature by proposing a conceptual model that explains how perceptions of authenticity evolve through accumulated customer experiences within the context of artisan businesses.

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INTRODUCTION

Artisan businesses face asymmetric competitive pressures: on one side, they compete against mass-market brands with substantial marketing budgets; on the other, they must maintain the uniqueness that is precisely the reason customers choose them. Under these conditions, authenticity becomes a distinctive competitive resource: customers evaluate whether a brand behaves truthfully, remains coherent over time, and acts in accordance with its stated values (Beverland, 2005; Li et al., 2024; Södergren, 2021).

Research on brand authenticity has grown significantly over the past two decades, yet most remains focused on large corporate brands in Western contexts (Li et al., 2024; Södergren, 2021). Halwani and Cherry (2024) confirm that research still requires deeper exploration of how consumers build and verify authenticity perceptions personally, especially for brands without formal marketing departments. Meanwhile, Hasanah et al. (2023) identify that five decades of

artisan entrepreneurship literature have barely documented Southeast Asian perspectives.

In this study, brand authenticity is understood as consumers' judgment that a brand communicates and behaves in a truthful, coherent, and value-consistent manner (Li et al., 2024; Södergren, 2021). Beverland (2005) and Ranfagni and Salvietti (2023), in a pioneering study of 26 luxury wine producers, identified that authenticity is built through narratives reflecting craftsmanship, place uniqueness, and commitment to quality, while simultaneously avoiding excessive commercial impressions. This finding is relevant to artisan fermentation businesses that share similar production characteristics: small-batch, craftsmanship, and benefit orientation. Beverland and Farrelly (2010) and Mann (2023) extended this argument by showing that consumers actively select authentic cues that align with their personal goals, meaning authenticity is not only communicated through the brand but also actively constructed by consumers.

Morhart et al. (2015) and Halwani and Cherry (2024) operationalized perceived brand authenticity (PBA) as four connected facets: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. This scale has proven reliable across brands and cultural contexts, making it an appropriate analytical framework for research in the Indonesian context. Napoli et al. (2014) complemented this perspective by identifying three factors of consumer-based brand authenticity: quality commitment, sincerity, and heritage, all highly relevant to Alazkalogy's artisan values. Kumar and Kaushik (2022) further reported that self-congruence shapes the strength of the association between perceived brand authenticity and customers' engagement with the brand.

Using sustainability-related Instagram communication as their setting, Bulmer et al. (2024) described brand authenticity through four dimensions: continuity (stability of values across time), credibility (truthfulness in communication), integrity (sincere concern for consumers), and symbolism (expression of personally meaningful values). These four dimensions are used as the primary analytical framework for this study. Gilmore and Pine (2007) and Smith and Du (2026) added a macro perspective that in the experience economy era, consumers make authenticity a primary consideration in purchase decisions, often more determining than price or technical product quality. This view becomes increasingly relevant for artisan businesses that must differentiate themselves from mass or conventional products through brand value and authenticity.

Table 1

Analytical Dimensions of Perceived Brand Authenticity

Dimension	Conceptual Meaning	Customer-Focused Assessment Question
<i>Continuity</i>	Consistency of brand values and character over time	"Does this brand maintain the same values and character as I have known since first becoming a customer?"
<i>Credibility</i>	Honesty and openness of the brand in communicating information to customers	"Does this brand always convey information honestly, including when it is unfavorable to the brand?"
<i>Integrity</i>	Genuine care for customer needs and interests, not merely a marketing strategy	"Does this brand truly care about my benefit and well-being as a customer?"
<i>Symbolism</i>	The brand's ability to represent values and meanings aligned with customer beliefs or identity	"Does this brand represent the values I believe in?"

Source: (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015)

Solomon and Mathias (2020) and Hasanah et al. (2023) identified that in artisan businesses, the brand and its founder are almost inseparable; brand authenticity is the authenticity of the person. This creates unique conditions where customers have direct access to verify authenticity claims through interaction with the founder, something impossible with mass-market brands.

Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020) and Zhang and Han (2025) showed that perceived authenticity in artisan products is significantly influenced by perceptions of the production process and the motivations behind starting the business. Joo and Guèvremont (2024) extended this finding by demonstrating that brand authenticity formation is dynamic, evolving as the brand faces new

situations that test value consistency. Joo's findings are relevant because they explain why Alazkalogy customers with longer subscription durations have deeper authenticity perceptions.

Oliver (1999) and Dey (2022) characterizes customer loyalty as an enduring intention to continue repurchasing a product or service over time. In the artisan business context, loyalty has an additional dimension: relational attachment to the person behind the brand, not just the product. Ofosu-Boateng and Jose (2025) found that brand storytelling is perceived as authentic when aligned with personal values and life contexts, and this alignment directly predicts loyalty. Halwani and Cherry (2024) likewise identify loyalty as a recurring favorable consequence associated with brand authenticity; in the present study, this pattern is reflected in the approximately 7.0-year average relationship reported across the loyal-customer informants.

Flanagan (1954) and Sadeghi et al. (2025) Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is designed to elicit concrete episodes that exert substantial influence on how people interpret an experience. Gremler (2004) and Sadeghi et al. (2025) confirmed that CIT effectively reveals mechanisms of customer perception formation that cannot be found through ordinary Likert-scale surveys. In the context of brand authenticity, CIT is relevant because authenticity is not formed all at once but through the accumulation of critical moments where the brand proves or neglects its values.

Across this literature, consumers' assessments of authenticity are generally organized around four dimensions - credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015). However, most research remains focused on identifying and measuring these dimensions as static constructs through cross-sectional approaches. Consequently, the mechanism of how these dimensions develop over the course of customer-brand relationships remains underexplained. Yet, recent research indicates that brand authenticity perceptions are dynamic and continuously evolve through repeated customer experiences (Joo & Guèvremont, 2024). Therefore, room remains to explain how each dimension of brand authenticity progressively forms in the context of long-term relationships between customers and artisan businesses.

Prior scholar has proposed multiple dimensions of brand authenticity (Halwani & Cherry, 2024; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014) and examined the factors that precede it as well as the consequences that follow. Much of this work, however, conceptualizes authenticity as a relatively fixed construct and captures it through cross-sectional measurement at one moment in the customer-brand relationship. Such approaches have not been able to explain how authenticity perceptions develop gradually through customer experiences that accumulate over the course of their relationship with the brand. Thus, there remains a knowledge gap regarding the mechanism of brand authenticity formation as a dynamic and temporal process, particularly in the artisan business context characterized by close personal relationships between founders and customers.

Alazkalogy, an artisan brand producing fermented products, gluten-free foods, handmade soaps, and artisan teas from Ponorogo that has been operating since 2015, offers an ideal context to address this gap. With an average customer loyalty duration of approximately seven years among the ten informants studied, sufficient temporal depth is available to analyze how brand authenticity perceptions develop through the accumulation of long-term experiences. This study addresses the question: *How is brand authenticity at the artisan business Alazkalogy built and perceived by loyal customers over more than a decade?*

METHOD

Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was operationalized by asking each loyal customer to reconstruct specific episodes that changed, confirmed, or weakened perceptions of authenticity. Each episode was coded through a common sequence of incident context, customer appraisal, authenticity cue, and subsequent behavioral response. Cross-informant comparison was then used to identify recurrent patterns that formed the Three-Layer Model.

A descriptive-exploratory single-case approach was used in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; "Qualitative Research Designs," 2025). This single-case approach was chosen purposively because Alazkalogy meets the criteria as a unique case, rich in information for constructing a phenomenon that has not been extensively explored (Yin, 2018, 2024). Alazkalogy was selected as the focal case for three reasons: (1) more than ten years of operations, which permits examination over an extended period; (2) organic expansion without external investment, making authenticity a particularly salient competitive resource; and (3) a stable base of customers

retained over the long term. The extended duration of these customer relationships supplies the temporal depth needed to apply the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to reconstruct how perceptions of authenticity emerge, are reinforced, and accumulate over time.

Informants were selected purposively based on two criteria: first, having actively subscribed to Alazkalogy products for at least 5 years, consistent with the criteria for determining loyal customers in Alazkalogy's database; and second, being able to identify specific moments that shaped their perceptions of the brand.

The field research underlying this article also involved three non-loyal customers as part of a broader case study. This article specifically limits its analysis to ten loyal customers because the research objective is to explain the process of brand authenticity formation from the perspective of customers who have formed long-term relationships with the brand, thus comparison with non-loyal customers falls outside the scope of this article.

Table 2

Informant Profiles (10 Loyal Customers of Alazkalogy)

Code	Age	Occupation	Residence	Duration	Primary Products Consumed
PL-01	42	Self-employed	Kediri	6 years	Kefir mask, fermented drinks
PL-02	41	Self-employed	Ponorogo	8 years	Fermented drinks, gluten-free foods
PL-03	36	Health Worker	Ponorogo	5 years	Gluten-free foods, handmade soap, water kefir
PL-04	45	Homemaker	Ponorogo	7 years	Handmade soap, fermented drinks
PL-05	30	Homemaker	Ponorogo	6 years	Fermented drinks, gluten-free foods
PL-06	37	Bank Employee	Ponorogo	8 years	Kefir mask, handmade soap, water kefir
PL-07	40	Self-employed	Malang	6 years	Handmade soap, face butter, kombucha
PL-08	45	Teacher	Ponorogo	8 years	Gluten-free foods, fermented drinks, handmade soap
PL-09	33	Self-employed	Madiun	8 years	Fermented drinks, Artisan Tea
PL-10	28	State-Owned Enterprise Employee	Ponorogo	8 years	Handmade soap, fermented drinks, gluten-free foods

Source: Author, 2026

In February 2026, each informant participated in a 45-90-minute semi-structured interview guided by CIT. Each informant was asked to identify, among others, the moment they first believed in the brand's authenticity, the moment that most strengthened their belief, and whether there was ever a moment that shook their belief.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through inter-informant triangulation across recurring incident patterns, member checking of the interpreted meaning of key incidents, and an iterative saturation assessment. Recruitment stopped when additional interviews no longer produced substantively new authenticity cues or layer transitions.

Interview material was analyzed using the three-stage framework proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994) and Miles (2023). Open coding was conducted to identify all units of meaning related to authenticity perceptions. During axial coding, these units were organized in relation to the four authenticity dimensions identified by Morhart et al. (2015) and Bulmer et al. (2024), together with the critical incidents evidencing each dimension. Selective coding constructed patterns of authenticity perception formation across informants and across time. Data credibility was ensured through inter-informant triangulation Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Beuving & de Vries (2025) member checking with representative informants. Interviewing concluded once later conversations yielded no additional themes, providing evidence of saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Rahimi & khatooni, 2024; Saunders et al., 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results are presented as a critical-incident analysis: reported incidents were first interpreted within their temporal sequence and then compared across customers. This procedure distinguishes the trigger, perceived authenticity cue, customer evaluation, and behavioral consequence associated with each layer rather than treating interview statements as decontextualized themes.

Three Layers of Brand Authenticity Formation from the Loyal Customer Perspective

Analysis of 10 interview transcripts identified that Alazkalogy's loyal customers do not build brand authenticity perceptions all at once but through three layers that develop gradually over the subscription duration. This finding extends Beverland (2005) and Ranfagni & Salviotti (2023) framework, which analyzed authenticity from the producer's side; this research shows that from the consumer's side, authenticity also has a layered and temporal structure.

First Layer: Experience-Based Authenticity

Analysis shows that the first layer is the initial stage when customers begin building brand authenticity perceptions based on the founder's narrative before having deep product experience. This first layer is formed from the founder's real-life experiences, particularly health experiences that motivated Alazkalogy's establishment in 2015. From the customer's perspective, this narrative functions as a legitimacy signal, among others, evidence that the brand was not born from business calculation but from identifiable and relevant health needs. This aligns with Beverland (2005) and Ranfagni and Salviotti (2023) finding that sincerity—authenticity proven through passion behind the product—is a key component of brand authenticity in artisan businesses.

PL-02 (8 years, Ponorogo): "I knew it not from the brand's story, but because my husband was diagnosed with anxiety and consumed kefir from Alazkalogy, and we saw the benefits firsthand." PL-10 (8 years, state-owned enterprise employee, Ponorogo): "Hearing the founder's struggle story of building a business based on personal experience makes me feel closer to the brand and appreciate the process behind every product."

The authenticity dimensions most active in this layer are credibility and integrity (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015). Both are formed even before customers try the product, merely from hearing the origin narrative. This confirms Beverland and Farrelly (2010) and Mann (2023) finding that consumers actively select authentic cues aligned with their personal goals, and Kumar and Kaushik (2022) finding that value congruence between consumers and brands can form before the first transaction.

Second Layer: Process-Based Authenticity

The second layer forms after customers have direct experience with the product and interaction with the founder. At this stage, customers actively verify the authenticity claims from the first layer through observation of the production process, honesty about product effects and limitations, and the founder's responsiveness in addressing questions.

PL-06 (8 years, bank employee, Ponorogo): "The founder is kind and patiently explains product benefits, even the initial effects when first trying water kefir, so as a customer I feel safe trying new Alazka product variants." Honesty about potentially uncomfortable initial effects—something that could be hidden to boost sales—becomes the strongest evidence that the brand is authentic. Halwani & Cherry (2024) identify transparency and credibility as primary drivers of brand authenticity perceptions from the consumer side.

PL-08 (8 years, teacher, Ponorogo, ovarian cancer survivor): "Alazkalogy understands that and tries to produce all the food or drinks needed for ovarian cancer patients." A brand that understands and responds to specific medical conditions proves its care is genuine, not performative. This is the strongest manifestation of the integrity dimension in Bulmer et al. (2024) framework.

Third Layer: Decision-Based Authenticity

The third layer is the deepest, available only to customers who have interacted long enough to observe the consistency of the founder's decisions when facing external pressures. At this layer, customers build authenticity perceptions not from what the brand says but from what the brand chooses when there is pressure to compromise.

PL-02 (8 years, Ponorogo): "The longer I follow its journey, I feel this brand is consistent, honest, and truly cares about consumer health. That's what makes me comfortable and stay as a customer." The phrase "the longer" is key; this perception does not form in the first year but from years of accumulation. Joo & Guèvremont (2024) confirms that authenticity is dynamic and requires active maintenance through consistent decisions.

PL-05 (6 years, homemaker, Ponorogo): "Alazkalogy never stops innovating, from kefir to kombucha, kimchi, gluten-free. In Ponorogo, no one is as consistently focused on fermentation as this." PL-09 (8 years, self-employed, Madiun): "Alazka doesn't just sell but also educates," a perception of the motivation behind the brand's actions formed from long-term observation.

The authenticity dimensions most active in this layer are continuity and symbolism (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015). Both require sufficient observation duration, aligning with Gilmore and Pine (2007) and Smith and Du (2026) argument that in the experience economy era, consumers evaluate authenticity from accumulated real interactions, not from single claims.

Relationship between Subscription Duration and Depth of Authenticity Layers

Cross-informant analysis shows a consistent pattern: informants with shorter duration (5-6 years) describe authenticity within the first and second layers—founder origin narratives and product quality. Informants with longer duration (8 years) consistently add the third layer dimension—the brand's decision consistency in facing various pressures over the years.

Table 3

Three Layers of Brand Authenticity from Alazkalogy Loyal Customer Perspective

Authenticity Layer	Customer Verification Mechanism	Dimension (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015)	Subscription Duration Representative	Key Quote
Layer 1 <i>Experience-based</i>	Founder origin narrative relevant to customer's health condition, formed before first purchase	<i>Credibility Integrity</i> +	5-6 years (early stage)	"Hearing the founder's struggle story makes me closer to the brand." (PL-10)
Layer 2 <i>Process-based</i>	Direct observation: honesty about product effects, response to specific medical conditions, confirmed consistent quality	<i>Credibility Integrity</i> +	6-8 years (intermediate stage)	"Founder patiently explains initial water kefir effects, as a customer I feel safe." (PL-06)
Layer 3 <i>Decision-based</i>	Observation of brand decision consistency over years when facing pressure to compromise on artisan values	<i>Continuity Symbolism</i> +	8 years (mature stage)	"The longer I follow its journey, this brand is consistent, honest, and caring." (PL-02)

Source: Author, 2026

Keyword Patterns Across 10 Informants

To strengthen the validity of the identified patterns, the frequency of keyword descriptions of brand authenticity used spontaneously by informants during interviews—without

specific stimulus from the guide—was recorded. These frequencies were calculated from open coding notes and are indicative, not formal quantitative analysis.

Table 4

Keyword Descriptions of Brand Authenticity from 10 Loyal Informants

Keyword/Phrase	Frequency	Authenticity Layer	Dimension
"Consistent", "unchanged", "staying the same"	7/10	Layer 3	<i>Continuity</i>
"Honest", "transparent", "what it is"	6/10	Layer 2	<i>Credibility</i>
"Caring", "truly understands", "not just selling"	8/10	Layer 2	<i>Integrity</i>
"Natural", "good ingredients", "no side effects"	9/10	Layers 1 & 2	<i>Credibility + Integrity</i>
"Different", "no one else like it", "no competitor yet"	6/10	Layer 3	<i>Symbolism</i>
"Educates", "shares knowledge", "not just selling"	7/10	Layer 3	<i>Symbolism + Integrity</i>

Source: Author, 2026

Discussion

These findings build on the Perceived Brand Authenticity framework introduced by (Bulmer et al., 2024; Morhart et al., 2015). Rather than treating continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism as dimensions that are equally observable at the same stage, the present analysis indicates that their salience emerges in a sequence. The dimensions of credibility and integrity appear at the early stage because they can be evaluated immediately through the founder's narrative and first product experience. Conversely, continuity and symbolism can only be evaluated after customers have accumulated long-term experience that allows them to observe business decision consistency. This finding also complements Joo and Guèvremont (2024) argument that brand authenticity is dynamic by explaining the concrete mechanism of how this dynamic occurs in the artisan business context.

The mechanism of brand authenticity formation identified in this study appears to be influenced by the distinctive characteristics of artisan businesses that position the founder as the primary brand representative. The personal relationship between founder and customers allows customers to directly observe production processes, communication, and business decisions made. This condition differs from corporate brands where most interactions are mediated by organizational systems and marketing communications. Therefore, the Three-Layer Model resulting from this research is more appropriately positioned as an explanation of brand authenticity formation in founder-driven artisan businesses rather than as a universal model for all brand types.

Based on these findings, this research provides three theoretical contributions. First, it shifts the perspective on brand authenticity from a static construct to a temporally evolving process. Second, it explains the mechanism of brand authenticity formation through three sequential layers of customer experience. Third, the analysis suggests that how long customers have been connected to the brand conditions how deeply they can evaluate its authenticity. Moreover, this relationship can become an essential lens for understanding how consumer trust evolves, not merely forms. The implication is that future research using cross-sectional survey approaches needs to consider the length of the customer-brand relationship because customers at different relationship stages may produce different levels of authenticity perception even when evaluating the same brand.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the study shows that brand authenticity in an artisan business develops temporally rather than appearing as a static perception. The Three-Layer Model links initial narrative cues, verified production practices, and repeated purchase decisions into a sequential process that explains why loyal customers continue to regard the brand as authentic. This temporal contribution extends established authenticity dimensions by showing how they are

experienced and confirmed over time.

In the artisan setting examined here, authenticity should not be viewed as four dimensions that become fully visible at the same moment. Instead, it develops through an incremental, relationship-based process. As founder-customer interactions accumulate, credibility and integrity can be assessed earlier, whereas continuity and symbolism become clearer through longer observation. Accordingly, the study broadens the application of brand-authenticity theory by adding a temporal explanation of how customers' judgments change across stages of the customer-brand relationship.

This research shows that Alazkalogy's brand authenticity is built and perceived by loyal customers through three cumulative layers that develop with subscription duration: first, experience-based authenticity—legitimacy from the founder's real-life experience narrative resonant with customer health conditions, formed even before the first transaction; second, process-based authenticity—verification through production process transparency and honesty about product effects, activating credibility and integrity dimensions; and third, decision-based authenticity—confirmation from observing business decision consistency over years reflecting brand values. These three layers complement each other in building long-term relationships and customer loyalty.

The study's principal theoretical contribution is to introduce time as an explicit element in understanding brand authenticity, which prior work has commonly assessed as a static construct. The resulting Three-Layer Model explains how authenticity perceptions develop through accumulated experience, a mechanism that differs between early-stage customers (accessing only the first layer) and long-term customers (accessing all three layers cumulatively). Practical implications for artisan business practitioners: investment in the first layer (honest origin narrative) has the broadest reach and forms most quickly. The second layer requires consistency in every interaction between founder and customer that cannot be fully delegated to systems. The third layer requires patience and value commitment over years but produces the most enduring loyalty and is the most difficult for competitors to imitate.

This research has limitations due to the single-case study approach, so findings cannot be generalized statistically. Future studies should therefore examine the model in other artisan categories, develop quantitative measures for each layer and investigate whether comparable temporal sequences occur in artisan settings beyond Indonesia.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Asti Dwijayanti contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation. Sabar contributed to the development of the research framework, validation of the analysis, critical revision of the manuscript, and supervision of the research process. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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