

Perceived Brand Authenticity as the Answer to Global Crises

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the article is to assess the impact of perceived brand authenticity and its different dimensions on the brand choice of young consumers.

Design/methodology/approach: The experiment was applied in the study. A sample of 180 Polish young respondents from Lodz region participated in the study in December 2022.

Findings: The research results confirm that perceived brand authenticity positively affects the brand choice in case of young consumers, even if a higher price is applied. The most important PBA dimension in the case of mineral water is the brand naturalness. The study also proved that the brand origin can increase the perceived brand authenticity.

Research limitations/implications: The sample is limited to young consumers and the studied brands represent only 1 category of products.

Originality/value: The key dimensions of perceived brand authenticity important for young Polish consumers were identified for the brand representing the food sector.

Keywords: authentic brand, perceived brand authenticity, brand origin, young consumer.

JEL: M30, M31

Postrzegana autentyczność marki odpowiedzią na współczesne kryzysy

Streszczenie

Cel: celem artykułu jest ocena wpływu postrzeganej autentyczności marki i jej różnych wymiarów na wybór marki przez młodych konsumentów.

Metodologia: w badaniu przeprowadzonym w grudniu 2022 roku, w którym uczestniczyło 180 młodych polskich respondentów z województwa łódzkiego, zastosowano eksperyment.

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Wyniki: wyniki badań potwierdzają, że postrzegana autentyczność marki pozytywnie wpływa na wybór marki w przypadku młodych konsumentów, także w przypadku zastosowania wyższej ceny. Najważniejszym wymiarem PBA w przypadku wody mineralnej jest naturalność marki. Badanie wykazało również, że pochodzenie marki może zwiększyć jej postrzeganą autentyczność.

Ograniczenia/implikacje badawcze: próba badawcza była ograniczona do młodych konsumentów, a badane marki reprezentowały tylko jedną kategorię produktów.

Oryginalność/wartość: dla marki reprezentującej sektor spożywczy zidentyfikowano kluczowe wymiary postrzeganej autentyczności marki, ważne z perspektywy młodych polskich konsumentów.

Słowa kluczowe: marka autentyczna, postrzegana autentyczność marki, pochodzenie marki, młody konsument

1. Introduction

In times of instability, including economic recession, political crises, international conflicts, pandemics and social pressure, consumers are increasingly looking for brands that offer them additional intangible values related to a sense of stability and authenticity. Today, a brand does not only serve as an element of product designation, but has become an added value for the consumer. The brand has a symbolic meaning for consumers, evoking a sense of security, and also serves to create the consumer's own image, harmonizing with their views and lifestyle. As a result, brands have become reference points that allow the consumer to assess both the tangible characteristics of the product and the intangible values associated with the brand (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2020). They are the basis for dialogue and building lasting relationships between companies and consumers.

Both academics and practitioners confirm the importance of authenticity for brand management and consumers behaviours (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Bruhn et al., 2012; Leigh et al., 2006; Morhart et al., 2015; Newman & Dhar, 2014; Rose & Wood, 2005). This area of research is still evolving in the academic literature, which results in rapid growth and development in both the theoretical and practical aspects of the research. In recent years, researchers have concentrated on the identification of the brand authenticity elements (Morhard et al., 2015; Safeere et al., 2022; Xuezheng & Zhucheng, 2022). Morhard et al. (2015) and underlined that brand authenticity perceptions are influenced by different elements, especially indexical, existential, and iconic cues. However, the literature lacks a comprehensive assessment of the impact of various factors on brand authenticity. In this regard, a knowledge gap is recognised in the existing literature on branding concerning the identification and assessment of the impact of different dimensions of the perceived brand authenticity on the brand choice. This article seeks to shed light on the importance of perceived brand authenticity from young consumers perspective. Additionally, in Poland, issues of the brand authenticity are rarely described, especially with respect to the brand authenticity dimensions. Polish Authors analyse especially the environmental

friendliness or origin of the brand (e.g. Bryła, 2014; Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2022). Due to the arguments, the following topic was chosen. It is important to identify if perceived brand authenticity (PBA) influence choices of young Polish consumers and which dimensions of the PBA are crucial for them. Taking into account the current crises (especially issues related to sustainable development), the research concerns a brand from the food sector.

The aim of the article is to assess the impact of perceived brand authenticity and its different dimensions on the brand choice of young consumers. Results of own empirical research conducted in December 2022 on a group of 180 young Polish consumers are presented.

The outline of the paper is as follows. The related literature concerning the concept of perceived brand authenticity (PBA) and the research questions are presented in section 1. Section 2 is dedicated to the presentation of the research methodology. The research results are presented with discussion in section 3. Finally, the conclusions, theoretical and managerial contributions and the limitations of the study are included in section 4.

2. Concept of Perceived Brand Authenticity

In recent years, many factors have emerged that have changed the traditional approach to brand management, including building its identity and shaping its image. The market, as a space of exchange, is not limited to the confrontation of income, prices and utility of goods. It is also a place where social relations are built, depending on the historical, cultural and institutional characteristics of society (Brémond et al., 2007). According to Ragas and Bueno (2006), as a society, we are absolutely addicted to brands because brands provide us with a sense of otherness in a group that does not feel different. For young consumers, the purchase of specific products is not only an act of consumption, but also an opportunity to demonstrate a specific value system, express their own views, attitudes and emphasize their independence.

Authenticity is an important concept whose meaning is a muddled amalgam of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual values (Steiner, 2006). A variety of associations related to the concept of the brand authenticity is implemented by different researchers (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Leigh et al., 2006). Brown et al. (2003) emphasize that a successful balance between past and future creates an authenticity that is crucial for the brand identity. In the opinion of the authors, consumers are looking for truth and authenticity in a false, inauthentic world. As a consequence, authenticity has become one of the most striking features of contemporary consumer culture.

Brand authenticity has its sources as one of the key elements of brand identity (Aaker, 2010; Beverland, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Upshaw, 1995) or a major value of brand image (Ballantyne et al., 2006). In his model,

Upshaw (1995) defines brand identity as a particular mix of positioning and personality, giving the product a unique and authentic character in the mind of the consumer. According to Ghodeswar (2008), a brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that signifies a promise to customers and includes a core and extended brand identity. Core identity is the central, timeless essence of the brand, which is expressed through its authenticity and is not susceptible to changes in the market environment and prevailing trends, and remains constant in the face of the brand's territorial expansion or its extension to new products. Aaker (2010) presents a similar approach, emphasizing the significance of the basic element of brand identity, i.e. the essence of the brand, which includes the values and vision of the brand and takes the form of an ambivalent and timeless declaration of identity. Lai and Aimé (2016) also point out that identity determines the roots, foundations of the brand and its "genetic code" based on an authentic approach (brand history, products, communication, completed projects, etc.). Brand identity is therefore a performative story that provides information about its essence and sense of existence. Consequently, brand identity creates an authentic, relevant, enduring and credible value promise associated with a product or organization and indicates the source of the promise (Kapferer, 2004).

Nowadays, consumers co-create brand meaning by carefully interpreting brand messages, adding their own personal stories, and constantly digging into the definition of brand authenticity. The identity of authentic brands is based primarily on positive connotations referring to both the physical features of the products they represent, as well as symbolic values referring to the brand experience, and sometimes also to its history and memories of consumers (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2020). An authentic brand can derive its identity from a product known for years, brand name, permanent values represented by this brand or its graphic differentiators. Brand authenticity can have its source in the form of historical and geographical heritage. Authenticity determines the memory of a brand or how it is best remembered by consumers. It is imperative to keep igniting this memory of how individuals truly recall a brand, given its significant influence on consumer preference and choice (Pogorzelski, 2018). It is also important to emphasize their originality and uniqueness in comparison with competitors' brands (Brown, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Kessous et al., 2015; Prieto & Boistel, 2014; Shivakanth Shetty et al., 2014).

The concept of perceived brand authenticity is described by the prism of heritage, origin, production methods, naturalness, credibility, self-verification, symbolism or moral values (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Safeer et al., 2021; Xuezheng & Zhucheng, 2022). Several conceptualizations and operationalizations of perceived brand authenticity were proposed (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2012; Eggers et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Different measurement et antecedents were defined. Brand authenticity is consequently related to a variety of attributes

and there is no unique definition of the authenticity concept, particularly in the branding context. Six chosen dimensions adapted to the specificity of the food sector were selected and are presented in Table 1: continuity, originality, reliability, naturalness, integrity and symbolism.

Table 1
Factors and items of perceived brand authenticity

PBA factors	Item	Origin
Continuity (C)	I think the brand is consistent over time (C1)	
	I think the brand stays true to itself (C2)	Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Wiedmann et al., 2011
	Brand offers continuity (C3)	
	The brand has a clear concept that it pursues (C4)	
Originality (O)	The brand is different from all other brands (O1)	
	I think the brand is unique (O3)	Bruhn et al., 2012
	The brand clearly distinguishes itself from other brands (O4)	
Reliability (R)	The brand delivers what it promises (R1)	Bruhn et al., 2012; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015
	Brand's promises are credible (R2)	
	The brand makes reliable promises (R3)	
Naturalness (N)	The brand does not seem artificial (N1)	
	The brand makes a genuine impression (N2)	Bruhn et al., 2012
	The brand gives the impression of being natural (N3)	
Integrity (I)	The brand gives up to its consumers (I1)	Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015
	The brand has moral principles (I2)	
	A brand true to a set of moral values (I3)	
	A brand that cares about its consumers (I4)	
Symbolism (S)	A brand that reflects important values people care about (S1)	Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015
	A brand that connects people with their real selves (S2)	
	A brand that connects people with what is really important (S3)	

When consumers experience a disruption of normalcy, their need for a sense of security and continuity increases. As a result, consumers become sensitive to the authenticity of brands that provide them with a sense of reliability, originality, integrity and continuity. In this case, brand authenticity is a mechanism used to deal with negative emotions about the present or concern for the future, and authenticity is a defence against a perceived threat. More often, however, authenticity of the brand is used to signal the guarantee of origin, quality, naturalness and symbolism helping maintain a specific lifestyle and being a tool to express one's own individual identity or cultivate social relations (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Bruhn et al., 2012; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Wiedmann et al., 2011).

Nostalgic brands are also perceived by consumers as authentic (Brown et al., 2003; Fritz et al., 2017; Leigh et al., 2006). The concept of authenticity as a connection with the past can be explained in two ways. Firstly, nostalgic memories are both positive and negative and therefore perceived as more authentic (Stephan et al., 2012). Secondly, consistency and transparency in the history of the brand inspire a sense of authenticity and thus trust (Ford et al., 2018; Napoli et al., 2014; Pecot et al., 2018). Veracity of events and consistency over time are therefore the main elements of the authenticity of a nostalgic brand.

The scientific problem in this article was developed through the following research questions:

- Q1: Does perceived brand authenticity influence choices of young Polish consumers?
- Q2: Which dimensions of perceived brand authenticity are the key to young Polish consumers?
- Q3: Does marking the country of origin positively affect the perceived brand authenticity?

3. Research Methodology

A sample of 180 Polish young respondents (53% females) from Lodz region participated in the study in December 2022. Participation involved a 15-minute experiment. The experiment consisted of a blind product test of a mineral water brand. The manipulation was based on the concept of Morhart et al. (2015) for hand cream, however provenance was emphasized by indication of the country of origin. Additionally the experiment was conducted for three, not two, product versions. The manipulation involved participants reading a description of one anonymized mineral water brand. Three versions of mineral water brand were prepared. In the description, brand A was presented as French and highly authentic, brand B as Polish and highly authentic, and brand C as foreign and less authentic. The brand authenticity was manipulated by delivering varying information concerning the six chosen perceived brand authenticity dimensions (continuity, reliability,

originality, naturalness, symbolism, credibility, integrity). Each group of 60 participants evaluated one branded product. After reading the brand characteristics' description, participants tested the product (i.e. a mineral water sample that was identical across conditions) and completed the brand choice likelihood measure ("Would you choose this brand?" and "Would you choose this brand if its price was a little higher?") as well as several manipulation checks concerning six PBA dimensions.

In order to vary different brand authenticity dimensions:

- for the continuity dimension: the brand's creation date was indicated as 1918 (for highly authentic brands) or 2018 (for the less authentic brand);
- for the naturalness dimension: the highly authentic brands were presented as basing on the natural, pure and healthy springs and the less authentic brand as a natural one;
- for the integrity dimension: the brand was founded by French or Polish monks (for highly authentic brands) instead of a foreign businessmen (for the less authentic brand);
- for the originality dimension: unique characteristics differentiating a brand from other were underlined for highly authentic brands, as well as the country of origin. For the less authentic brand the typical ingredients were indicated and the country of origin information was missing;
- for the credibility dimension: the series of quality tests of each product were mentioned in the description of highly authentic brands, whereas the founders of the less authentic brand just underlined good quality production conditions;
- for the symbolism dimension: the brand slogan was proposed – "Feel nature – Feel like free" (highly authentic brands) or "Feel nature – Feel good" (the less authentic brand).

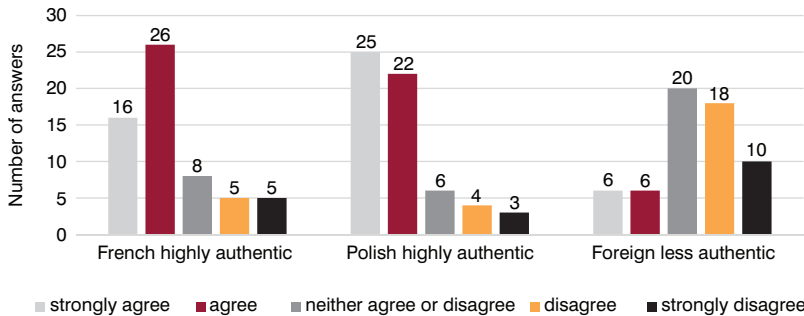
The same quantity and quality of information was deliver during manipulations for each brand. The same conditions were provided for all experiments.

4. Research Results and Discussion

The research results confirmed that participants evaluated the brands described as "authentic" significantly higher on each of the PBA dimensions than the participants in the less authentic brand condition. Respondents most often declared the choice of a product of the Polish and highly authentic brand (78% for strongly agree or agree). It is interesting that the French and highly authentic brand was chosen by a smaller group of consumers (70% for strongly agree or agree). The product signed with the foreign and less authentic brand was chosen the least often (20% for strongly agree

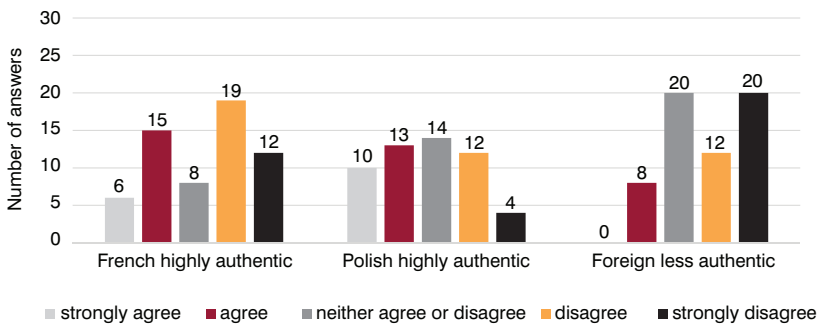
or agree) (Fig. 1). This confirms the conclusion of Morhart et al. (2015), Safer et al. (2021) and Xuezheng & Zhucheng (2022) that consumers are more likely to choose products supported by highly authentic brands than products signed with less authentic brands.

Figure 1
Brand choice in case of similar prices



In the situation of price increase, consumer preferences changed, but they still chose the Polish and highly authentic more often. In the case of the tested product with higher price, highly authentic brands were chosen more willingly (38% and 35% for strongly agree or agree) than the less authentic brand (13% for strongly agree or agree) (Fig. 2).

Figure 2
Brand choice in the case of higher prices



The research results also confirmed that the authenticity manipulation was successful: respondents in the case of the highly authentic brands conditions rated the brands higher on each of the PBA dimensions than respondents in the case of the less authentic brand condition (Table 2).

Table 2
 Perceived brand authenticity – research results

Item	Brand A French and highly authentic			Brand B Polish and highly authentic			Brand C Foreign and less authentic		
	n=60			n=60			n=60		
	<i>X</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Sd</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Sd</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Sd</i>
C1	3.52	4	0.72	3.78	4	0.63	2.88	3	0.88
C2	3.67	4	0.79	3.87	4	0.74	2.58	3	0.90
C3	3.48	3.5	0.83	3.78	4	0.78	2.82	3	0.87
C4	4.13	4	0.59	4.13	4	0.59	2.95	3	1.01
O1	3.92	4	0.64	4.15	4	0.60	3.38	3.5	1.00
O2	3.73	4	0.44	3.82	4	0.53	3.17	3	0.88
O3	3.72	4	0.45	3.90	4	0.57	3.32	3	0.76
R1	3.40	3	0.61	3.60	4	0.66	3.22	3	0.75
R2	3.48	3	0.50	3.58	4	0.53	3.42	3	0.59
R3	3.58	4	0.49	3.73	4	0.54	3.30	3	0.90
N1	4.02	4	0.67	4.05	4	0.67	3.10	3	1.08
N2	4.18	4	0.59	4.27	4	0.54	3.53	4	1.12
N3	4.23	4	0.64	4.25	4	0.65	3.20	3	1.14
I1	3.77	4	0.64	3.90	4	0.57	3.53	4	0.96
I2	3.47	4	0.67	3.73	4	0.63	2.83	3	0.99
I3	3.43	4	0.67	3.83	4	0.55	2.93	3	1.08
I4	3.82	4	0.59	3.83	4	0.55	3.20	3	0.95
S1	3.63	4	0.68	3.77	4	0.67	3.25	3.5	1.01
S2	3.62	4	0.55	3.68	4	0.56	3.22	3	0.91
S3	3.78	4	0.55	3.87	4	0.50	2.92	3	1.07

The highest values for all dimensions of PBA were received for the Polish highly authentic brand. Slightly lower or similar indications were obtained for the French highly authentic brand. The highest rated dimension of authenticity was the naturalness of the brand ($X_{FHA}=4.14$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.64$; $X_{PHA}=4.18$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.63$). It can be related to the chosen product category (mineral water) and its perception taking into

account that naturalness of products has recently become an important feature in the food sector., Authenticity is often associated with natural character that explained the results also in anthropology (Bruhn et al., 2012). The foreign less authentic brand was perceived as less natural ($X_{FLA}=3.27$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=1.13$). In the case of brand continuity, the highest values were received in case of the Polish highly authentic brand ($X_{PHA}=3.89$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.78$) and the French highly authentic brand ($X_{FHA}=3.7$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.71$). Respondents agreed that the brands are consistent over time and have a clear concept that they pursue. For the foreign less authentic brand, respondents' indications were lower ($X_{FLA}=2.88$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=.93$). Similar conclusions were formulated by Morhart et al. (2015). Conceptual similarities were also identified between continuity and the brand heritage by Merchant & Rose (2013) and Wiedmann et al. (2011). Participants also confirmed the importance of the symbolic dimension of PBA ($X_{FHA}=3.68$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.60$; $X_{PHA}=3.77$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.59$; $X_{FLA}=3.12$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=1.01$). The research results are consistent with results of Beverland & Farrelly (2010) and Mohart et al. (2015) who underlined that symbolism is a brand's potential to serve as a resource for identity construction. Highly authentic brands represent also higher originality than foreign the less authentic brand ($X_{FLA}=3.29$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=.89$). Respondents assessed them as distinguishing, unique and different from other brands ($X_{FHA}=3.78$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.53$; $X_{PHA}=3.96$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.59$) and perceived as more reliable and credible than the less authentic brand ($X_{FHA}=3.49$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.54$; $X_{PHA}=3.64$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.59$; $X_{FLA}=3.31$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=.76$). Similar situation was recorded in the case of brand perceived integrity ($X_{FHA}=3.62$; $Me_{FHA}=4$; $SD_{FHA}=.67$; $X_{PHA}=3.83$; $Me_{PHA}=4$; $SD_{PHA}=.58$; $X_{FLA}=3.13$; $Me_{FLA}=3$; $SD_{FLA}=1.03$). However, in the case of brand reliability and integrity, the differences between highly and less authentic brands were the lowest ones.

The study also proved that brand origin can increase the perceived brand authenticity as stated previously by Xuezheng & Zhucheng (2022) or Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka (2022). Polish young consumers declared the choice of Polish highly authentic brand more likely than the French one. In this case, we can talk about social "expanded authenticity". Consequently, For the purchase of specific product, it is an opportunity to choose a specific value system, as stated Mróz (2013).

The structure of postmodern society more and more often resembles a network of social mini-groups, based on quasi-archaic values, emotions and a characteristic lifestyle (Dziewanowska & Skorek, 2011). Individuals prioritize membership in their tribes over class affiliation. Importantly, they may belong not only to one, but to at least several communities and in each of them performs a different function (Cova, 1997). Belonging to a group can be based on shared history and experiences and, consequently,

be expressed in the choice of authentic brands that symbolically connect individual members of the group. By choosing a specific brand, the consumer can emphasize the relationship with a group using a given brand. The importance of the brand naturalness and the brand origin also confirms the significance of sustainable issues for a modern young consumer.

5. Conclusions

Nowadays, more and more consumers are looking for values of authenticity, security references, identity, emotion and re-enchantment, and consequently they are seeking a sense of security and stability (Grębosz-Krawczyk, 2019). Authenticity is the emotional pillar of a brand that is resistant to turbulent environment and protects the consumer from uncertainty. Consumers look for a sense of authenticity in the offered brands, and then use them to construct and confirm their own present identity. Understanding what makes a brand stand out, what its audience expects, and how to effectively express its identity is the key to successful brand positioning. The need to develop a coherent and well-thought-out brand concept, which is the basis for its credibility and distinction, is emphasized. An identity shaped in this way is the starting point for creating a brand image in the minds of potential buyers that will meet their expectations and, as a consequence, will lead to the development of a strong brand equity.

It can be stated that the paper has resulted in two contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it has provided a better understanding of the impact of perceived brand authenticity on a brand choice, as well as broader perspective on factors and items that contribute to the perceived brand authenticity. Additionally, the key dimensions of perceived brand authenticity important for young Polish consumers were identified for the brand representing the food sector. Theoretical considerations and empirical findings enrich the state of knowledge about the possibility of using the phenomenon of authenticity in brand management on the Eastern European market, due to the assessment of attitudes of Polish young consumers towards different components of brand authenticity. From a managerial perspective, it has shown the potential of local authentic brands in food sector. It is clearly visible that the national background affects the young consumers' attitudes and PBA.

Limitations of the study should be underlined. The sample is limited to young consumers and the studied brands represent only 1 category of products. To provide a more comprehensive picture of the evaluation of the attitudes of young consumers towards authentic brands, similar studies could be conducted for different products categories. The sample could be extended to different age groups and nationalities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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