**The Authentic Celebrity Brand: Unpacking Ai Weiwei’s Celebritised Selves**

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**Abstract:** This research extends prior work on celebrity brands to focus on the issue of how authenticity is constructed, communicated and managed in the manufacturing of celebrity. Using a case study approach, this paper explores the branding of contemporary artist-activist Ai Weiwei, who has emerged as a heroic celebrity figure. We find that authenticity is key to this brand narrative and is derived from a unique vision of the world which is amplified, reproduced and co-created to create emotional engagement. We argue that by analysing the celebrity brand as a corporate brand, a more holistic understanding of what constitutes an ‘authentic celebrity’ can be attained.

**Keywords:** celebrity brands; celebrity activism; culture and consumption; biographical methods; narrative analysis; social media

**Summary statement of contribution:** By building up a ‘portfolio’ of brands, celebrities generate leverage, synergy, clarity and credibility to raise awareness of brand values. This is illustrated through the various roles Ai has played: artist, architect, blogger and dissident, which all serve to reinforce his authentic vision. This is of wider interest to those researching how moral or political causes can be transmitted and augmented through celebrity and in opening up pathways for further understanding of celebrity brand theoretics.

**Introduction**

The rise of a celebrity culture has been widely noted in the literature (McCracken, 1989; Lash and Lury, 2007; Kerrigan, et al., 2011). Moreover, celebrities are no longer relegated to entertainment news but regularly appear in political and business discussions as well. For example, in the recent World Economic Forum of 2014 in Davos, the political and business elite were queuing to hear Goldie Hawn’s views on meditation (Treanor and Elliott, 2014). As the economic value-generating ‘industry’ of celebrity is becoming increasingly, powerful, mediatised and globalised (O’Guinn, 1991), the socio-cultural value of celebrities is now being used to generate political and ideological values in more transparent ways than ever before: whether through charity work, political campaigns or media appearances. Indeed, Rindova, et al. (2006) find that celebrity can be an important intangible asset as an attention-getting and profit-generating value. Driessens (2012) comments on the mobility of today’s celebrities as they migrate into other spheres such as politics, capitalising on their reputation. This paper seeks to show how this migration can occur successfully by using the lens of corporate branding to consider the implications of this ‘celebrity portfolio.’ As noted by Kerrigan et al. (2011) there has been little research in marketing studies that has moved beyond simple economic analysis of celebrity endorsement of products (Erdogan, 1999) to see how socio-cultural values can be packaged, framed and circulated. Furthermore, this celebrity migration is no longer limited to simple endorsements, celebrities’ personal brands encompass a range of products and services, effectively operating as businesses and now encompassing a whole ‘lifestyle’ (see, for example, Gwyneth Paltrow: Heawood, 2014).

Celebrity as a context has been shown to allow marketers to consider the emotional dimension of consumers’ responses to causes, people and even firms (Rindova et al., 2006). Through a strong brand narrative, we argue that the celebrity brand can bring into relief ideological values which serve to heighten public attention and empathetic engagement but for this to come about, the brand must perform authentically. Although authenticity has been linked to celebrity in the literature (see for example Rojek, 2001; Kerrigan et al., 2011) as a quality which has historically been ‘greatly prized’ (Dyer, 1998, p.11), there has been little understanding as to how this is performed, transmitted and negotiated. We therefore seek to unpack how authenticity is constructed, managed and circulated within the celebrity brand and how this process adds meaning and value to the brand. Authenticity is found to be inextricably linked to core brand values and narrative which is transmitted through a brand leveraging process, being augmented and replicated collectively across various platforms, media, roles and products to generate brand awareness. This follows from much of the authenticity literature (e.g. Rose and Wood, 2005; Beverland, 2006; Leigh, et al., 2006; Chronis and Hampton, 2008) which acknowledges that authenticity is socially constructed.

Furthermore, our research demonstrates how, through the Internet, this authenticity can be disseminated faster and further than ever before. This has wider implications for the marketing literature in terms of social, cultural and political meaning-making. As such, this paper contributes to recent research placed in the intersection between the political economy, culture and society (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Brownlie and Hewer, 2009; Kravets, 2012). The way in which the celebrity brand is framed and positioned and the discourses that are picked up all serve to highlight the hidden ideological underpinnings of the market system. This allows us to consider what is perceived as ‘authentic’ and how these values are amplified and circulated.

This paper thus extends other research looking at celebrity brands and in particular, Hewer, et al. (2013) and Kerrigan et al.’s (2011) work on the Andy Warhol brand. While they identify the evolution of Warhol’s brand through various creative enterprises such as painting and filmmaking which all add to his brand awareness and equity, the process through which these elements are tied together to create an authentic whole needs further investigation. We therefore provide this analysis of Ai Weiwei as a celebrity brand as a natural follow-up to that of Warhol. Indeed, Ai has been described by the press as the ‘Chinese Andy Warhol’ and he acknowledges Warhol as a key influence (Ai, 2011). Since Ai’s high-profile commission as a consultant architect for the Beijing National Stadium for the 2008 Olympics, he has barely been out of the news, at least in the West. He has become ‘China’s most famous artist’ (Bach, 2014) and even called ‘the most important artist in the world right now’ (Jones, 2013). His high-profile arrest and imprisonment by the Chinese state in 2011 (Martin, 2013) made him a household name and ArtReview (2011) subsequently named him the ‘most powerful artist in the world.’ Like Warhol before him, Ai has successfully capitalised on brand extensions, co-branding, current events and media interests to generate brand awareness, masterfully borrowing ideas from others and selling them to a wider audience. However, while Kerrigan et al. (2011) note that Warhol cultivated disinterestedness, Ai cultivates authentic engagement. ArtReview’s (2011) profile explained that ‘Ai’s power and influence derive from the fact that his work and his words have become catalysts for international political debates that affect every nation on the planet: freedom of expression, nationalism, economic power, the Internet, the rights of the human being.’ As such, we find Ai to be an interesting exemplar of celebrity in the twenty-first century, existing in a global world of social, cultural and economic relations and using his engagement with social issues and dilemmas to perform his authenticity. Moreover, by operating through various media (art, architecture, blogs, film, etc), Ai successfully replicates and reinforces this authenticity thereby stretching his celebrity over a fragmented, highly competitive global market. His brand therefore contains a number of different ‘products,’ (often produced by artisans, volunteers or sometimes factory workers), which until closed down by the Chinese government in October 2012, were managed through his company: Fake Cultural Development Ltd.

To examine the celebrity brand of Ai Weiwei, we use cultural branding theory as set out by Holt (2004) which considers brands as socially constructed and reliant on a range of actors to collectively develop meaningful brand identity. Recent studies have demonstrated how through a complex process of co-optation and cooperation with populist worlds and cultural intermediaries, brands become associated with specific ideals and values (Diamond et al., 2009; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). We focus on how these ideals and values can be performed so as to negotiate authenticity. As such this paper is part of a wider call for inclusion of cultural issues within marketing research (Holt, 2005; Schroeder, 2005). Our analysis demonstrates the role of various ‘personas’ or ‘celebritised selves’ which all create different products but crucially, transmit the same brand values thereby raising brand awareness and mobilising social attraction. This process is a complex one which must be strategically managed (a process which is rarely acknowledged in the literature) but, if done properly, generates authenticity. To unpick this process, we bring in some relevant constructs from the corporate brand literature. Indeed, the marketing literature has noted that the business landscape has become not just a brandscape but a corporate brandscape (Balmer, 2006) whereby corporate brands dominate globally. As celebrities operate across more and more domains, increasingly embracing the market and becoming businesses that sell various types of products and services involving various stakeholders, it makes sense to apply this corporate framework to the celebrity brand in order to understand their role as navigational tools across markets, often at a global level.

We find that much like a corporate brand (see for example Aaker, 2004), the celebrity brand represents more than just a product, there exist several product lines and brand values are transmitted through an association reinforcement process. Therefore the corporate brand is not a portfolio of individual brands but rather, each brand cooperates as a member of the wider brand system (Aaker, 1996). We argue that bringing together corporate branding and cultural branding theory allows for a more holistic and multifaceted understanding of the brand leveraging process in which meaning is collectively negotiated across markets using various media. The brand here is therefore a set of representations and values that are not indissolubly tied to a specific product or products. Rather, it can be stretched across various domains while still creating a value proposition by delivering emotional benefits though authentic engagement. Our aim is therefore to unpack this authentic engagement through the context of celebrity branding; focusing on *cause-célèbre* Ai Weiwei who transmits authenticity through: *amplifying, replicating* and *co-creating* his ‘self’ to connect with multiple stakeholders in multiple markets. The paper starts with an overview of authenticity and its relation to celebrity, continues with a description of the qualitative research programme undertaken for this study, culminates in an analysis of these three key themes and concludes by considering the implications of the celebrity brand in transmitting authenticity.

**Authenticity defined**

One of the key concepts to emerge from recent marketing research is contemporary consumers’ need for authenticity (Holt, 1997; Belk and Costa, 1998; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Kozinets, 2001; Brown, et al., 2003; Leigh et al., 2006; Gilmour and Pine, 2007; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Authenticity has been shown to be critical in building brand identity to differentiate the brand (Keller, 1993), putting authenticity at the heart of the brand and giving it its value. Brown, et al. (2003) demonstrate how authenticity can operate as a sort of brand essence, distilling what the brand stands for and promises to offer the consumer (Brown, et al., 2003). The celebrity literature puts equal emphasis on the notion of authenticity as a key construct in the celebrity persona. As Dyer (2003, p.2) suggests, the public seeks to understand who the star ‘really’ is, so although they are primarily ‘a case of appearance’ co-constructed by the media, they are judged by what they are perceived to be ‘really’ like in their private as well as public lives. Authenticity is therefore central to the meaning-making process as it is through a negotiation of authenticity that the public engages with celebrity.

Authenticity is thus a property of the celebrity’s relationship with the public, as explained in the authenticity literature (i.e. Rose and Wood, 2005; Beverland, 2006; Leigh et al. 2006; Chronis and Hampton, 2008): it is a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed rather than any inherent properties found in the object (or person), making it context-specific and collectively recognised. As such, the brand is co-created or co-lived: the more information provided and the more available the celebrity is, the easier it becomes to construct authenticity by appearing more immediate and intense, reflecting current concerns which, in turn, leads to shared values and emotional engagement. In order to be constructed and transmitted, then, authenticity must be intertwined into the brand narrative and developed and extended through time (Thomson, 2006). This paper therefore seeks to investigate how authenticity is communicated through the celebrity brand narrative and what types of authentic cues connect the brand to stakeholders.

While there has been significant interest in authenticity as a concept, how these studies define what authenticity is constituted of, how best it can be communicated and what is actually meant by it remains unclear. By using a case study approach, we seek to explore and clarify these concerns by focusing on the dynamics of a narrow research setting (a single celebrity) in order to provide a sufficiently ‘thick description’ of the field under study so as to ensure transferability and theoretical relevance of the case to other contexts in an inductive approach (Lincoln and Guba, 2013). We argue that Ai Weiwei is perceived as an ‘authentic’ celebrity (see for example Turan, 2012; Gopnik, 2012) due to the way in which he lives his brand values and readily packages them for the wider public through a variety of media, allowing for collective mythologising of his life and successfully inviting the public into his brand; making him a worthy exemplar. This paper unpacks the process through which various elements are used to transmit authenticity and how these can be managed across markets to generate celebrity, responding to Thomson (2006)’s call for further research to examine what authenticity means in reference to human brands which are expected to be more authentic than corporate brands. We find that authenticity is what makes the brand credible, unifying the portfolio of brands and driving the core values of the brand. Indeed, authenticity, by emotionally engaging the public, serves to strengthen celebrity influence.

Following on and drawing from these various bodies of literature, we argue that authenticity emerges from: a unique vision of the world which is grounded in the socio-cultural context and is therefore engaging, staying true to this vision and perceived transparency and accessibility in doing so. The rest of this paper will unpack how the Ai Weiwei celebrity brand creates and communicates this authenticity but first we shall further outline what is meant by these ‘authentic’ dimensions. Baugh (1988) suggests that authenticity in relation to art is about the artist’s individual expression of the world, a unique vision of the world and the extent to which we can enter this ‘new’ world. The artist therefore provides a means of escape from reality, yet to be relevant, this escape must be grounded in a culturally relevant context: authenticity comes from revealing new possibilities of existence which are seen as faithful to the artist’s own personal vision.

**A Cultural Brand**

This vision of the world is at the heart of the brand and the brand values emerge from here. As we will demonstrate, for Ai Weiwei, the consistent thread holding together his body of work is a call for freedom of expression which relies on political and societal engagement, usually in opposition to the Chinese government. This allows for ready mythologisation of the brand, playing upon archetypal story of the martyr, which can be consumed as a way for ‘the majority’ of us to transfer some of those moral values in a meaning transfer process. This draws on cultural branding theory which emphasises the importance of myths in consumer culture (Holt, 2004; Thompson, 2004) in allowing consumers to resolve cultural anxieties. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, the narrative the Western media have constructed around Ai draws freely from mythic archetypes and plotlines to create a compelling narrative implicitly justifying Western neo-liberal ideology. At a time of economic uncertainty when the West is in danger of losing its power to emerging economies such as China, the Ai narrative provides reassurance of the West’s ideological superiority. As Holt (2004) demonstrates, brands become iconic when they locate specific historic opportunities and respond to them with cultural content; as we will show, Ai does this effectively by consciously playing on the martyr narrative, presenting himself as anti-authoritarian at great risk to himself. This follows research in the arts, notably Bradshaw and Holbrook’s (2007) study of Chet Baker, which suggests that he is an authentic icon because he speaks as an outsider artist, unshackled by societal pressures, acting out the lifestyle we cannot have. Hirschman (2010) suggests that there is therefore an underlying danger present in the authentic, it is something we revere precisely because it takes strength which most of us do not have.

This brings us to the need for staying true to this vision in order for authenticity to be perceived. Despite imprisonment and violence to his person (Martin, 2013), Ai continues his struggle. This relates to the brand authenticity literature (Beverland, et al., 2008) whereby authenticity comes from internal rather than external motivation and is deemed disinterested in commercial motives. It is also worth noting that while Ai does occasionally sell work, most of his work is conceptual and difficult to commodify so he does not seem to appear to be ‘selling out.’ Moreover, whilst many artists can be considered to have an ‘authentic’ vision that they stick to, few have allowed for co-creation within their vision to such an extent, inviting the public to interact directly. Thomson (2006) demonstrates the importance of human brands interacting with consumers to reduce uncertainty and provide the basis for attachment to grow as it makes them more ‘real’ bringing us back to Dyer’s (2003) dichotomy between the public and private, fake and authentic. Hirschman (2010) in her study of Bluegrass music in Appalachia discusses authenticity as a ‘genuineness of experience’ (171) and by interacting directly with the public through the Internet and presenting them with his ‘private’ self, Ai appears more authentic. Therefore, providing opportunities for the co-construction of ‘authenticity’ by consistently communicating the inbuilt values and relating them to current events is important to retain authenticity; this needs careful staging through monitoring and editing as noted by Chronis and Hampton (2008).

**Context**

This paper provides an in-depth case study of the Ai Weiwei brand in its many manifestations through analysis of documentary accounts of his life and work, tracking studies of media representation of Ai, content analysis of his work and examination of its critical reception and observation of his interactions on social media. This follows Hewer et al.’s (2013) study of the Warhol brand, which uses biographical and archival methods to improve the depth of understanding as part of a brand genealogy whilst still using wider social and cultural considerations in their analysis and interpretation of the brand. To trace the Ai brand genealogy, we draw from various sources in line with other studies such as Brown and Patterson’s (2009) study of the Harry Potter phenomenon.

A list of examples of the sources of biographical data and documentary evidence consulted for this study can be found in Appendix 1. This data primarily focuses on Ai’s own writings in the form of interviews, blogs and twitter posts to develop insights into how he has built and managed his career. This follows Fillis’ (2003, 2006, 2007) call for the use of biographical and narrative methods to better understand entrepreneurial marketing practices. However, we also turned to content analysis of his artworks[[1]](#footnote-1) (whether conceptual art objects, films or architectural pieces) as Ai considers his art as a vehicle to express himself and develop new ideas: ‘I spend very little time just doing “art as art”’ (Ai, 2013, p.28). Previous celebrity studies (Dyer, 1998; Morin, 2005; Kerrigan, et al. 2011) have shown that we cannot understand celebrity without looking at both the public and the private persona. Ai’s case is found to be particularly illustrative of this as he considers his life a vehicle for his art. To undertake this content analysis of the art, we follow from Holbrook and Grayson’s (1986) and Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1993) claims that cultural artefacts offer appropriate sites for investigation due to their use as carriers of meaning as well as Schroeder and Borgerson’s (2011) more recent work examining the need for more critical visual analysis in marketing research. To triangulate the data, media coverage was also drawn from in the form of news reports, art criticism and art market data to understand the way in which the Ai brand is disseminated, circulated and perceived. Finally, to understand how authenticity is constructed collectively, we also examined Ai’s direct interactions with the public through netnographic analysis of his Twitter and Instagram profiles.

With such large amounts of material, it was necessary to keep our analysis extremely focused. We did this by concentrating on a select few critical events (see Appendix 2) that repeatedly appeared in our main data sources (listed in Appendix 1) and have therefore shaped the brand narrative. This provided the backbone of our study by revealing a strong narrative of Ai as a political hero/martyr who struggles for freedom of expression against a repressive government at ever-greater risk to himself. Our focus was therefore on how Ai has been framed as such in the West, centring on the recurring images and discussions of social consciousness, anti-authoritarianism, freedom-fighting and suffering. This frame of reference was taken partly to illustrate the hidden ideological values of celebrity branding and also due to the realities of Chinese State censorship which makes it difficult to understand how Ai is perceived within China.

Adopting this focus allowed us to then return to the data, examining it through this lens in terms of how Ai presents himself within this heroic narrative, how the media packages this[[2]](#footnote-2) and how the public responds to it on Ai’s social media pages, thus covering both the dissemination and consumption of the brand. We could then step back and observe, more holistically, how this narrative is collectively constructed and consumed as ‘authentic’ through these three levels of interrelated analysis. The approach taken in terms of data analysis follows Dyer’s (1998) seminal study of celebrity whereby the cultural significance of a ‘star’ can only be understood through thorough examination of the network of ideological discourses from which they emerge. As such we take into account not solely Ai’s own activity but that of multiple groups of stakeholders who all participate in the positioning and consumption of the brand in line with previous cultural branding (Holt, 2004) and celebrity brand approaches (Kerrigan et al., 2011). We find that each of the significant events highlighted in the narrative shed light on key aspects of how the brand has been managed and disseminated and how authenticity emerges from it. In particular, referring back to the literature discussed above, we highlight the cues that serve to signal authenticity (see Appendix 2). How these are communicated, managed and perceived will be unpacked below.

**Unpacking the Ai brand portfolio**

‘My voice is not for me. Every time I make a sentence I think how many people for how many generations had a voice that no one could hear.’ (Ai, 2013, p.13).

Ai Weiwei is a symbol of the ‘indomitable desire for freedom’ inside every human being, according to Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York (Foster, 2011)

‘My goal in life is to be the female version of @aiww and fight crimes against humanity’ (Fan retweeted by Ai Weiwei, 2014)

We do not approach the Ai Weiwei brand as simply the commodification of Ai’s person or his work but as a meaning carrier for ideas and views that resonate beyond his ‘being.’ As expressed in the quotes above, we can see how Ai has become much more than just an artist and that he himself, the media and the wider public acknowledge his power as symbolic carrier. To examine the process through which this happens, we borrow from corporate branding models (Aaker, 2004; De Chernatony, 2006), which permit us to see how authenticity is produced through a portfolio of ‘product brands’ which create a mutually supportive brand system. We argue that the reason the Ai brand has received so much attention compared to other artists and activists, which ultimately enabled him to become a global celebrity, is due to three key elements: generating wider attention through operating in multiple markets under various guises, which compose what we refer to as the ‘product portfolio’ (artist, curator, architect, blogger, activist), achieving coherence and clarity by consistently repeating brand values in each of these markets and encouraging the various stakeholders to participate in the brand and make it their own. We propose that authenticity emerges from the synergy created between these various markets and stakeholders in ‘staying true’ to the brand values (particularly as this comes at a cost to Ai, thus the importance of the brand narrative) yet applying them to different contexts, thus reinforcing them and making them meaningful to diverse stakeholders. We now examine how this occurs in more detail by examining the Ai ‘corporate’ brand.

**The Corporate Celebrity Brand**

As touched on previously, key to the celebrity brand is the ability to transfer cultural meanings across various contexts. The Ai brand provides a good example as to how to manage brand associations and build up a portfolio of brands to generate leverage and synergy and thus appear more authentic. We therefore borrow from the corporate brand literature due to the complexity of the products involved; whilst most celebrities in today’s consumer society are used to endorse various commercial products they also ‘sell’ their talent/image/products through the work that they produce and the events they attend. Indeed, Dyer (1998) argues that celebrities are commodities which are constructed through multiple materials. We argue that today’s celebrity brands are thus broader than simple person brands, much like corporate entities they encompass a range of products and services.

Aaker’s (2004) discussion of how to leverage a corporate brand is applicable here as he identifies that a master brand with a ‘driver’ role can generate leverage, synergy, clarity and credibility by conveying a central value proposition, what we call the vision. In his analysis of this process, Aaker suggests that a corporate brand will generally have the following components: a rich heritage, assets and capabilities, people, values and priorities, a local or global frame of reference, citizenship programs and a performance record. We argue that these are all adaptable to other complex brands such as celebrity brands which have manifold dimensions, operating in various spheres to different markets (see Figure 1 below as the framework applies to the Ai brand). We find that these ‘corporate’ components are useful in unpacking the process through which the celebrity brand transmits authenticity by amplifying and reproducing the brand’s vision and inviting co-creation to generate heightened public attention and positive emotional responses from the public. Each of these elements therefore provides a source of authenticity if it is used properly in transmitting the vision coherently to the public. The Aaker framework thus provides a vehicle through which the brand’s values are transmitted.

The core product in the case of Ai is his works of art. However, Ai has subsequently used various other roles and media to further increase his influence, extending the brand into various realms to become a global business spearheaded by his Fake design company. This started with a move towards architecture which served to demonstrate that unlike most conceptual artists, his work had a more functional impact on society thereby illustrating authenticity in terms of social engagement. The risk, as with any brand extension, was brand dilution, however, by staying true to his brand values (or vision), Ai managed to make a smooth transition: ‘I realised that doing it by myself wasn’t enough. The projects had to be big (…) and could raise public consciousness much more’ (Ai, 2011, p.60). This demonstrates the use of a different medium to communicate to the masses; whilst fine art has a relatively small audience, architecture is a part of everyday life. As we shall explore, Ai’s brand gradually expanded through these ‘product’ changes, speaking to larger and larger audiences. The moment where the Ai brand became truly significant in terms of global impact is when he started blogging. Again, this has been presented as a natural extension of his artwork: ‘the blog is modern drawing. Whatever I say there could be seen as part of my work’ (Ai, 2011, p.45), describing Twitter as his ‘new artistic medium’ (Ai, 2013, p.74). However, unlike the artwork, more than a million people could see it everyday: ‘I have my opening every minute if I want it’ (Ai, 2011, p.4). As we will explore further, the illusion of transparency and immediacy blogging and social media provided were crucial in further building up authenticity.

With each brand extension he has performed, Ai has been careful to create synergy, exploiting each medium to maximum advantage to reinforce his brand vision. Significantly, he has maintained his authenticity despite these various strategic manoeuvers by keeping the focus on the content (i.e. the vision), transforming him into the poster boy for freedom of expression rather than just another artist or dissident. This seems to be a deliberate strategy, he notes that ‘activism is [his] art; the two are inseparable’ (Ai, 2013, p.28). It is his personal presence as, entrepreneur and social commentator that gives the brand unity. As one critic notes, ‘Weiwei’s life has become a work of art in its own right’ (Smart, 2011). This is why curator Hans Ulrich Obrist compares Ai’s body of work to Joseph Beuys’ notion of a ‘social sculpture,’ which strives to reflect on and shape society (Ai, 2011, p.iv). Ai’s holistic, interdisciplinary approach provides an illustration of how meaning can be constructed and leveraged in the celebrity brand. As the brand has evolved, the brand values have successfully been communicated through various media to generate global brand awareness. Moreover, as we will explore, as this awareness has grown, more opportunities to co-create authenticity were engendered. Therefore, authenticity occurs as the result of an iterative process, each medium Ai chose to use served to further build authenticity, so, a consideration of which were chosen and how they were used is necessary. That he is now a powerful global symbol is demonstrated by the wide range of fans from all over the world that interact with him daily on Twitter, posting their own images and messages demonstrating their commitment to his cause[[3]](#footnote-3).

***Figure 1: Components of the Ai Weiwei corporate-celebrity brand***

*Amplifying the Vision*

As in conventional corporate brands (Aaker, 2004), *values and priorities* are at the core of the celebrity brand. We have already noted that it is these brand values which allow for leveraging between product offerings, they are at the core of the brand narrative through the creation of meaning for the brand. Ai’s various projects all derive from his individual artistic expression which he holds as an essential democratic right, in line with his ‘authentic vision’ discussed above. This is significant as it unifies the various strands of Ai’s life and career, providing not only an underlying sense of purpose but making these product offerings recognisable due to their common themes. By presenting his activism as a necessity rather than a choice, Ai makes it appear more genuinely authentic: ‘“the choice of being an artist is political” and therefore all the work produced is by definition political’ (Ai, 2013, p.26). In this sense, by drawing on his own reality and incorporating any situation into a ‘ready-made,’ he makes the predicament of China’s place in the world as well as his own predicament as an artist trying to practice freely in China, into a work of art: ‘I take the political situation in China as a readymade’ (Sirmians, 2011).

One of the reasons that his choice of being ‘political’ appears so authentic is due to what Aaker (2004) calls *heritage,* a key part of the brand narrative. In the Ai celebrity brand, the heritage comes primarily from Ai’s father, a renown poet who was denounced and exiled during the Cultural Revolution only to be reinstated after Mao’s death in 1979 (Kunzru, 2011). The heritage thus provides cultural capital in the two key spheres the Ai brand operates within: as an artist and as a dissident. Having this lineage communicates authenticity through continuity, he is seen to be ‘born’ into both art and dissidence (Kunzru, 2011), his role as ‘China’s conscience’ is presented as ‘a position he inherited’ (Cotter, 2011). He follows what his father started and amplifies this call for freedom of expression across various media.

As noted above, by operating across a portfolio of ‘products’ rather than solely in one domain, Ai can get the brand values across to various markets and different types of stakeholders. This is what Aaker (2004) means by ‘*people*,’ those working within the organisation and its spokespeople. Obviously, having an audience is necessary for a celebrity brand and we argue that, therefore, ‘people’ extends to a much wider set of stakeholders than those discussed by Aaker, in line with previous studies such as Kerrigan, et al. (2011); these include the artworld, the media and the wider public. Ai’s career first generated attention within the relatively small sphere of the artworld: peers in the form of other recognised artists both in China and the West who have collaborated with, been associated with, or commented on the work; dealers who represented him; curators who showed the work in galleries and museums and collectors who have bought the work. Collaborators such as prominent architects Herzog and De Meuron, for example, provided significant status through co-branding, adding value to the brand and indirectly providing authenticity in what can be seen as an endorsement; legitimising and establishing Ai as a lucrative artist with social capital that allows him to stretch the brand to different spheres i.e. curation, architecture, filmmaking, activism.

Through his various projects, Ai has managed to get across his brand values to different groups of people in different locations: while the Sichuan Earthquake project was primarily targeted at a Chinese audience for example, the sunflower seeds were made as a comment on Chinese mass production and collectivism for a Western audience. As such he is represented as a genuinely ‘authentic’ Chinese artist due to his frequent use of traditional Chinese crafts, for example, yet also as a defender of ‘Western’ values in the form of democracy and liberal thinking, successfully symbolising that ideology as an iconic brand (Holt, 2004). The *frame of reference* (Aaker, 2004) is thus adapted as necessary, providing for multiple perspectives in line with what Dyer calls the ‘extensive, multimedia and intertextual’ nature of celebrity images. As such he becomes a symbol for defiance that can be applied to various contexts allowing for widespread recognition, brand awareness and authentic engagement.

*Reproducing the Vision*

The role of the media (another important stakeholder in the ‘people’ discussed above) in the celebrity brand cannot be overemphasised as they are key to the commoditisation and distribution of the brand, directing the public’s attention towards Ai and framing and sensationalising the discourse within which the brand operates and authenticity can be communicated. Time Magazine and ArtReview’s features on Ai in 2011 exemplify this by describing him as a ‘visionary’ (Huntsman, 2011) thus providing further authenticity in terms of legitimising his view of the world (Baugh, 1988) and disseminating it, as well as providing evidence of a strong *performance record* (Aaker, 2004). Ai has been extremely savvy in allowing and enabling his brand to be positioned within the mythical dissident narrative that can easily be iconicised as an international symbol for anti-authoritarianism and collectively valued as such.

The visibility and buzz Ai creates is not insignificant, as a highly controversial figure he generates huge media attention (a news search on Google currently yields 8,720 results). He is very much a media darling as, until the recent restrictions imposed upon him by the Chinese government, he could be sure to say something provocative (and sometimes continues to do so at great risk) and had been extremely willing to accept interviews and make himself publicly available. Indeed, Ai capitalises on current news stories (what Holt and Cameron (2010, p.65) call ‘provoking ideological flashpoints’ by identifying issues of the day that stick in consumers’ minds) to achieve maximum brand awareness, frequently using humour and shock tactics to create headlines. A recent example is his version of the viral hit song ‘Gangnam Style;’ jumping on the parody bandwagon, he not only managed to get hundreds of thousands of views but also to carry a more meaningful message to these viewers. By calling his video ‘Grass Mud Horse Style,’ a symbol of anti-censorship in China (as the phrase in Chinese sounds similar to the Chinese phrase ‘fuck your mother’), the video was a way for dissenters to bypass government censors for a few hours (Levin, 2012). The Ai ‘corporation’ produces a huge amount of content whether in the form of philosophical musings or artworks so that there is always something readily available, increasing his seeming omnipresence and allowing for more opportunities for ‘authentic’ engagement with the audience. Much of Ai’s success comes from his ability to maximise coverage and headlines by deploying his various *assets and capabilities* (Aaker, 2004) to any situation using whichever ‘product’ or medium suits the situation best.

According to the cultural branding literature (Thompson, 2004; Holt, 2004), archetypal characters and storylines are attractive because they are so resonant of meanings, however, they are also inherently ideological; they hold value because of their role in representing and negotiating social conflicts. We argue that what sets the Ai brand apart from many other celebrity brands is the dramatised narrative, setting Ai up as an underdog in battle with all-powerful, sinister authorities which is innately compelling and made more so by applying it to a specific social context which is of global interest due to China’s growing economic power. This brings us back to the notion of an ‘authentic’ artistic voice speaking out about socially and culturally grounded issues (Baugh, 1988). Indeed, having chosen art as his vocation, Ai argues that the very role and responsibility of an artist is to give an opinion and ‘reflect’ on the society in which they live (Ai, 2013, p.4).

Aaker (2004) notes that consumers prefer to do business with people or organisations that are considered ‘good.’ While in standard corporate brands this usually comes under the umbrella term of corporate social responsibility, in celebrity brands it usually takes the form of charitable representations or donations. For Ai, the dissident brand narrative is key to this notion of *citizenship* as it provides a tangible illustration of how dedicated Ai is to ‘the people’ in that he is willing to risk his own safety for these values, generating admiration and respect for his beliefs as well as his actions thereby accumulating authenticity. The Ai brand is presented as one which is characterised by confrontation and danger. Indeed, it could be argued that Ai seeks out this adversity by deliberately causing controversy, for example in the staging of a show called ‘Fuck Off’ in response to the Shanghai Biennale which was used by the government to declare China’s soft power on the world stage. The show featured experimental and avant-garde work meant to ‘self-consciously resist the threat of assimilation and vulgarisation’ in ‘an uncooperative and uncompromisable way’ (Ai and Feng, 2000, p.9). Ai, in this sense represents the authentic artist rebelling against societal pressures (Bradshaw and Holbrook, 2007). Yet, whilst many of today’s celebrities express political or ethical views, few demonstrate integrity in terms of acting on them. Ai is the rare heroic celebrity figure, his detention at the hands of the authorities illustrated to the world the real dangers he was inciting and instantly provided him global fame as a political martyr. The sacrifices Ai is willing to face for the benefit of others give credibility to the dissident narrative. This relates back to Dyer’s (2003) study, which shows how battles with the ‘system’ or establishment are central to iconic stars’ images. As we have seen, little effort is needed to characterise Ai in a romantic light as the avant-garde rebel artist whose voice, as he states himself: ‘is not for me’ (Ai, 2013, p.13).

However, if we are to consider the media’s role in disseminating the Ai brand, we must reflect on why the Ai narrative is so popular in the West. Indeed, the vast majority of the coverage has been celebratory in tone. It is interesting here to consider the ideological background of what is and is not picked up by the media as this is by no means neutral. With his high-art credibility, his charisma and his fluent English, he is an excellent spokesman for a new China. Other activists who have suffered similar punishments have had little to no coverage (Chayka, 2011), the disproportionate focus on Ai is perhaps due to his accurate representation of our Western ideal of what the ‘Chinese dissident’ should be. Commercial brands have been shown to be framed and packaged to reflect ideological views, for example Preece (2014) shows that the contemporary Chinese art that is celebrated on the market implicitly justifies Western democratic, capitalist views. Ai is similarly used as a protagonist to exemplify the dramatic ideological divide between the West and China. The Ai brand therefore functions as a symbolic device through which the public can collectively buy into this expression of their ideological views, thus providing them with meaning by enabling them to make sense of their place in the world (an example of Holt’s (2004) cultural branding in action). This simplistic good versus evil is particularly attractive to the Western media as it confirms ideological stereotyping of the Chinese State. Supporting Ai allows the West to symbolically uphold these ‘good’ ideological values whilst of course ignoring that it is complicit with the Chinese State in many ways, not least of which in its economic dealings.

*Co-creating the Vision*

Finally, consideration of another group of ‘people,’ the public, is needed, they are the audience for the brand. Their number and constitution is more difficult to establish but the devotion and depth of emotion Ai’s supporters feel towards him has been illustrated on numerous occasions in the past few years. Worldwide protests and demonstrations following his disappearance most clearly demonstrated evidence of a global following (d’Arcy Hughes, 2011). As a celebrity figure, much of the equity of the Ai brand comes from his ability to bring together large numbers of people around his cause, having them buy into his brand values. Social media has been key to this, as of July 17 2014, Ai had 250,000 followers on Twitter and his ability to invite them into the brand is regularly evidenced. It is useful to consider these fans as more than a collection of individuals, as a brand community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p.412) in that they share ‘consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility.’ Authenticity therefore comes from an understanding by fans that Ai’s work is considered relevant and is used in anti-authoritarian struggles across the world, that certain visual symbols serve to communicate these struggles and that they all believe in the need for these struggles to make the world a better place. By consolidating fans into a community which revolves around the core values, the brand appears more coherent, ‘natural’ and therefore more authentic.

To take a recent example, after uploading an image of himself with one leg raised up in the air, toes pointed, as though aiming a rifle, hundreds of individuals have taken over Ai’s Twitter feed with their own versions. The photos show children and adults, alone or in groups, from across the world, all taking aim at people, places, statues, images, etc. (see <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-27868755> for images). Ai described the image as an ‘anti-terrorism campaign’ suggesting that governmental power was being overused in the name of counter-terrorism (BBC, 2014). Whatever the intent, the photos operate as a sign of membership in the brand community, reflecting the vision of the brand. Through this co-creation, authenticity is generated as the symbol is easily applicable globally, grounded in the contemporary social context. Ai recognises this and states that: ‘it’s never about me. [My supporters] use me as a mark for themselves to recognise their own form of life: I become their medium’ (Ai, 2013, p.25). In deliberately communicating to the masses, he explicitly seeks to ‘design a frame that’s open to everyone’ (Ai, 2013, p.32). Thus while the values are central in driving the brand, the way in which they are transmitted is also important.

It is therefore worth also considering the tools used to deliver these values. The internet has been vital in allowing Ai to interact with a much larger audience than would ever have been possible with other forms of communication. Ai calls the Internet ‘a miracle’ and that ‘without [it], I would not even be Ai Weiwei today. I would just be an artist somewhere doing my shows’ (Ai, 2013, p.71). This quote is interesting, not only because its shows an understanding of the importance of the medium as well as the message but also because, by discussing the entity of ‘Ai Weiwei,’ Ai provides an indication that he is aware of the construction of his branded persona as opposed to his actual person. Furthermore, the characteristics of social media provide what we call ‘accessible’ authenticity due to the illusion of directness and transparency it provides to the public (see for example Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Thomson, 2006). Indeed, social media seems perfectly suited to the Ai brand which relies on the notion that art should be social and provide a reflection of society.

That Ai is indeed a symbol for freedom is most evident in the propagation and replication of his most iconic anti-authoritarian work, *Study of Perspectives*, when he photographed his middle finger in front of national symbols of authority such as the White House, Eiffel Tower and Tiananmen Square. This image has become a symbol of defiance and Ai’s social media pages show fans re-appropriating this image to represent their own struggles. For example, one image found on Ai’s Twitter shows his own photo of Tiananmen inspiring a re-creation of the work, this time pointing the finger at the Armenian Presidential Palace as a sign of dissidence. This shows further evidence of a strong brand community who actively engage with Ai’s work, applying it to their own realities, appropriating it to their own identity projects in order to create meaning in their lives.

Moreover, due to the instantaneous nature of social media it allows for creative outbursts, the unstructured and direct nature of this making the content appear more genuine. Ai is scrupulous about documenting all his activities and thoughts, he says that he ‘realised that [the blog] was the best way to have immediate contact with reality and also to throw my private life out into the open, out to the public’ (Ai, 2011, p.45). This plays on Dyer’s (2003) notion of our search for stars’ ‘private’ selves, by seemingly having access to Ai’s most private thoughts we are afforded the sincerity we search for in our celebrities. Ai’s Internet presence demonstrates this authenticity due to the nature of his posts: writing philosophical pieces on democracy and current affairs, discussions of artistic inspirations and the role of art in society, alongside mundane activities such as giving his assistants haircuts (and posting the images online) and entertaining the homeless cats he finds on the streets. This reality allows for further authentic engagement on a more basic level, that of everyday life.

**Conclusion: A complex, manifold whole**

Throughout this paper we have unpacked the way(s) in which authenticity is created and communicated through the celebrity brand of Ai Weiwei (see Figure 2 below). We draw on cultural branding theory and corporate branding theory to illustrate the brand leveraging process through which the central brand vision is amplified, reproduced and co-created in order to build authenticity across multiple markets and engage various publics. Corporate branding theory serves to illustrate how the celebrity brand can operate across various ‘products’ and media and still be perceived as ‘authentic’ through: a strong performance record which in turn is predicated on having relevant assets and capabilities (cultural capital), a global market which involves multiple constituencies (social capital), a strong heritage and core values which are steadfastly held to and serve to unify the brand. Furthermore, cultural branding theory serves to explain the emotional benefits this authentic engagement can create, bringing meaning to the brand through a shared ideological vision of the world. When all these components come together successfully, as in the case of Ai, it results in global prominence demonstrated by name and image recognition, strong reputation, distinctive identity, and high credibility. These intangible assets are highlighted in Towle’s (2003) account of the manufacturing of celebrity as they can then be commoditised through the celebritisation process whereby the celebrity is utilised for economic and marketing ends (Kerrigan et al., 2011).

***Figure 2: Authenticity framework for the celebrity brand***

Although we have broken down the various components of the ‘corporate’ celebrity brand, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and as a manifold construct which is bound by time and space, it is constantly shifting as is the importance of the various parts in the creation of authenticity. Each product brand within the portfolio has a distinct image and its own source of equity and therefore its own points of engagement for authenticity construction. We do not, therefore, simply compare the celebrity brand to the corporate brand, the celebrity brand is found to be significantly more powerful in generating authenticity due to its links with an individual at the heart of the brand who embodies its values yet it is also broader than a simple person brand. The Ai brand demonstrates how a celebrity-worthy narrative can be crafted and managed by various stakeholders and how, for this to be transmitted authentically, there must be points of engagement within the narrative. This case also highlights the power of the Internet and social media as tools to circulate the authenticity of the celebrity brand. Ai, with his controversial personality, demonstrates great talent in the behind-the-scenes manipulation of fame production. By connecting directly with the public and inviting them to collaborate and co-create within his vision, he allows for an authentic brand culture. Indeed, we would argue that Ai is one of few celebrities to have understood the full significance of the medium used to communicate with the public in performing authenticity. Therefore, while previous research on celebrity brands have focused on how celebrity is co-created through numerous groups of stakeholders, this study shows how celebrities can reach out to these stakeholders and create authentic relationships with them.

Authenticity is therefore shown to be an important tool that marketers can use to engage with the public and create meaningful connections. Using corporate branding as a lens therefore provides further understanding of how meaning is built up in the celebrity brand through the creation of a ‘portfolio’ of brands (or in this case, branded ‘selves’) which all serve to engender leverage and synergy. In this sense, we can see the process through which authenticity is communicated and managed on a wider level, expanding each time the celebrity takes on a new ‘self.’ However, this is not without risk, key to the success of this process is staying ‘true’ to the core brand vision despite changes in media or product.

What differentiates celebrity brands from other person, corporate, or product brands, we argue, is the extent of the authentic engagement, authenticity must be perceived in multiple markets by numerous stakeholders. Whereas Kerrigan et al. (2011) suggest that Warhol presents a ‘plastic’ identity that can be continuously reshaped through the resources of branding, we suggest that for authenticity to occur, a more ‘elastic’ identity is needed, which can be stretched further and further across different contexts and markets, yet still retain the core brand vision by consistently replicating and reinforcing the brand values. The more ‘available’ or ‘accessible’ the celebrity, the more what seems like the ‘private’ is made ‘public,’ the more opportunities there are for this authentic engagement. The Ai brand demonstrates how, as he multiplied his ‘selves’ into different practices, producing new types of products, he managed to negotiate authenticity by sticking to his original vision and replicating his brand values across these various media. As we have explored, Ai’s central belief of freedom of expression is always at the heart of his various ‘selves’ giving the brand the coherence and clarity needed for it to be considered authentic, any project which did not reflect these values would be a stretch too far. Moreover, careful consideration of the media chosen is essential; in the case of Ai, the various media used were all suitable to present his artistic and social values and therefore could transmit authenticity. Each provided the credibility needed to move onto the next, generating ever-greater awareness. Indeed, the social and cultural capital he built first as an artist and then as an architect allowed him to reach a global following on his blog.

This brings us to considering some of the inherent difficulties of the celebrity brand. Many of these are generally applicable to any person brand, whereby the boundaries between identity, brand, self and work become indistinguishable. Bradshaw and Holbrook (2007), for example, demonstrate the dangers of ‘living’ the brand when the cultural myths associated to the brand are self-destructive. Shepherd (2005) argues that the negative psychological and social side effects are something that have not been considered enough in the person brand literature. We suggest these dangers take on further significance in the celebrity realm as the brand is further distorted by the huge range of stakeholders co-constructing, representing and communicating it, whether in the form of collaborators, the media or the general public. As we have shown, Ai has been extremely successful in managing his authenticity across the various platforms for maximum exposure yet we can question how this will end as he continues to place himself and ultimately those who support him, into danger. Will the use of the dissident/martyr narrative lead to an ever more dangerous path that can only end badly? Are we in the West complicit in this by applauding his actions? These are questions to which we have no answers but regard as worthy of further consideration.

In Driessens’ (2012, p.13) study of celebrity, he argues that celebrity ‘moulds the cultures we live in or the fields people are active in and what its consequences are.’ Indeed, we agree that the ways in which celebrity brands are framed has important implications for the ways in which our ‘reality’ and identities are channelled into specific ideological directions. Whilst this is not the focus of the article, there is a need for further research as to how ideology underpins branding practices as noted by Kravets (2012); whilst celebrity brands are portrayed as neutral, this example shows that they are far from it. Here, branding is not just a rational marketing activity but a political act. This is why celebrities can appear ‘authentic,’ as Wang (1999, p.351) argues ‘things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives or powers.’ By using the lens of branding to reveal the discourses of power that underpin them, we can critically consider how ideological agendas are put forward and commoditised. As authenticity is negotiated through engagement between the public and the celebrity, it is only perceived when the ideological frame is shared. Indeed, if Ai did not have the ‘dissident’ pretext it is questionable as to whether a Chinese artist could have been elected the ‘most powerful artist’ in the world.

The ‘celebrity’ concept and its emphasis on narrative draws attention to ideological values, engaging consumers emotionally and ultimately binding them together through a brand community. This research may therefore also be relevant to the non-profit sector in terms of how to engage the public in social issues, we noted in the introduction that celebrities are now frequently associated to various political or ideological causes and the Ai brand demonstrates how this can be done authentically. Indeed, at a time when there is an increasing need for firms to appear genuine, the ability to transmit authenticity cannot be underestimated, particularly in terms of protecting the brand’s underlying vision.

While we have been focusing on the Ai brand, we argue that this framework could be applied to other iconic celebrities, although the cues used to communicate authenticity can be expected to combine in different ways as each celebrity can be expected to have a different brand vision and narrative. The corporate brand approach, however, provides a framework to then amplify and propagate these cues in order to maximise possible authentic engagement. As an exploratory study, this is an area that would benefit from further research as to the various forms celebrity authenticity can take and how it can best be communicated. For example, can authenticity be found to exist within attributed celebrities (who are famous purely from media representations, see Rojek, 2001) rather than ascribed or achieved celebrities, as is the case for Ai? Also of interest would be longitudinal studies examining how authenticity develops through time, whether it changes throughout a celebrity’s fame and whether it can be stretched too far. Additionally, a cross-cultural analysis is called for; a key limitation of this study is that although Ai is a celebrity within China, due to the censorship involved, we focused on his image in the West but comparing cultural interpretations of celebrity authenticities could provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, this paper responds to a call for further research into both celebrity branding (Kerrigan et al., 2011) and authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). This is considered a timely area for research due to the increased importance provided to celebrity in our consumer culture. We present the Ai brand as an example of a celebrity brand as his life has now ‘overshadowed’ his art (Jones, 2013). In unpacking this celebrity brand we focus particularly on the notion of authenticity which has received a lot of attention in both the person brand and product brand literature to understand how it is constructed, communicated and managed. In line with previous studies of authenticity, we argue that authenticity is socially constructed. Furthermore, we find that in celebrity brands, authenticity is constructed through engagement with the celebrity’s unique vision and brand values which have to be grounded in the socio-cultural context to be relevant, in line with iconic brands (Holt, 2004).

Authenticity is therefore, somewhat paradoxically, manipulable, in line with what Rojek (2001) calls ‘staged’ authenticity. While it cannot be imposed by a brand manager as it is performed collectively, it can be encouraged to flourish through certain cues (such as heritage, sacrifice, non-commerciality, availability and transparency) which serve to communicate authenticity. By no means do we argue that this process is always a conscious one on the part of the brand manager, nonetheless this ‘authenticity framework’ could be adapted for different contexts. Thus, while authenticity appears ‘natural’ due to it being socially-constructed, by using socio-cultural touch-points to dramatise certain issues, authenticity can be incited. Brand managers must however provide access points for the negotiation of authenticity to occur whether through the media or directly by the public. Applying corporate branding theory allows us to consider how best to create these access points across various contexts and thereby transmit and augment authenticity. These access points are important in two ways: firstly they engage the audience by referring to culturally- and socially-relevant current situations or issues that they care about (which must be related to the celebrity’s brand values in some form); secondly they allow these audiences to feel they can participate meaningfully within in them. As we have seen, Ai provides this time and again, using real world events as a platform for attention, relating these events back to his personal quest for democratic values and providing opportunities for the public to feel like they are a part of his struggle (without any of the hardship). Ultimately, we argue that in following this approach, celebrities can gain significant benefits as it appears that the public wants to feel connected to an ‘authentic’ existence.

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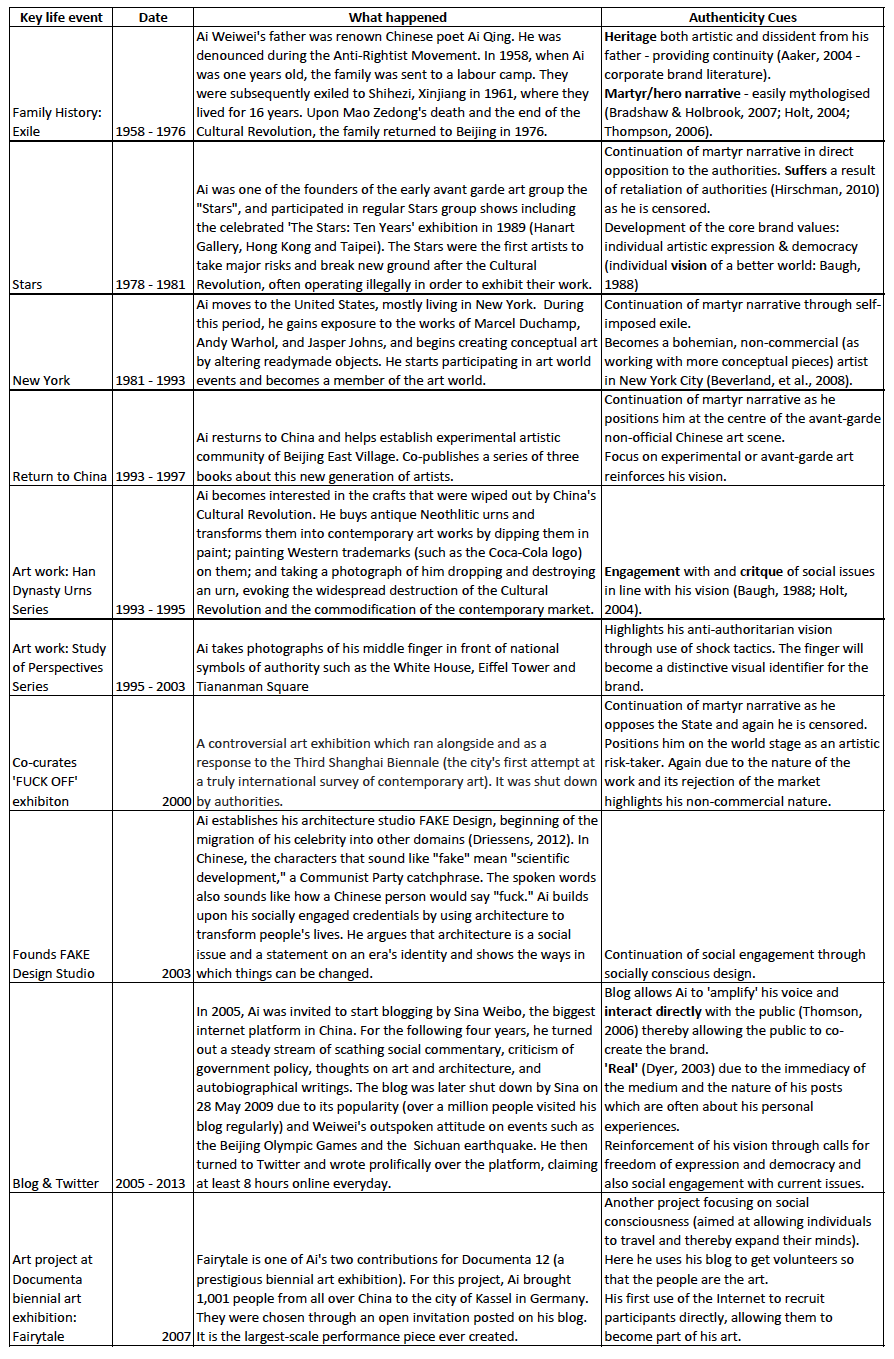
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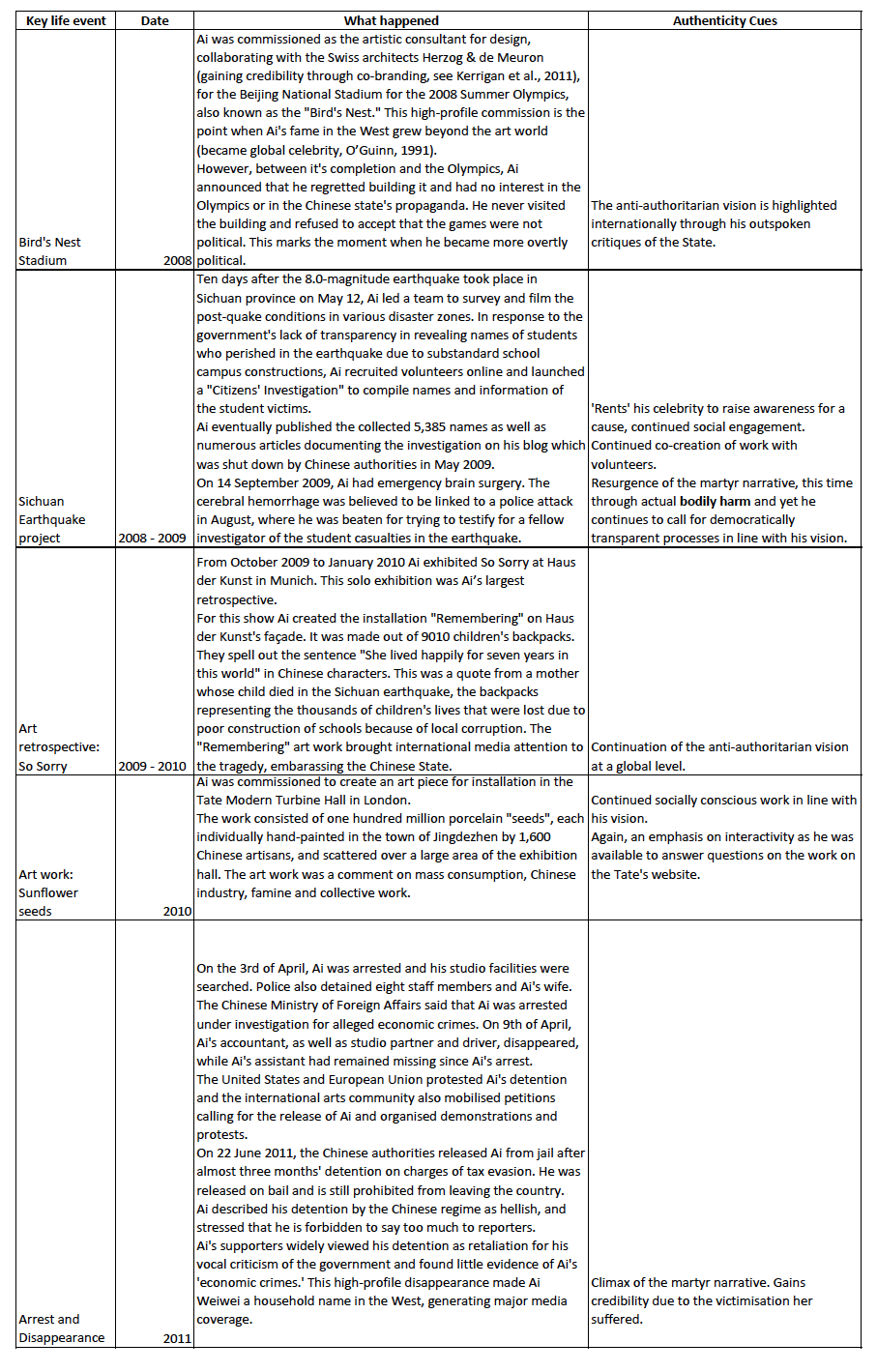
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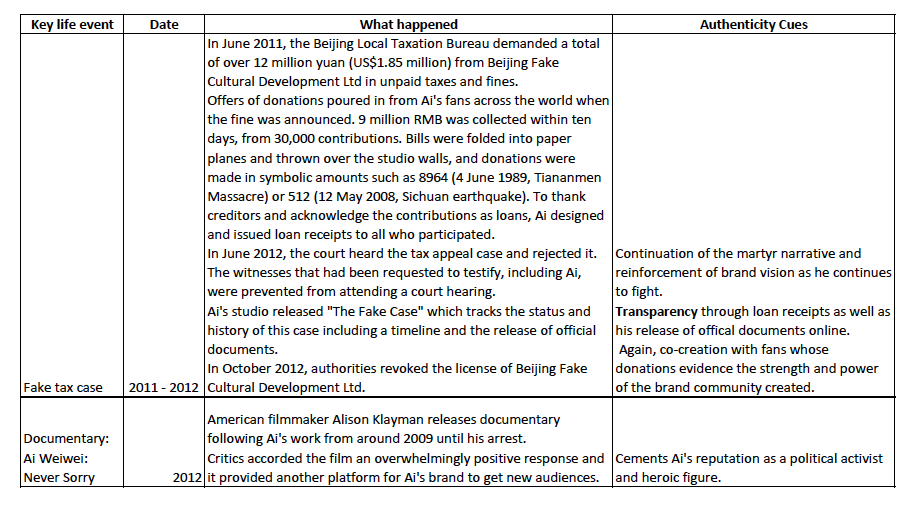
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**Appendix 1:** Sources of biographical data and documentary evidence consulted for this study

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Media type | Date | Title | Description |
| Book | 2013 | Weiwei-isms: Ai Weiwei | A collection of Ai quotes about art, politics and life playing on the format of Chairman Mao's sayings. |
| Book | 2013 | Hanging Man: The arrest of Ai Weiwei | A biography based on interviews after A's release from illegal detention. |
| Book | 2011 | Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist | A series of interviews with Ai conducted over several years which discusses his life and work. |
| Book / blog | 2011 | Ai Weiwei's Blog: writings, interviews and digital rants | The most complete public documentation of Weiwei's original Chinese blog translated into English. Covers his posts from 2006 until the blog was closed down in 2009 by Chinese authorities. |
| Documentary film | 2012 | Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry | Documentary following Ai's life and activities from 2009-11. Includes conversations with family members, supporters and fans. |
| Documentary film clip | 2011 | Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei? | PBS Frontline short documentary on the emergence of Ai's activism. |
| TV News Report | 2010 | Ai Weiwei interviewed on CNN's Amanpour | Interview discussing Ai's life history and social media use. |
| Magazine | 2012 | New Statesman | Guest edited by Ai Wewei and focusing on 'the China its censors don't want you to see.' |
| Social Media | 2009- | Instagram (http://instagram.com/aiww) Twitter (https://twitter.com/aiww) | Regular postings by Ai and evidence of his interaction with fans and their response to his work. |

**Appendix 2: Key life events that are weaved into the Ai brand narrative and cues that transmit authenticity**

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1. Following Schroeder and Borgerson’s (2011) consideration of visual analysis we started with a basic description of the work based on observation (i.e. form, subject, themes, genre, medium, colour, size, etc.) and then interpreted this information, considering contextual issues (work’s purpose, symbolic connotations, presentation, subject, how and where it was presented, reception, value etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We limited ourselves to major news coverage in leading publications such as *The New York Times, The Guardian, Time Magazine* and in terms of art publications *ArtReview, ArtForum and Time Out.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, every morning Ai places a bouquet of fresh flowers outside his studio in Beijing as a sign of protest against the restrictions he is placed under. He says he will continue to do so until he regains his freedom to travel. He photographs the flowers and posts these images to Twitter under the hashtag ‘flowersforfreedom.’ A search of this hashtag reveals hundreds of pictures of flowers from fans all over the world in support of Ai with comments such as ‘power to the Chinese people,’ ‘for the freedom of theartist’ and ‘for a brave spirit’ (see www.twitter.com/aiww). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)