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# The “authenticitude” battle in action sports: A case-based industry perspective

Chrysostomos Giannoulakis\*

School of Kinesiology, Ball State University, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The expanding and often unregulated status of the action sports setting has resulted in mainstream athletic companies diversifying their products in order to portray an authentic image and establish their market presence. The influx of mainstream brands has created a new paradigm in the industry and further pressure on core action sports brands regarding their competitiveness in a highly antagonistic environment. Through a descriptive case study, 13 in-person interviews were performed with a private action sports company's employees in order to examine their perceptions relative to the organization being authentic while expanding to mainstream markets. This occurred through identification of the enterprise's true identity and deconstruction of its authenticity based on participants' responses, which were categorized in five properties (i.e., essence of enterprise, nature of offerings, effects of heritage, sense of purpose, and body of values). Varying perspectives on each of the five elements were uncovered and discussed. Outcomes illustrated the need for a new management imperative, where action sports organizations should not only comprehend the essence of originality within their identity, but also how to render consumer's perception of authenticity.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, there has been a rapid growth of the action sports industry, although quite chaotic compared to the mainstream sport setting. Action sports have expanded significantly, but not too long ago marketers realized the powerful connotation the terms *alternative* or *action* hold, especially for youth markets. As far as their relative definition is concerned, action sports are “an eclectic collection of risky, individualistic, and alternative sports such as skateboarding, BMX biking, surfing, street luge, wakeboarding, and motocross” (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004, p. 239). They have also been termed *extreme*, *alternative*, *lifestyle*, *whiz*, *panic sport*, *post-modern*, *post-industrial*, and *new sports* (Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007). Among different expressions commonly used to describe activities that either ideologically or practically provide alternatives to traditional sports and mainstream values (Rinehart, 2008), the representative and all-encompassing term action sports is utilized throughout this paper.

During the past decade, television and corporate sponsors recognized the vast potential of action sports in attracting a young male audience (see Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2003). As such, mainstream companies instantly sought to associate

\* Present address: 2000 West University Avenue, HP-320, Muncie, IN 47306, USA. Tel.: +1 765 285 1458; fax: +1 765 285 3485.  
E-mail address: [cgiannoulakis@gmail.com](mailto:cgiannoulakis@gmail.com)

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with the alternative and extreme “do-it-yourself” image of the rider/boarder to cross-promote a variety of products, such as apparel lines and cultural events (Gonzalez, 2011). Media corporations, including ESPN and NBC, have capitalized on the growing popularity of action sports via events such as the X Games and the Mountain Dew Action Sports Tour. For instance, ESPN's X Games are televised in approximately 200 countries. In 2013, the event was hosted in Brazil, Germany, and Spain as part of the network's global expansion (“ESPN International Fact,” 2013). In relation to the indisputable growth of action sports globally, Kellett and Russell (2009) noted that the action sports industry has seen an organic and almost chaotic growth in comparison to mainstream sports, as they often function outside a formal business environment. Interestingly, there are few barriers for entry into the action sports industry due to the absence of leagues or governing bodies regulating action sports, a fact that constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge for the action sports world (McKelvey, 2012).

The evolution of action sports has triggered a growing interest of younger consumers and their parents in sports that have an alternative and unconventional character and ethos. This increasing popularity has resulted in mainstream athletic companies diversifying their products in order to portray an authentic image and capture a share of this lucrative business. Nike, for example, has repeatedly attempted to break into the action sports setting. Before releasing its skateboarding line in 2002, Nike marketed skateboarding shoes twice and failed. Donnelly (2008) discussed how the company faced formidable challenges entering the skateboarding shoe market due to affiliation with mainstream sports such as basketball and baseball, and their lack of association with skateboarding. To this end, Grayson and Martinec (2004) noted consumers may become suspicious or reserved if they perceive elements of authenticity have been purposefully manipulated for making profit. The difference now is that Nike has a limited distribution to skate shops, it sponsors grassroots skateboarding contests, and several of Nike's staff members in skateboarding are recruited from the core action sports industry (Gomez, 2012).

Action sports have undergone an evolution subjected inevitably to the major forces of commercialization (Thorpe, 2006). The gradual influx of mainstream athletic entities, such as Nike and Adidas, has created further tension in the overall action sports setting. As a result of this somewhat sudden upsurge and following demand from mainstream markets, alternative sport subcultures have expressed concerns about the “selling out” of companies in the field (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010). Evidently, there are conflicting dynamics between alternative sport participants who want to preserve and control authenticity of their sports as they become commoditized, and the corporate world that gradually takes ownership and wants to present these sports as mainstream (Honea, 2004). Thus, core entities have been striving to comprehend the nature and process of change in action sports consumption communities, and, simultaneously, maintain a delicate balance between addressing needs of core consumers and expanding to mainstream markets. The goal of the market expansion strategy is to attract new customers to existing products (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 1994). A major challenge in market expansion strategies is converting non-customers of a certain industry into customers. Consequently, the increased commercial appeal of action sports and the resulting entry of mainstream participants/consumers into the subsequent alternative communities have impacted definitions of authenticity in core subcultures.

Marketers are increasingly recognizing the sociocultural aspects of branding and the pivotal role of authenticity within an enterprise's image and marketing mix (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Although researchers have investigated the consumption context of action sports from a consumer (e.g., Bennett et al., 2003; Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006) and subcultural participation perspective (e.g., Beal & Wilson, 2004; Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004), there is a need for pragmatic insight into the corporate management aspect of the industry. The imperative of authenticity will dominate managerial attention in action sports, and the vitality of brands will result from “the individual and collective ability of businesses to master the discipline of authenticity” (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, the dynamic status of the action sports setting, which is constantly transformed due to the gradual entry of mainstream entities, has resulted in the formation of new standards of authenticity and a continuous expansion to mainstream by core action sports brands. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine perspectives of a private action sports entity's employees with regard to the organization being authentic while opening up to mainstream markets. This was accomplished via a case study of the Board Sports Company (BSC) based on information-rich insight provided by a diverse sample of its employees. Participants' responses relative to the organization's perceived authenticity formulated the foundation of deconstructing BSC's identity.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives on authenticity

Often regarded as the cornerstone of modern marketing (Kozinets, 2001), authenticity is a multilayered, polysemous, and complex concept that is subjective and socially constructed (Beverland, 2005; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Quester, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2006). From a branding perspective, authenticity is an individual assessment by consumers of whether a brand is legitimate or genuine and has a sense of quality that emerges from their own experiences (Cohen, 1988). From a sociological perspective, an authentic subculture has been defined in opposition to the inauthentic, mass-produced, commercial mainstream, or dominant culture (Wheaton, 2007). Foundationally, consumers construct authenticity because they are motivated to realize associated benefits such as sense of escape, feelings of assuredness, and connection with the past (Rose & Wood, 2005). According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010), “consumers actively seek authenticity to find meaning in their lives, and in line with associated personal goals prefer brands that reinforce their desired identity” (p. 839). Since notions of authenticity are socially constructed, consumer expressions of authenticity often reflect wider social norms (Beverland, 2005).

Authenticity has been researched in a variety of consumer contexts (e.g., tourism, wine, automobile). For instance, Leigh et al. (2006) examined the multiplicity of meanings within the MG sport cars subculture. The authors made a distinction between authenticity based on product symbolism and self-efficacy. They further noted authenticity appears to rely on a personal investment tied to one's identity and communicated to others. Through application of semiotics theory with 218 museum visitors in the United Kingdom, Grayson and Martinec (2004) purported authenticity is captured via physical attributes (indexically) and brand essence (iconically), as judged by consumers using their lenses of personal experiences. They further contended authenticity could be both a social construction and a source of evidence; therefore, companies may utilize the constructed nature of authenticity in developing authentic market offerings. Parallel to brands' efforts in rendering authenticity with consumers and competitors (outer context), it is imperative enterprises communicate and reinforce authenticity elements within (inner context). Before underpinning "true to self" aspects, entities should identify the self to which they want to stay true. Gilmore and Pine (2007) proposed five categories that determine the true identity of an organization: (a) essence of enterprise (who you are at your core), (b) nature of offerings (what you offer to others), (c) effects of heritage (where and when you came to be who you are today), (d) sense of purpose (why you are in business), and (e) body of values (how your identity is manifested). The aforementioned components may support organizations in establishing standards of authenticity and defining characteristics of market positioning and differentiation.

Another stream of research has examined authentic subcultural participation in action sports (e.g., Wheaton, 2004, 2007; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Although subcultural groups are constantly evolving and transforming, for those who self-identify as participants there is an increased stability and distinctiveness in the culture's sense of collective identity and forms of status (Wheaton, 2007). From a subcultural perspective, communities of consumption in action sports derive from grassroots traditions; however, they have grown to such an extent that founding members are raising concerns about "selling out" (Beverland et al., 2010). Per the example of Nike, commercialization may often undermine the value of authenticity to consumers since, in their minds, authenticity is associated with evidence and truth (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Carter (2004) purported that the individuals whom a sport marketer should certainly reach with a message of authenticity are core consumers; namely, the ones who are truly passionate about the sport and its subsequent details.

While the concept of brand authenticity has been extensively researched in various business settings, its systematic and empirical investigation in sport is limited. As consumers gradually shift from the Service Economy into the Experience Economy and in a world increasingly filled with deliberately staged experiences, today's business is all about being real (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This currency of experiences is even more enhanced in action sports participants, as they are characterized by an anti-establishment and unconventional ethos that constantly makes them redefine their own activities. Action sports consumers select products and services that conform to their self-image. Furthermore, consumer identity goals (i.e., their idealized image of themselves) may underpin assessments of whether a brand is authentic or not. It is often possible that simply belonging to a consumption community could make the brand authentic to individuals, not the brand itself (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Authenticity is actually created by consumers, which implies perception is still a reality in constituting the realness, genuineness, and truth of a brand. Today's, consumers purchase on the basis of whether a product or service conforms to their self-image; that alone may determine the authenticity of a brand (Weinberger, 2008). Thus, the rise of experiences calls for a new era of management expertise, where entities must learn to comprehend, manage, and excel at rendering authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

### 3. Research method

The qualitative research strategy for this study included utilization of a single-case design. Yin (2003) defined case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). The case study approach provides a holistic and intensive description of a single phenomenon (Merriam, 1998), which in this paper represented the issue of core action sports brands maintaining their authenticity in the face of market expansion pressures. Case studies are explored as a bounded system through detailed and in-depth data collection processes involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 1998). The case is expected to be something that functions and operates; the study is the observation of operations (Stake, 1994). By utilizing a case study as a comprehensive research strategy, the present study aimed to uncover the interaction of significant factors characterizing the authenticity and true identity of the specific action sports organization.

Researchers generally perform case studies for one of three purposes: (a) to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, (b) to develop possible explanations of it, or (c) to evaluate the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The specific case study addressed the first purpose and, thus, was characterized as *descriptive*; namely, the end product of this investigation is a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998). The constructivist approach was employed to capture different experiences and perceptions of BSC employees. Implications of different perceptions (or multiple *realities*) were then examined within the bounded unit of study (Patton, 2002). Outcomes of this case study are certainly not applicable and generalizable across all action sports brands. Eventually, patterns and insights could be transferred to similar settings and contexts within the action sports industry.

### 3.1. Research context

The examination of the action sports company as a bounded unit provided a holistic description of its corporate culture, values, authenticity elements, and *true self*. Through the implementation of a non-probability purposeful sampling procedure, the BSC was selected as the case study. The specific organization represented a typical and information-rich case relative to the phenomenon under investigation. A single owner, who is a former world champion skateboarder, established the company in early 1990s as an authentic skateboarding footwear manufacturer, which evolved into one of the largest private action sports entities with expansion to 70 countries worldwide and revenues close to \$200 million. BSC is widely perceived as a core skateboarding footwear entity that also produces apparel and accessories known for function, style, innovation, and durability. The company, whose headquarters are located in southern California, United States, utilizes a multi-brand strategy as its seven sub-brands (SB) expand to surfing, skateboarding, snowboarding, BMX, and motocross (see Table 1). Despite BSC's brand image and positioning as an authentic action sports company with a focus on core consumers, three of its brands target more lifestyle consumers and are distributed through mainstream channels. Since BSC retains a single-owner status, the organization has expanded to mainstream via the multi-brand strategy in order to remain profitable in a competitive business environment, while investing those resources back to the core community and strengthening core target markets. This market expansion has created conflicting dynamics within the organization pertaining to its identity and authenticity. A select sample of BSC employees shared their unique perspectives on the status of the organization, and discussed challenges and opportunities per authenticity elements.

### 3.2. Procedure

The constructivist perspective expects that different stakeholders (i.e., BSC employees) involved in an organization (i.e., BSC) would have different experiences and perceptions, all of which deserve attention (Patton, 2002). In an effort to capture these varying perspectives, the author utilized the in-person, semi-structured interview as the appropriate means of data collection. Interviews were conducted with employees involved in various functional areas such as marketing, public relations, consumer research, product development, web management, and graphic design. With respect to securing diverse participant viewpoints and triangulation of data, the selected sample represented all levels of the organization: upper (e.g., director of brand marketing), middle (e.g., public relations specialist), and lower (e.g., graphic designer). Additionally, participants demonstrated diversity in their action sports involvement, time affiliated with the company, and background (i.e., mainstream vs. non-mainstream). Meetings were scheduled in consultation with the author's contact person at the headquarters based on the established need for diversity of participants and their subsequent availability. Eventually, 13 individuals (see Table 2 for participant information) provided their consent to perform face-to-face interview meetings, which were audio recorded, lasted approximately 45–60 min, and were transcribed verbatim. Participants chose their

**Table 1**  
The BSC brands.

Brand	Sport(s)	Product(s)	Profile	Target audience	Distribution
SB1 (1996)	Skateboarding	Footwear and apparel	Exclusively core skateboarding brand associated with rock and punk music. Known as the 'core defender' of BSC.	Hardcore skateboarder	Core
SB2 (1996)	Skateboarding	Footwear and apparel	It is known as a superior, sophisticated, premium, and highly technical brand. Big follower of hip-hop music.	Urban and lifestyle skateboarder	Core
SB3 (2006)	Skateboarding	Apparel	Considered a street wear brand, born from the skate world. It is the youngest of the seven brands.	Influencer skateboarder	Core skate stores or high-end boutiques called "skatiques"
SB4 (1995)	Snowboarding	Boots and accessories	Focuses on performance, function, and durability of boots. Known as a highly technical brand.	Core snowboarder	Core
SB5 (1986)	Skateboarding, snowboarding, surfing, motoX, and BMX	Footwear, apparel, and accessories	The biggest of the seven brands, it has a broader appeal and is characterized as a lifestyle brand with expansion to mainstream audiences.	Mainstream/lifestyle consumer	Mainstream, street wear boutiques
SB6 (1999)	Skateboarding, snowboarding, and surfing	Footwear, apparel, accessories, and sandals	The female brand of BSC that has a lifestyle approach and targets mainstream female adolescents.	Mainstream female adolescents	Action sports stores, boutiques and mainstream
SB7 (2005)	Skateboarding	Footwear	Offers limited-edition street wear inspired by skateboarding culture and artists.	Affluent lifestyle consumer	Core and mainstream

**Table 2**  
Participant information.

Role	Pseudonym	Gender
Director of Brand Marketing	Elliot	Male
Sub-Brand (SB) 1	Tom	Male
Brand Marketing Manager (BMM)		
SB2 BMM	Aaron	Male
SB3 BMM	Frank	Male
SB4 BMM	Paul	Male
SB6 BMM	Joann	Female
Senior Marketing Analyst Manager	Ian	Male
Technical Representative Manager	George	Male
Public Relations Group Manager	Maria	Female
Public Relations Specialist	David	Male
Graphic Designer	Stephen	Male
Consumer Research Manager	Ronna	Female
Web Manager	Louis	Male

preferred location for the interview either at the headquarters or in more neutral settings (i.e., during lunch break in restaurants or coffee shops). The interview guide implicitly covered the five categories proposed by Gilmore and Pine (2007) relative to the identity and authenticity of a business. Initially, questions were aimed at identifying participants' background, as well as their relationship with action sports and their company affiliations. For instance, participants were asked to share their level of involvement with action sports and how it had influenced their professional career and positioning in the organization. The interviewer utilized more direct questioning in order to elicit "behind-the-scenes" information related to participants' perceptions of BSC's corporate mentality and philosophy.

As interviewees progressively felt more comfortable sharing their criticism and judgment of BSC, the author asked participants to share their personal opinion on the organization's expansion to mainstream, and how it could affect its integrity in the field. Finally, more general questions were asked about the future of BSC and the shaping of the greater action sports industry. Constant assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were instrumental in securing participants' genuine feedback and personal stance. Their perspectives represented repetition and uniqueness and constituted information-rich sources in addressing the purpose of the study.

### 3.3. Researcher positionality

Reflexivity, which emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective, has emerged as a central theme in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). As the researcher becomes the instrument in qualitative research, one should address biases regarding the phenomenon and unit of analysis. Merriam (1998) presented this process as clarifying the researcher's assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. Furthermore, Misener and Doherty (2009) suggested "researcher positionality acknowledges the impact of the researchers' backgrounds, assumptions, and relationships with research participants and subject matter to provide more thoughtful and critical representation of ourselves within our research" (p. 466). I am Caucasian, born in southern Europe, and I have a strong affiliation to mainstream sports. As a former competitive swimmer, I have had limited experience with unorganized and alternative sport activities. Recognizing my lack of active involvement and familiarity with action sports was instrumental in uncovering how my background and predispositions as a researcher may have constrained what was observed and understood throughout the study (Patton, 2002). For instance, my comprehension and interpretation of interviewees' insights on authenticity elements could have been influenced by my experiences as a mainstream athlete and an academic. Overall, this self-reflexivity process allowed me to observe how my role as a researcher with a mainstream background may have affected the interview setting, participants' responses, and the data analysis process. Acknowledgment of such limitations contributed to the reliability (dependability) of the study.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Tesch (1990) proposed three major types of case study analysis: interpretational, structural, and reflective analysis. Interpretational analysis "is the process of examining case study data closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 466). In order to find patterns in the qualitative data relative to BSC's authenticity elements as perceived by participants, a deconstruction of the company's authenticity occurred through Gilmore and Pine's (2007) five categories for determining a business's true identity. This provided a priori categories for the data analysis process and included the following four steps.

#### 3.4.1. Segmenting the database

The first step was to compile the case study data into a computer database. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, formatted as computer files, and loaded into NVivo 10 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia). In terms of data

segmentation, each textual document was broken down into meaningful segments. A segment is a section of the text that contains one item of information and is comprehensible even if read outside the context in which it is embedded (Gall et al., 2007).

#### 3.4.2. Developing categories

A category label, along with a respective definition, was created for each type of phenomenon in the database to be analyzed. The categories were formulated based on Gilmore and Pine's (2007) five properties.

#### 3.4.3. Coding segments

Upon finalization of the five categories, segments were coded numerically. Each segment was then examined and assessed in order to determine whether the phenomenon it described matched the label and the operational definition of one of the categories in the system.

#### 3.4.4. Grouping category segments

Upon identification and coding, all segments were assigned into the respective categories. The constant comparison function solidified the meaning of each category and developed clear distinctions between them (Gall et al., 2007). Constant comparison was initially conceived as a continual process of comparing segments within and across categories.

Since qualitative research is guided by an interpretive epistemological orientation, terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To that extent, the internal validity (credibility) of this study was ensured through member checking and peer examination. Specifically, a copy of each transcript was sent to each interviewee for clarification regarding ambiguous or unclear statements and correction of factual errors. Member checking enabled the effective representation of participants' *emic* perspective, namely the way they perceive the phenomenon under study (Gall et al., 2007). In addition, an academic researcher specializing in action sports and two action sports participants provided peer review input, as they examined initial findings of the study and shared their expert opinions and feedback. Finally, reliability (dependability) was ensured via audit trail and identification of researcher's positionality.

## 4. Findings

Through Gilmore and Pine's (2007) five dimensions of assessing a business's true identity, participants' perspectives on the status of the organization and how BSC maintains its authenticity in the face of marketing expansion pressures are illustrated (see Table 3). Select quotations representative of the categories are also showcased to enhance the thick description component of this case study.

### 4.1. Essence of enterprise

The first category addresses the question "Who are you at your core" and comprises two elements: (a) *entity*; the type of organization formed via legal charter or other means, and how the enterprise has shifted over time, and (b) *ethos*; how the

**Table 3**  
Categories, description, and sample respective quotations from raw data.

Categories	Description (elements)	Text example
Essence of enterprise	Who you are at your core (Entity & Ethos)	One of the things that I find special about this company is that we are one of the largest privately owned companies in the industry. That is really special. That prevents us from having the Kohl's logo on the side of our t-shirt. It gives us control over our brands. The owner is not making a decision to please our shareholders. He is making a decision to please his customers, the employees, and the culture. (Louis)
Nature of offerings	What you offer others (Output & Obligations)	SB5's appeal is so broad that it doesn't capture as much of the core audiences. SB1 tends to appeal to a very raw skateboarder. SB2 in more of an urban, clean and hip-hop style brand, more for the metropolitan oriented skateboarder. ...SB5, because of its involvement with other action sports, has a more broad appeal. (Tom)
Effects of heritage	Where and when you came to be who you are today (Origin & History)	When it comes to the skate industry, you are known as a skate brand trying to do surf or vice versa. A lot of companies will break it up more by sport. With us, we've done it because we are skate driven, our owner is a skater, so we are more about skate. We kind of break it up within that skate world. (Elliot)
Sense of purpose	Why you are in business (Intention & Interests)	We are looking at the future and where younger generations are going to be. Being green will not be something like a trend, but more like a lifestyle, what do we need to do to make things better for the world. Through the owner's vision our apparel line communicates our social responsibility out there. (Joann)
Body of values	How your identity is manifested (Beliefs & Behaviors)	The owner looks at the values of the company like quality, teamwork, enjoyment. That is the heart of the owner. He wants everybody to have a great experience. The owner is often asked why you don't sell out. It is because he feels obligated to provide a place for people to work, have a great living, and he feels that he could not make a difference in the world if he was publicly owned with answering to shareholders. (Maria)

organization's set of unique values are reinforced via the core of the entity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). BSC maintains a private status with the same single owner, who serves as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). As manifested in the company's official website, "BSC is the first and only footwear company owned and operated by a former world champion skateboarder." To this end, ownership and governance have affected the essence of enterprise for BSC throughout time. The owner's vision of positively impacting consumers' lives was transparent to all participants and has created a driving force to the company's core identity, as well as employees' personal and professional development. The vast majority of participants shared a sense of pride in terms of working for a privately owned, core action sports organization. Louis, the web content manager, elaborated on the benefits of BSC's status:

One of the things that I find special about this company is that we are one of the largest privately owned companies in the industry. That is really special. That prevents us from having the Kohl's logo on the side of our t-shirt. It gives us control over our brands. The owner is not making a decision to please our shareholders. He is making a decision to please his customers, the employees, and the culture.

The leader of SB2, BSC's highly technical skate brand, concurred with Louis' statement:

It is one of the largest private action sports companies, because we are not answering to stockholders and we decide what we do. The owner and the people around him are really good people, very passionate, smart, energetic. The growth aspect is one of the main aspects that attracted me. (Tom)

Ian echoed the unique culture of BSC, but also alluded to the negatives consequences of the company's private status:

The good thing is we can really take huge risks and we are responsible for selling product, but if we don't sell enough product it is not a big deal. There are no direct consequences because the company has a single owner. The other good thing is since he owns it, the things that he is passionate about we go do. The opposite side of that is since we are not a publicly-traded company, we may take our time longer for certain things and there is no sense of urgency. (Ian)

The private status provides a sense of freedom and flexibility to employees relative to their duties. As Ian suggested, however, this mentality appears to have negative consequences in the "sense of urgency" of selling more products and being efficient. Despite the increasing competition and the constant struggle among action sports brands for more shelf space in retail stores, BSC maintains a family atmosphere and remains steadfast to the owner's ethos of growing organically and gradually. Despite BSC's expansion to mainstream, the enterprise has maintained its private status over time and a sense of uniqueness that differentiates it among action sports brands.

#### 4.2. Nature of offerings

The second category pertains to the question "What you offer others," which is answered through identification of *output* (i.e., the category and class of product/service) and the contractual *obligations* attached to acquiring such output (e.g., price; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). BSC has adopted a multi-brand strategy by launching skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, motocross, and BMX products under seven sub-brands with different and unrelated brand names. This approach has allowed the organization to expand its distribution to core and mainstream channels, while competing at different price and quality levels. Tom discussed how each brand has a different target market:

SB5's appeal is so broad that it doesn't capture as much of the core audiences. SB1 tends to appeal to a very raw skateboarder. SB2 is more of an urban, clean and hip-hop style brand, more for the metropolitan oriented skateboarder. Within the skateboarding subculture, it is weird that you have these niches, but they are very clearly defined. SB5, because of its involvement with the other action sports, has a more broad appeal.

Aaron described the opportunities with expanding to lifestyle consumers and offering quality products at a higher price, and he emphasized the need to perform such an expansion of his brand (SB2) with legitimacy:

I would like to see our brand transcend outside skateboarding, where we are able to go to a more affluent customer based on their needs for superior and technical product. It would be still within those niche focuses, street wear style doors, snicker boutiques etc... It's not all of a sudden that we have that opportunity with the urban market. We have always been there, but we want to do it legitimately and with our integrity intact.

Most interviewees acknowledged the inevitability of an expansion to mainstream markets due to the intense competition and the need for additional revenues. They all agreed that exposing the BSC brands to a wider audience and attracting mainstream consumers to BSC products is not necessarily a negative thing. Nevertheless, they noted the importance of maintaining the integrity of the brands and the continuing focus on the essence of enterprise regardless of the market trends. To that end, participants also stressed the essentiality of constantly addressing the needs of core consumers first before catering to mainstream audiences. Elliot characteristically said, "Going mainstream is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as you take care of your core. As long as you keep your core guys happy, you can definitely go mainstream." BSC's major challenge with its nature of offerings is best summarized in Ian's words:

I think we are not struggling on how to deal with mainstream. We are struggling with how do we maintain and work with the core as our relationship changes with the mainstream. I think that what our customers say, our periphery customers who are those mainstream people, we will buy your products at different price points and different locations that are mainstream outlets, and then as we expand into that, what do we do within the core so we don't lose our culture and also it's the perception that we are getting other customers and we are investing this money back to the core.

Gilmore and Pine (2007) noted that an organization's offerings should reflect its essence of enterprise. Indeed, participants demonstrated mixed responses relative to the status of the markets, the respective distribution channels, and the overall business in which some of the BSC brands are involved. Despite the anti-establishment and "no sell out" mentality of BSC, the organization has initiated a gradual expansion to mainstream markets through its multi-brand approach. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the need to focus on the essence of enterprise by serving the core action sports customer and giving back to the community, as well as offer actions sports products from a genuine sense of self.

#### 4.3. Effects of heritage

The third category deals with where and when an organization came to be what it is today, and it focuses both on the *origin* and the *history* of the enterprise (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). The owner purchased his first skateboard footwear brand (SB5) in 1986. By mid-1990s he launched three more brands (SB1, SB2, and SB4) and consolidated all four labels under the BSC umbrella. His main focus was producing stylish skateboard shoes and, simultaneously, providing quality, durability, and function for skateboarders. Thus, BSC is known for its technological advancements and extensive research in the area of skateboarding. The company operates the Action Sports Lab (ASL, pseudonym), where biomechanics, wear, physical, and fit testing are conducted. In this way, new design and technological features are tested in order to improve functionality, durability and, above all, the performance of BSC products. Most interviewees made a reference to the lab and expressed their pride in this technological initiative. Elliot, the Director of Brand Marketing, noted the uniqueness of the ASL:

We are the only company that has a real testing lab and real technology in the shoes. It's definitely a point of difference. You can buy that shoe here or you can buy this one, you can wear it longer, it won't turn your ankle. Now Nike has done it on the athletic side, no one has done it in our industry.

Aaron shared his perspective on the importance of technology for his brand:

There is a tradition and a commitment from BSC as far as creating great products and bringing the best product to the market. The differentiation for SB2 is that it is the most technically driven brand in the history of skateboarding footwear. We were in the forefront of putting air in the shoes, we were the first to do that. We used technologies that are more synonymous with athletic shoes. This last year we still put out the lightest shoe ever made in skateboarding, with ASL foam etc. All of our brands utilize the benefit of ASL, we have been in the forefront of using this technology.

The fact that BSC was first established as a highly technical skateboard footwear enterprise has been an important element of the organization's "corporate DNA." The term corporate DNA describes the organization as it exists today, primarily as a result of its origin and heritage (Neilson, Pasternack, & Mendes, 2003). Apparently, skateboarding remains at the core of BSC's identity and heritage, despite the incorporation of additional action sports holdings. The majority of participants purported that since the company was born and bred from the skate world, it is pivotal this heritage is preserved throughout the organization's philosophy, offerings, and actions.

#### 4.4. Sense of purpose

In the process of identifying BSC's true identity and deconstructing its authenticity, the fourth category considers why an entity is actually in business. Sense of purpose is formulated based on the *intention* of the firm (i.e., why the business exists beyond making a profit), and the *interests* the organization and its employees demonstrate in achieving this aim. Through delivering technology, innovation in performance, and style, BSC has evolved into a prominent and influential action sports supplier worldwide. Beyond giving back to youth and the action sports community, the enterprise's soul lies in the owner's passion for the environment and his commitment to corporate social responsibility. The company has employed several environmental-friendly initiatives, including installation of solar panel systems, water-free urinals, conversion to water-based cement manufacturing, and corporate-wide recycling efforts. The owner's commitment to environmental efforts has been adopted by BSC employees as a lifestyle. David described the effect of this mentality:

Green is the new hot thing for everybody. For the owner it was since he was a child, it's not a hot thing. It is the way he lives his life. It's a lifestyle and because of that, just being a BSC employee, I have learned a great amount about the environment and how we affect it. I like the fact that he doesn't see it as a trend. He doesn't even care if he starts a trend. He cares that he is doing his part. It's a lifestyle that you form into as an employee.

While the environmental efforts result in added manufacturing and hard costs for BSC, the owner is steadfast in his insistence additional costs will not be transferred to the consumer. The company is also promoting sustainable products and



launches new collections that utilize environmental-friendly products. Joann, the marketing manager of BSC's female brand, elaborated on the launch of an environmental-friendly collection:

We are actually going to launch a new project for girls, the Environmental Project. It's really exciting since we are able to offer something that is environmentally friendly, expand our consumer sustainable options, and then give something back, too. It's being able to embrace what the owner set forth with his vision and yet something that is relevant to our consumer and future generations while creating those options to make sure we are building up for a better tomorrow.

During the author's presence at the BSC headquarters, publicity surrounding the company's environmental initiatives was apparent throughout office spaces and the company's official store. Indeed, green campaigns and activities were perceived as natural functions within the organization. The mentality of discreetly promoting BSC's environmental initiatives was widely supported by interviewees. Interestingly, they perceived it as an authentic element of the organization depicting a genuine interest toward the environment and not another "marketing stunt" often employed by other action sport entities. BSC's goal to become the first action sports company to go carbon neutral by 2020 provides the organization with meaning and direction. This *intention* is fundamental in establishing authenticity, as interviewees also demonstrated *interest* in adopting and furthering the organization's sense of purpose through environmental practices.

#### 4.5. Body of values

The final category addresses how the enterprise's identity is manifested based on *beliefs* through which the purpose is communicated, as well as how these *beliefs* are perceived through the *behaviors* of employees (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In the case of BSC, the company's private status and owner's values appear to be embedded in the mentality of most participants. Maria shared her personal view on the owner's pivotal role to BSC's corporate values:

The owner looks at the values of the company like quality, teamwork, enjoyment. That is the heart of the owner. He wants everybody to have a great experience. The owner is often asked why you don't sell out. It is because he feels obligated to provide a place for people to work, have a great living, and he feels that he could not make a difference in the world if he was publicly owned with answering to shareholders. Of course he wants to grow, but he wants to do it the right way. The corporate culture is very important, even more than the corporate growth.

The idea of empowering youth cultures and supporting the core community was also illustrated as fundamental values and integral components of BSC's identity. Interviewees utilized expressions such as *legitimacy*, *integrity*, *self-expression*, *individualistic stance*, and *anti-establishment* to describe in what way BSC should be manifested. They commonly discussed how the no sell out perspective is vital to the core of action sports, and how brands are respected in the industry when consumers feel these entities do not compromise their integrity. On the other hand, George, one of the older employees and a veteran within BSC, had a different perspective in terms of the emphasis the organization places on the core community:

We are spinning the wheels here and it is like come on guys, it ain't rocket science. If you want to act like a core skateboarding company, then you got to give back to the core. And we don't do that. We don't sponsor events. If you are not strong in the core, you are not strong in the mainstream.

George's latter statement epitomizes the strategy for BSC brands to expand to mainstream markets, and then invest revenues acquired from mainstream consumers to support the core. Overall, interviewees illustrated divergent opinions on how the continuous expansion to mainstream, along with the development of products that would just sell more and contribute to greater revenue, could have a negative impact on BSC's body of values. To that extent, Beverland (2005) suggested actions perceived as selling out or breaking the idealistic norms of a community result in a loss of authenticity. Foundationally, authentic brands not only conform to the self-image of consumers, but their core values and belief systems are also congruent with the inherent values of their customers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Overall, the delicate balance between focusing on the core consumers and expanding to mainstream audiences was perceived as a continuous struggle for BSC as related to the manifestation of its body of values.

## 5. Discussion

In the era of constant commercialization and mainstream assimilation of the action sports industry, distinct elements (e.g., authenticity, original expressions, artifacts) of both action sports subcultures and brands have started to fade or become increasingly unrecognizable. This study sought to shed light into the complex and dynamic status of the action sports industry, primarily from a corporate management perspective, via the case study of the Board Sports Company. The paper highlighted one of the most pressing issues characterizing the action sports setting: how core brands maintain authenticity while expanding to mainstream, and, simultaneously, compete with mainstream athletic companies that may influence consumers' perceptions of originality in the industry through portrayal of an authentic image. The aforementioned issue could be characterized as the "authenticitude" battle. The term authenticitude – a combination of the words authenticity and attitude – derived from one of the interviewee's comments, where he described how he never imagined Nike would ever become a serious competitor in action sports. This brings to surface the acting of authenticity, where organizations either

fake or actually render authenticity to establish their presence in the market. Ostensibly, incorporating alternative subcultural elements of action sports into marketing and branding strategies, as well as promoting an anti-establishment and no sell out image may be important precursors for success in action sports. The example with Nike signifies it is not just how brands render authenticity; most importantly, it is about how consumers perceive authenticity.

Outcomes of this case study also emphasized the importance for core action sports brands to explore their true sense of self through deconstruction of their authenticity. Unarguably, interviewees' responses per authenticity and expansion elements of BSC were quite diverse. Individuals with long-term experience in the industry (e.g., Tom) or who are active action sports participants (e.g., George) appeared to have legitimate concerns as to BSC's expansion to mainstream, and how this expansion affected the authenticity of the organization. On the other hand, younger employees with less involvement in action sports who were recruited from mainstream industries, such as Maria and Elliot (came from Nike), perceived BSC as being particularly authentic and genuine among other rivals who have already sold out. To that extent, BSC has developed a hybrid approach to recruiting employees who understand action sports, but still incorporate a mainstream business profile. This strategy supports the organization in coping with the continuing transition to mainstream and the highly antagonistic mainstream athletic brands.

Interestingly, interviewees' status, their relationship to the industry, as well as their particular knowledge and experience with action sports influenced their notions of the organization's authenticity in relation to market expansion and the overall corporate culture. With a couple of exceptions, there was an evident consensus by participants, regardless of their position and status in the organization, of the inevitability of expanding to mainstream markets and channels to remain competitive and profitable. Simultaneously, they mentioned the importance for BSC to retain the essence of enterprise, namely support the core consumer market. There are seemingly increasing benefits of attracting mainstream consumers and investing revenues from those sales to support the core by: (a) sponsoring community events, (b) empowering youth, and (c) implementing environmental-friendly initiatives. These strategic elements were perceived as valuable efforts to enhance core aspects of the organization.

Indisputably, the foundation of BSC's expansion to mainstream and the organization's authenticity is based upon support of the core. Interviewees stressed the fact that BSC brands need to formulate inner corporate strategies that make them appear less commercialized, as well as display an image of adherence to the accepted rules of action sports communities and subcultures, namely, assess how the organization's body of values conforms to its consumers' self-image. Simultaneously, participants stressed the need to manifest the effects of heritage through the legacy of the owner, who initially established BSC as an authentic and technologically-advanced skateboard shoe and apparel manufacturer. Beverland (2005) suggested the connection with time and place is important for consumers because it affirms tradition.

To that end, the owner's sense of purpose to invest in high-quality products, technology, youth empowerment, and environmental initiatives was perceived as a particularly authentic element and point of differentiation by employees. Namely, BSC's reason for being in business aligned with its employees' intentions to fulfill this overarching purpose. In general, interviewees had a consensus on the fact that an organic growth, along with a gradual market expansion, provided BSC with an opportunity to remain loyal to the action sports core community and maintain its authenticity. They unanimously recommended BSC should constantly assess how its relationship with mainstream consumers is affected while some of the brands focus on the core.

Evidently, brand managers are not the sole creators of brand meaning, and current trends require them to locate their brands within communities and subcultures (Beverland, 2005). To further the line of inquiry on brand authenticity, Beverland et al. (2010) purported in terms of current brand management "models should be treated with caution in the context of consumption communities where the nature of authenticity is hotly contested and where multiple meanings of authenticity are often present" (p. 713). Enhancement of the core community and the organic growth of action sports brands could lead to a successful expansion to mainstream markets and audiences, a strategic plan that may ensure their viability in the action sports setting.

### 5.1. Practical implications

Findings of this case study will certainly not provide managers with all the answers as to what may constitute an authentic action sports brand. Nevertheless, the overarching goal of this research effort was to provide a deeper understanding of the concept of authenticity through the case study of a core action sports enterprise and employee perceptions of its authenticity and true identity. Managers from other segments of the sport industry could potentially apply this knowledge to their respective organizational settings. In the process of deconstructing BSC's authenticity through Gilmore and Pine's (2007) five properties, interviewees illustrated in their responses the crucial need for all members of the organization to constantly examine how BSC's identity is manifested. In the case of BSC, the sense of purpose (i.e., why you are in business) may at one point be misaligned with the owner's declaration of the organization's purpose. Even the essence of enterprise may be in disagreement with how BSC's image is communicated to its stakeholders. In sum, it is imperative each of the five elements of being true to self align with how the enterprise's identity is manifested (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Therefore, brands should also be sincere with locating inauthentic dimensions of their offerings. This illuminates the complex, multifaceted, subjective, and evolving nature of authenticity.

Identifying the true identity of a business is one component of enhancing its positioning and authenticity. The second part of the authenticity equation lies upon rendering consumers' perceptions of authenticity by establishing *real* business offerings. In the case of BSC, the expansion to mainstream has an impact on subcultural aspects of both action sports participants and, consequently, brands. BSC systematically examines mainstream and lifestyle trends (e.g., fashion, music, and art) of adolescents, and incorporates alternative themes and stories to products in order to achieve uniqueness and differentiation. A marketing blend of mainstream trends, along with an effective utilization of brand messages that reflect core subcultures, may support an entity's expansion efforts to mainstream markets, while preserving the authentic image of the brand. BSC has effectively used the multi-brand approach to achieve the aforementioned goal. Despite the influx of young consumers in action sports, effects of heritage (where and when you came to be who you are today) such as tradition and respect to the legacy of alternative sports appear to be of particular importance to action sports consumers. BSC's core message repeatedly communicated through its marketing campaigns is "Born through Skateboarding," which also reflects the mentality of the company's single owner. In addition, the organization's predominant theme in the official website is "To inspire youth through passionate commitment to authentic action sports brands." Once consumers seek the "real thing" in the variety of providers that exist in the action sports industry, the management of consumers' perception of authenticity becomes the primary source of competitive advantage and creates a new business imperative (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

### 5.2. Limitations

Any selection of a single case in qualitative research has certain limitations, such as lack of representativeness and lack of rigor in the collection, construction, and analysis of the empirical materials that give rise to a study (Merriam, 1998). Nevertheless, the representative and typical status of BSC among other cases may increase the level of applicability and representativeness of this case study. Due to confidentiality issues, the researcher was not able to secure data on BSC's annual sales reports and market share information. Such an approach would certainly provide further insight into the market standing of the BSC brands and a potential comparison to mainstream athletic entities. Finally, the paper focused on authenticity predominantly from a corporate rather than a consumer standpoint.

### 5.3. Future directions

This study approached the concept of authenticity within a bounded unit of study: a single core action sports entity with a privately owned and multi-brand status. There needs to be further empirical examination of brand authenticity with a diverse sample of firms in order to enhance generalizability of the findings. For instance, the comparison of two or multiple cases could provide an insight into the corporate approach to authenticity of multi vs. single brands, private vs. public companies, and core vs. lifestyle brands. Furthermore, research that examines the nature of brand authenticity in a subcultural consumption context, as well as how multiple forms of authenticity are constructed in this context in relation to the brand, the product, the participant/consumer, and the action sports community is certainly timely and of importance. Sport managers should delve into the deeper essence of brand authenticity by exploring with greater sensitivity the true meaning of authentic, genuine, or original, and the significance of these terms both within the inner and outer context of their organizations and in sport brand communities (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). This paper therefore makes a contribution to further exploring elements of brand authenticity in the action sports and greater sport setting, as entities seek to provide sincere and authentic experiences to their consumers while remaining true to their mission and profitable.

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