



Ajankohtaista

The quest for authenticity in popular music cultures

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In my dissertation, I explore the concept and discourses of authenticity in popular music cultures. My interest in the topic of authenticity stems from my youth as a music listener who grew up watching MTV and reading rock magazines. I was always intrigued by such things as which bands are cool, which aren't; who has credibility and who is a sell-out? Which bands should one mention as one's favorites and which artists should you only listen to in the privacy of your own home? The concept of 'bad music' is also close to my heart; I was once an avid listener of Paskalista, or "Shitlist" in Radio Helsinki. During my doctoral studies I became fascinated by processes that determine which performers are seen as legitimate, others not—why is it so, and how does it come about?

Authenticity, a value in Western culture for centuries, surrounds us not only in the realm of popular music but in our everyday life. It is either demanded for or celebrated in advertisements of all kinds, with references to the authentic, genuine, or real. One strong strategy of product marketing is to refer to the 'original' as in the cases of Jaffa and Hartwall Long drink, indicating the idea of an original product as opposed to fake or copied lemonade or drink.

Authenticity is also a central cliché in Western ideologies of who we are: authentic living is referred to when searching for a fulfilling life and happiness, accompanied by phrases of keeping it real, being true to oneself or finding one's true self. Besides authentic living, learning, and happiness, there is a new trend of authentic leadership – for instance, Harvard Business Review stated in 2015 that "Authenticity has become the gold standard for leadership." Harvard professor and former Medtronic CEO Bill George, the author of a book on the topic, defines authentic leaders as genuine, moral, and character-based leaders: "People of the highest integrity, committed to building enduring organizations ... who have a deep sense of purpose and are true to their core values who have the courage to build their companies to meet the needs of all their stakeholders, and who recognize the importance of their service to society." The definition sounds familiar also in relation to the demands placed on musicians, with key terms such as integrity and being true to one's core values.

Authenticity as a topic offers a view to the core of Western thought and subjectivity, perhaps subconsciously affecting us all. That is why I am feeling a bit inauthentic standing here, wearing



shoes and makeup I would not normally wear and speaking a language that is not my own. It is built into my psyche to be as authentic as possible, with the help of different catchphrases. As the late Oscar Wilde is quoted as saying: Be yourself, everyone else is already taken. Or alternatively, as the late Chris Cornell sang: To be yourself is all that you can do.

The ideal and the reality of authenticity demands

Media formats such as *Idols* and *XFactor* offer audiences a view backstage. We get a glimpse of how future stars are made, how they are just like us, regular folks, how they prepare for performances and how they recover from them. Or as in *Vain elämä*, where some of the most popular stars of Finland (ideally) share very personal stories accompanied by tears – signs of authentic emotion – and real-life stories behind the songs – even when the songs may be written by other people.

My friend's nephew has a habit of constant self-reflection – stating "I found that funny" after a good scene in a movie, or "I was anxious about that" after meeting new people. Sociologist Dennis D. Waskul did an experiment in his daily life, deciding to attempt complete sincerity and authenticity for a day. In a similar fashion, he was stunned at his child's ability to be in complete awe about seemingly mundane things constantly. What would our everyday life and interactions be like if we, as the nephew, dared to say that "I was pretty scared back there" or "I am feeling really vulnerable right now". However, Waskul concludes that actually, insincerity might be the thing that is really more ethical and valuable to our communities. Instead of my so-called inauthentic look, if I would have chosen some authentic clothes today and appeared here wearing a sweatshirt, boots, and jeans, it probably would have decreased the value and dignity of this event and offended people. Similarly, Waskul's – actually fictional – experiment with total authenticity had some disastrous results, such as upsetting his daughter about the real nature of Santa Claus, offending colleagues at the university, and shocking students with harsh feedback on their course work.

The ideal of full authenticity and sincerity however lives on in cultural debates. In the context of popular music, my research focused on media material, such as artist interviews and music reviews.

In the case of Lady Gaga, I argued that the interviews from *Rolling Stone* utilized two seemingly contradictory strands of authenticity discourses: traditional and modernist strands.

Gaga is quoted as saying "I've always been Gaga," which represents the traditional strand, but elsewhere, she is quoted as saying "If I had come out as who I was, no one would be listening. Now people are listening." (Strauss 2010). Creating a persona, a trait of modernist authenticity, is here the key to success and fame, and to getting your voice heard.

In the second case study, I investigated the hatred towards the Canadian band Nickelback. Jose Riikonen portrays their music as 'hypocritical bullshit performed through gritted teeth' (Riikonen 2012), and thus traces the unworthiness of the music to its insincere and fake quality. Markus Hilden (2011) continues on the theme of hypocrisy, painting a sarcastic picture of Kroegeer, while quoting Nickelback's lyrics from 'When We Stand Together': 'In the midst of his collection of quad bikes Kroegeer has figured that hey, should we restrain this consumption feast'.



According to music researcher Simon Frith, the most common complaint regarding bad music is that it is inauthentic, insincere – ‘as if people expect music to mean what it says,’ judging the music as if it were synonymous with a person’s sincerity (2004, 28). The theme of lies can be applied to the band’s personas as well, as they are accused of trying to be something they are not – of ‘striving to play a credible rock band’ as Romppainen (2012) states in his critique. The reviews portray a strong tendency to hate the band because of their lack of authenticity.

Finland certainly has its own nickelbacks: the likes of Yö, Mamba, and the rapper Cheek, who has caused strong reactions, both positive and negative. In the future, it would be interesting to explore what elements have cast these artists in the same pile with Nickelback: is it their lack of authenticity? Poor quality of the music? Bad public image? These artists are also the ones you should not mention as your favorite band if you wish to maintain some sort of cultural capital – authenticity is thus tightly intertwined with questions of fandom as well.

Cheek, who announced his decision to end his career last week, stating that he has nothing more to offer, is one of the most successful, but also most hated artists in Finland. He is also one of the artists often accused of inauthenticity. In Joensuu, the rock festival Ilosaarirock received a massive backlash after booking Cheek last summer. People accused the festival of losing their original feel and spirit, of not being a proper ‘rock’ festival anymore. Cheek’s retirement raises many questions – is the one retiring actually the character of Cheek that Jare Tiihonen is tired of and needs to cast away? Cheek’s case reminds me of an idea, argued for instance by David R. Shumway (2014, 22), of whether the product of music industry is actually the star, and not the music. In this case it is the product of Cheek that would be past its expiration date, sucked dry of its potential and needing to be retired. The person Jare Tiihonen might then later create a new product for the market.

In the third article of the work, the aim was to examine the intertwining of censorship and authenticity in metal, a genre that values transgression. In addition, it explores how authenticity can be applied in analyzing other music-related phenomena, such as censorship. Overall, concentrating on the experiences of musicians themselves through qualitative interview material, thus offering an inclusive view to the discourses of censorship, this article contributes to the debate on the limits of musical expression. The intertwining of authenticity and censorship was visible in accusations of false lifestyles, insincere lyrics, or bands knowingly aiming at being censored for the sake of achieving fame. This article can also be read as deconstructing the myth of authenticity and total freedom of expression: some sort of self-censorship is described as a constant in the creative process.

Alternatives to traditional authenticity

In discussions on the demands for authenticity, there have also been contrasting voices questioning the hegemonic views. For instance, rock journalist Ann Powers suggests the idea of “Bread-and-butter songs [that] are good for group yell-alongs.” I started to miss Nickelback’s singer, Chad Kroeger’s voice, after forcing myself to listen to the band intently – it would be great yell-along music, as well as soundtrack for drinking beer, or wanting to feel bordering-on-kitschy sentimentalism (my weapon of choice for this was the track “Lullaby”). Is that not valuable?



Powers suggests that maybe the mediocre or unoriginal musical moments afford the listener with space to embrace also the intensive experiences and emotions music may offer and help digest especially the difficult elements of modern life songs might present, such as change and confusion (2004, 239–240). However, Powers continues that the unexceptional, vapid hit songs may actually be more extraordinary than they seem: “Actually, ‘Bailamos,’ or whatever represents your personal nadir in packaged pop, can’t really be mediocre – with nearly 30,000 recordings produced each year, any one that makes it to the public’s ear must possess some charismatic quality, puzzling as it may be. As critics and music lovers, we need a framework for understanding that nondescript essence. There needs to be room for the unexceptional in our thinking about music.” This in turn could free us to let the musical skeletons in our closets loose.

Last year in September, I went to see Nickelback perform live in Helsinki. Unavoidably, I had a certain filter in my gaze as I experienced the event, having finished the article. Consequently, I paid special attention to details mentioned in my research material, such as the elaborate highlighting of alcohol use, while through the critical researcher’s gaze I also wanted to know whether or not there actually was any alcohol in the cup, or if they were lying to us in their beverage consumption as well. Throughout, I was struggling a bit to enjoy, but at the end, in the middle of all the rock ‘n’ roll clichés and tough guy acts, I found one thing I truly believed in: it was Chad’s blinking. When he sang, he has a habit of blinking unconsciously which I found very authentic. This bodily gesture cannot be faked, as has also been said about the tears in *Vain elämää*: the bodily fluid is a sign of authentic emotion that cannot be forced, a piece of evidence of authenticity. I forgot all the rock clichés Nickelback had performed when I watched Chad blink and sing: there was nothing fake about his dedication in producing his vocals, the pitch, the sound, and the blinking that he could not help. ([See video here.](#))

It is also worth asking why I felt the need to find something to believe in in the first place. Isn’t the music enough? However, the argument that many have suggested feels fitting: in a time where most collective value systems and constants of our culture have collapsed, we crave for something permanent and true with a capital T to hold on to – even if it were only an illusion of it.

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