# The Need for Authenticity in Opinion Formation

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# Необходимостта от автентичност при формиране на мнение

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Авторът декларира, че няма  конфликт на интереси

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## Abstract

The need for authenticity is a latent manifesto of Romanians who seem overwhelmed by a constant wave of inauthenticity, prejudices, and stereotypes in an environment that makes it more difficult for us to adhere to a genuine development as individuals, but also as a society. Public opinion reveals itself under the impact of the desired authenticity to cope with galloping globalism, which turns us into bystanders of our own lives. More specifically, in a world where we have become accustomed to our ideas being very aesthetically packed, the characteristics of the products for which we show a certain interest, the quality of the services we want and the values we so ardently adhere to, the need to be sure that we receive exactly what we have been mentally longing for becomes a purpose in itself. Thus, the more common and plentiful the values we are exposed to, along with the risk that they may be prebuilt, the greater the possibility for people to develop the need for a guarantee of compliance with the promises made by these values – a need for authenticity. I hope that my paperwork can contribute to further research in terms of arousing the interest of those who are looking to better understand why globalism can affect both public opinion and authenticity. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in the position of talking about black swans whenever the public opinion is different from the minority that we are part of. In a world of social media, the article talks about vocal minorities and the silent majority.

*Keywords*: authenticity, public opinion, stereotypes, prejudices

## Резюме

Нуждата от автентичност е скрит манифест на румънците, които изглеждат обхванати от постоянна вълна от неподходящост, предразсъдъци и стереотипи, в среда, която затруднява придържането към истинско развитие не само на отделните личности, но и на обществото. Общественото мнение се разкрива под въздействието на желаната автентичност, за да се справи с галопиращия глобализъм, който превръща хората в странични наблюдатели на собствения си живот. Светът, в който сме свикнали нашите идеи да са естетически опаковани, характеристиките на продуктите, към които проявяваме определен интерес, качеството на услугите, които искаме, ценностите, към които толкова горещо се придържаме, необходимостта да бъдем сигурни, че получаваме точно това, за което мислено сме копнели и пр., се превръща в цел сама по себе си. По този начин, колкото по-често срещани и изобилни са ценностите, на които сме изложени, заедно с риска те да бъдат предварително изградени, толкова по-голяма

е възможността хората да развият нуждата от гаранция за спазване на обещанията, дадени от тези ценности – нуждата от автентичност. Надявам се, че статията може да допринесе за по-нататъшни изследвания по отношение на предизвикване на интереса на тези, които искат да разберат по-добре защо глобализмът може да повлияе както на общественото мнение, така и на автентичността. В противен случай ще се окажем в позиция да говорим за черни лебеди, когато общественото мнение е различно от малцинството, от което сме част. В един свят на социални медии статията разказва за малцинства с глас и за мълчаливо мнозинство.

*Ключови думи:* автентичност, обществено мнение, стереотипи, предразсъдъци

## The Need for Authenticity in Opinion Formation

The dynamics of decision-making processes are constantly moving. The greater the number of people, the more the thinking schemes we will have to identify to understand and anticipate our fellow citizens' actions. Sociology is one of the areas that has grown up together with the subject of study. Therefore, it is necessary to assume that the phenomena this science is observing and trying to define are in constant motion, and we should not be surprised that certain human behaviours have developed precisely as a result of the development of technology, the too often invoked stereotypes and intercultural clashes.

*The need for authenticity* began in the form of a series of questions I asked myself a few years ago: *When the number of options is too high, how do we know how to choose what is relevant to our needs? What is natural? How it defined, and what is, is its role in the consumption processes and even society? What does authenticity mean?* In an attempt to find a sociological definition of this concept (*natural/authentic*), I have often found myself lacking consistent paradigms that would address the above-called theme as such, all the more so because the basic definition was too narrow to capture everything that can be called *authentic* in sociology. Thus, social values such as trust, guarantee, and truth have become the main tools that I used to understand what authenticity is, how it can be sociologically defined, and whether we can call into question *the need for authenticity* as a trigger for consumption behaviours (messages, consumption items, ideas, etc.). Whether we are talking about people's distrust in the political discourse, the promises of brands or products sold in hypermarkets, or in the guarantee of the purchased services, all these phenomena are founded, on an empirical level, on a common background: people's desire not to be deceived and not to have their expectations rewarded with less appropriate or irrelevant solutions. To be more specific, in a world where we have become accustomed to having our ideas packed in a very aesthetic manner, the characteristics of the products for which we manifest a certain interest, the quality of desired services, and the values we so ardently wish to adhere to, the need to be sure that we receive exactly what we have been mentally longing for becomes a purpose in itself. As impressive as it is, this land has a considerable load of uncertainty and abstract, especially in terms of scientific investigation, because matching the intended needs with the solutions that aim to satisfy these needs is very difficult to capture and prove. Moreover, this is also the challenge behind my thesis – the attempt to identify a concept that would capture an idea that

is broad enough to talk about it as a trigger for a trend of consumption and yet accurate enough to be identified by using methodological instruments specific to sociology.

The work of Phillip Vannini and Patrick Williams, *Authenticity in culture, Self and society* (2009) is of the utmost importance in understanding the concept of authenticity, the two authors making a collection of theories that explains the authenticity from a sociological, psycho-sociological, and philosophical point of view, as it is perceived by different categories of people and applied to different behaviours and segments of people. James Gilmore and Joseph Pine (2007) claim that today's industrial and informational societies are moving away from the value of the concepts that have been representing their foundation precisely because of the "levels of inauthenticity that we are forced to breathe" (p. 43). Authors quote various sources and bring many examples to the readers to validate the above-mentioned idea. One of these examples is the very large number of emails we receive from people we do not know or should not trust; another example refers to the fact that we no longer receive the news directly from the source, from the journalists who make it, but rather through a more complex process, whereby news is repeatedly filtered by intermediaries (bloggers or social media knowledge), thus determining us to consume the essence considered by them as important, which is most of the times biased. In this way, according to what Gilmore and Pine (2007) say, the value we give to people, messages, and consumer goods becomes strongly influenced by the traces they leave in the virtual spaces, by the perception towards them expressed by our relatives, friends or people we follow online. According to the two authors, authenticity is socially constructed, validated by the group and not necessarily by the individual's value system. Thus, the idea that emerges from the sentence mentioned above is that because authenticity is socially defined by an average of the perceptions of those whom we do not necessarily consider authentic (according to the qualitative investigation that is the subject of this study), there is a rush for reality, the consumers are developing a need of authenticity's validation in general.

Following this logic, the questions that arise are the following: To what extent can the crisis of authenticity be empirically studied, and in what ways are individuals and groups of individuals psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, or socially affected? Moreover, we can ask ourselves whether the processes described in the work Authenticity: What consumers want to talk about the so-called toxic levels of inauthenticity. If so, how can we measure this toxicity? Or, to be more specific, how can we distinguish between what is authentic and what lacks authenticity, what is original and what is a copy, or how do we differentiate between

what is true and what is false? To be able to answer any of these questions, the present study aims to give, first of all, a definition of authenticity, as the Romanians perceive it today.

To this end, the present study was based on a methodological approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research so that it can be used to validate certain definitions and perceptions of consumers (regarding goods, messages, ideas, services, and so on) from many definitions proposed by consumers themselves. The interview guide, as well as the focus group, were semi-structured precisely to allow respondents to build around the ideas they shared regarding their needs, expectations, and opinions describing their perception of the concept of authenticity: where it appears most often, concerning what, where we perceive the lack of authenticity, and so on. Consequently, to reach a more concrete perspective on the concept of authenticity, I suggest looking in the dictionary to define this concept: *truth*, *accuracy*, *justice*, *legality*, *validity*. In the English dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary), the leading concept of Phillip Vannini's and Patrick Williams' work, *authenticity*, is defined as being consistent with the deed, being fundamentally true or in all the areas. One of the two authors' examples, for a better understanding of this definition, compares two messages promoting two distinct brands of vodka. The Swedish brand, Absolut, presents the vodka bottle with an aura above it that reads "absolute perfection." In contrast, the competing brand, the Stolichnaya vodka, is presented under the slogan "choose authenticity," and the bottle has several medals around its neck.

Practically, both brands present the product under the motto of authenticity, each trying to emphasize that the product they represent is true, unblemished, and original. The two authors also asked which of the two brands communicates more authentically. Moreover, the English dictionary defines authenticity a*s original, real, and has full authority over the values declined from which it represents.* Don Jacobs (2008) completes this definition in an attempt to help his students through a guide to writing their dissertation paper, by suggesting that, for more originality, students should consider enhancing the quality of their work with creativity by presenting the concepts in innovative ways, regardless of how well known they are. The English dictionary's third and last definition characterizes authenticity as something that is real, factual. Here, the concept of authenticity is built to counter what is claimed to be something else, imagined or false (see the term *fake*).

All these definitions have in common is that authenticity reinvents itself each day and is closely linked to the speech and culture of the social actors it defines. The same can be

applied to consumer goods, especially since, as we have seen, the brand of products is a set of values attributed by the social actors to the objects themselves. What we can say in return, whether we are talking about people, objects, messages, or other entities characterized by authenticity, is the quality of this concept that cannot be nuanced – the object defined by authenticity is therefore either authentic or lacking authenticity. The paradox that emerges from this last idea is that contemporary society and today's industries, in particular, invest everything that they have in their capacity to promote the highest degree of authenticity for products that cannot be manufactured: we often hear advertising messages suggesting that nothing is comparable to a particular product, taste or service, yogurts are too good to be authentic, and politicians too sincere to be honest. On that basis, we can say that the paradox of authenticity lies in the fact that it cannot be demonstrated. Instead, it can be indirectly transmitted through several factors that suggest and indicate the idea of authenticity. In his 1997 book, *Creating Country music*, Richard Peterson analyses the theme of the last few years precisely to demonstrate this problem -- the fabrication of authenticity by profit-seeking people. By a deconstruction procedure of the myth of authenticity, Petersen suggests that this concept is a socially constructed phenomenon regardless of space and time. His paper is a long series of sociological theories developed in recent years criticizing realistic assessments of the term of authenticity. Even so, the following question remains – what is authenticity? Apart from the fact that we consider this to be a socially built phenomenon, we admit the fact that authenticity is "ultimately a concept with an evaluative role, no matter how much its methodological approach lacks in, thus making it difficult to operationalize it outside the context in which it arises" (Van Leeuween, 2001, p. 392). Authenticity can be regarded as ideal, highly valued by social actors or groups in their becoming process (Vannini and Wiliams. 2009). As an alternative to this idea, authenticity is repeatedly invoked as a status marker or as a method of *social control*, the same author says. Authenticity represents the objectification of the social representation process that refers to a set of traits assumed by people in a certain space and time to represent a certain ideal. As culture changes, and everything that means values, tastes, beliefs, and practices, the definition of authenticity is continuously dynamic. Peterson tells us that authenticity is a moving target, and the sociology of authenticity must adhere to the evaluative character, *socially constructed* of the concept of authenticity itself (Peterson, 2005, p.10). Another author who tried to define the concept of authenticity is Alessandro Ferrara (1998), who highlights three dimensions of authenticity:

referring to a moral identity, acting as a source of issuing norms (therefore having a normative character), being culturally derived in terms of the construction of the Self and representing the power of example in itself and the practice of exemplifying the ideal. In his work, *Reflective Authenticity*, Ferrara (1998) tries to show that authenticity has a special characteristic – that this concept constructs itself according to how each individual passes through his own filter of values the object, message, or person that they consider authentic.

Another author who addresses the meaning of personal authenticity**,** Andrew Weigert (1988), conceptualizes the Self as an emerging project by perceiving it as both a subject and an object of the process of evaluating personal authenticity. This is how Weigert reaches the territory of the concept of hope, a term which he analyses from the perspective of collective motivation. The link between hope and authenticity occurs as the author attempts to create a connection between the personal motivation of the social players and the group's motivation to become authentic and, therefore, less *inauthentic*. For the author, authenticity implies social responsibility and an increase in cosmopolitan consciousness (Gecas, 2001).

An important aspect in defining authenticity is the very understanding of inauthenticity or lack of authenticity, a concept that we used to define the reverse of the idea of authenticity. Its existence (lack of authenticity) is inevitable and even desirable under certain conditions. The lack of authenticity, sincerity, or the mere need for moral abandonment are contemporary situations that we face every day, even trying to achieve a better life. This paradox has been exemplified by an exercise that (Vannini and Wiliams 2009) encourages us to do, by trying to act towards us and others, in accordance with our values, during one day, while we are also asking us to understand what is authentic and what lacks moral authenticity in our endeavors. In this way, the author (Vannini and Wiliams 2009) distinguishes between what is sincere from a moral perspective and what is socially correct.

This idea is also reinforced by Goffman (1959), who claims that people wear masks and perform on a social scene for others not because we like the idea of playing a part in everyday life, thus imitating some cultural activities, but because we are trying to save our relationships with others and implicitly the image we created about ourselves by showing an easy-to-anticipate profile. Therefore, authenticity cannot exist in the description of certain human behavior in its own right but builds an image of a person together with it or in its absence. From a dramatic point of view, the value of authenticity does not lie in choosing a role to which we feel as close as possible. The value of authenticity and the lack of it lies

instead of being "*more or less one person*" than always being an authentic one toward itself (*true to herself*). A "*more or less person*" is defined by being a social actor who is aware that life requires the creation of secrets and personal situations, and thus the creation of means for dishonesty and inauthenticity.

Debates on authenticity and lack of authenticity are directly proportional to the increase in the number of cultural studies and especially in relation to interdisciplinary approaches to the study of subcultures. Classical ethnographers showed that the concern for authenticity lies in the way groups, subcultures, and countercultures are formed (Coco & Woddward, 2007).

In order to understand the experience and the practice of personal authenticity, Giddens (1991) perceives the concept of authenticity as an individual or collective practice of projecting the Self. In the same sense, Alexis Franzese (2008, as cited in Vannini and Wiliams, 2009) brings a substantial amount of empirical evidence to suggest that only authenticity matters by implying that "*emotional experiences of authenticity are nuanced, multi-faceted, complex and strongly dependent on a given context*" (Vannini and Wiliams, 2009).

Vannini is one very consistent author in the sense of his interactionist-symbolic approaches towards defining and working with the concept of authenticity. He is conscientious when she says that authenticity motivates the behaviour. Such a causal bond, he says, could be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the weight of the Self in making decisions, the authenticity thus becoming a determining force for action. However, the author does not necessarily talk about authenticity in terms of triggers or causal power, but rather as *socialized willpower* (Vannini & Wiliams, 2009).

One aspect as important as the definition of authenticity itself is its reflection on the concept of production and consumption of authenticity. Vannini is an author who attacks the question of authenticity and the possibility of validating this concept in the context of consumer culture and contemporary capitalism. Vannini's idea is all the more interesting as it was born as a consequence of consulting a bibliography, mainly validating the idea of an impossibility to reach authenticity in the capitalist context of production and consumption. The idea around which Vannini's entire theory gravitates comes from the skeptical perception of authenticity due to contemporary society. The author considers that products, services, and messages specific to the capitalist era cannot be overcharged with authenticity, contrary to

their own essence. Beverland (2005) is an author who summarizes this idea by the phrase *authenticity is a hook hired to sell products and services*.

Another view of *the rush for authenticity* belongs to Erickson (1994, as cited in Vannini and Wiliams, 2009), who considers this to be *a typical (rational and emotional) response to life in a world perceived as deeply inauthentic*

Hanson (1989) reminds us that "*Culture and tradition represent anything else than stable realities transmitted from generation to generation,*"(p.890) thus suggesting that authenticity is a dynamic process governed by values that are also malleable depending on space and time.

A last dimension of authenticity, important enough to clarify here, is its quality of becoming a semiotic resource (Van Leeuwen, 2003). The author considers that people commit to it to validate some qualities, increasing the value of their speech and identity while not changing anything significant in the essence of their personality. Just as with authenticity, he believes that it is not important to distinguish between this concept and inauthenticity because people's conduct is more important– what they do to authenticate what they are or are not. With this perspective, Van Leeuwen places authenticity under Self's influence, the latter being strong enough to steer and nuance authenticity. Thus, as he describes it, authenticity is more a cyclical process than a static, self-contained characteristic – once constructed as value, authenticity is used to build or validate through its manifestations and performances.

These last ideas are the final elements that build the key to understanding the concepts of authenticity and need of authenticity that I will explore in the course of this thesis, while trying to prove to what extent, in Romania, the social actors are driven by the need for a set of genuine values to validate their performances, their affiliation to a certain group or the guarantee of the quality of the consumer goods they are interested in.

The study follows two directions: the first one, the theoretical one, is intended, on the one hand, to provide a perspective of the place people assume toward the concept of authenticity, and the second direction of the study aims to test a research hypothesis according to which, the more the objects of consumption (either goods, ideas or messages) or values, in general, are more mainstream and plentiful, the greater the possibility that people (consumers) develop a need of assurance that those goods or values will respect their promises.

As a result, the purpose of this essay can be summarized in the following paragraph: In an era where consumer goods (products, services, ideas) are becoming increasingly difficult

to distinguish and more numerous, authenticity, expressed as a guarantee of the promises directly or indirectly transmitted by the goods in question, has the potential to become a decisive factor in triggering consumption behaviors and in completing the acquisition processes (where applicable) or in adhering to the promoted values.

## Method and materials

The research falls within the exploratory work scope and seeks to distinguish itself from the works that provide advice specific to popularization books, from the series of those who teach us "How to...", through the theoretical content. At first, the methodological design built around the research hypothesis consisted only in a qualitative investigation phase, based on the focus group's method and the semi-structured interview. In this way, the main purpose was to understand better how the concept of authenticity is constructed according to the interviewed people. One of the most significant benefits of qualitative research is the one that allows respondents to express their needs, opinions, and expectations concerning the topics discussed. However, both in the group and in individual conversations, the topics focused on a storytelling component in which the moderator interfered to help his respondents express their experiences on the following four dimensions: interaction with others, consumer goods, advertising messages, and political elements (political marketing or even political representatives). In these circumstances, the results proved to be very consistent, and the qualitative research showed specific clusters of needs. The idea to continue the research through a quantitative study was thus born by applying the CATI (computer-supported-testing-interview) method, carried out at the national level on a representative sample. To implement the questionnaire, I collaborated with the operators' team of the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy. The quantitative study's advantage is that it can provide an overall picture representative of a society caught in transit between poverty, the scarcity from before 1989, and today's turbo-consumerism.

**The methodology of the qualitative study**

The time placement and the social investigation, designed to test the consumption behaviour of people inclined to form judgments regarding a group without a prior check or analysis (Allport, 1954) gathered around the discussion tables 32 people characterized by the fact that they are watching news broadcasts, know Romania's main political leaders (the President and the Prime Minister), at least by name, buy from hypermarkets at least once a month and go out with friends or family at least twice a month. The 32 people were equally

divided, eight people in four focus groups moderated at a national level, in the capitals of historical provinces - Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Timișoara. The reason why I chose four and not two groups are because I tried to maintain under control the *age* variable so that the first group of each category of respondents could gather around the table people aged between 18 and 24 years old, the second one brought together people aged between 25 and 35 years old, same as the third one, and the last one that took place, in Iași, gathered around the table people with ages between 36 and 45 years old. Thus, I have taken non the classic premise of the age segmentation according to the time agreed around the age of 25, as the transition between the years of adolescence and the period of youth and the 35 for the age-maturity (Schiopu, 1997).

The number of respondents gathered around the table is not representative at a national level; the approach was instead aiming to discover which are today's reasons for consumption, the consumer's behaviour concerning consumption and its purpose, their perceptions regarding the concept of authenticity, explored on several dimensions and which would be the main needs they have developed (with the topics discussed). Therefore, from a methodological point of view, the study consists of the one hand in a qualitative stage, which mainly aims to identify the reasons behind the prejudices and the consumption, rather than to issue national-wide representative patterns. However, it is essential to note that today's consumer portrait can be shaped, particularly in terms of the needs defining his main interests, as a sum of characteristics common to consumers' typology.

Each consumer of the four focus groups was recruited by looking for many characteristics that distinguish those prone to easily form prejudices and less inclined to do so. Thus, the participants at the focus-group table were divided into two categories created by four people prone to prejudices and four people who avoid constructing judgments based on stereotypes or who do not *attack* new experiences with pre-defined reasoning's, who would instead prefer to be surprised, so taken by surprise by the specific stimuli of objects, services, experiences to develop a better understanding of them. To understand in-depth the wishes, needs, expectations, and views of the respondents and test concepts built together with the so-called consumers of authenticity, the quantitative phase of this research was preceded by a qualitative one. For the qualitative stage of the study regarding a deeper understanding of the concept of authenticity and its implications in consumption behaviors, we conducted eight interviews with various consumers (consumer items, advertising messages, political

messages, services, and media in general), besides four group discussions, and two parallel groups, the so-called T-groups. Focus groups were moderated in Bucharest, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, and Iași, while the interviews and the parallel groups were equally distributed in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, cities where the local charm seemed to have some influence on the respondents' answers. In Bucharest, the respondents proved to be more attentive, sharper, and implicitly more skeptical regarding the authenticity assumed by politicians, about the communication campaigns built around brands and products, and how authenticity is built in the interaction between them and their relatives, friends, or acquaintances.

On the other hand, in Cluj-Napoca, at least at a discursive level, the respondents proved to be more tolerant than the authenticity exercise extended to the consumption mentioned above items. Thus, during the interaction with these respondents, it was mandatory to try on certain stimuli to test the interviewees' deeper perceptions. These were also why parallel groups were run, a methodology that met the activation of latent but very well-shaped opinions, as we observed at the time of the data analysis. A research method was promising to investigate both versions of the statements. The benefits of using Parallel Groups consisted of offering the opportunity to identify the possible inconsistencies between the studied groups. These groups are in constant interaction, such as:

- representatives of organizations and their clients

- marketing strategies and consumers

- sellers and customers

- politicians and voters

- parents and children

- doctors and patients

The parallel groups' results translate into very detailed radiography of the insights related to the inconsistencies between the statements of the two investigated groups. Such analysis is the main source of recommendations whose role is to address the problems raised by the research methodology itself. Therefore, the Parallel Groups method creates a 360 picture of the explored situations. Simultaneously, the insights identified as a result of the research analysis end up as the basis for the study's advisory part based on this research method.

***How the method works:***

Two different moderators simultaneously conduct two focus groups. Representatives of the two investigated groups will be present in each room, without mixing the respondents. Thus, if we speak of group A, this will become the central component, a classic focus group, where the moderator, together with the beneficiaries of the services offered by the respondents from group B, will go through a guided discussion, covering all the components of a common experience (interaction between the two groups).

At the same time, respondents from group B will be invited by their moderator to take as many notes as possible from the topics discussed in the next meeting room, while group A works for them as a stimulus that they would evaluate once the discussion in group A is completed.

In this way, the sellers' representatives will be placed face-to-face with the consumer's voice to make the interaction's evaluation of the most relevant components. The benefits lie in the possibility of identifying the problems that are not at all known to the bidders.

**Quantitative method**

The questionnaire was applied to the total number of 1019 people. Considering the very abstract concepts that have been tested, to filter people so that we could obtain answers as relevant as possible, especially for open questions, the first stage of the questionnaire was an element that helped select the people who could shape the image of authenticity in Romania. Screening questions consisted of the following aspects: understanding the term of authenticity or its synonyms, as respondents built them at the qualitative stage and the ability to provide spontaneous answers to the open questions.

The average time taken to apply the questionnaire was 12 minutes. Given the high degree of abstraction that characterizes the tested concepts, the rate of non-response reaches, on some questions, even values exceeding 25%. The deletion of questionnaires which were not completed because of the excessive length of application time or because of the overly complex concepts being investigated would have led to distortions inside the investigated group and were therefore retained, views on the subjects being investigated and the respondents' contribution to the construction of the concepts discussed is equally important.

Validating a concept such as an authenticity in a questionnaire may become, in the absence of its operationalization along with the respondent, a mere linguistic assessment, which is irrelevant in understanding the respondents' need for authenticity, all the more so since the concept of authenticity was very generously built by the respondents. It was

different depending on the dimension it characterized. To reiterate the metaphor behind the title, I would like to mention that authenticity itself is a label designed to assume a series of expectations of the interviewed social actors concerning various aspects of their lives (interaction with others, perception of the political class, the way decision-making trees are built regarding purchases and so on).

Matching this analysis with the socio-demographic variables, the responses were grouped into classes. In this way, the ages of interviewees were categorized as it follows: 1st category 17-17 years old, 2nd category, 18-35 years old, 3rd category, 36-50 years old, 4th category 51-65 years old, and the 5th category, over 65 years old), the level of education was comprised in the following categories: elementary education (graduates up to 8 classes), middle-education (graduates of vocational school, high school, post-secondary school) and higher education (college graduates, faculty graduates, post-graduate). It is important to emphasize that the percentage of elementary education is 30,1% of the investigated sample, with 51,5% being having middle-level studies and 18,4% with higher education.

Depending on the net salary that the participants claim they gain, the following categories were created: No income, less than 500 RON/month, between 501-1000 RON/month, 1001-2000 RON, 2001-4000 RON/month, 4001-8000 RON/month, over 8000 RON/month. The percentages within each of these socio-demographic variables can be consulted at the end of the papers, in the annexes.

In order to collect the qualitative data, discussions were recorded in audio format, using the tape recorder, respondents being asked in advance for their approval to store the discussion in a digital format. They were guaranteed the confidentiality of their personal data. This was also why the authors of the quotes cited in the paper appear mentioned by the first letter of their names or even by fictional names, where it was specifically requested. Given the relatively high number of discussions (focus groups, interviews, and parallel groups), the discussions' transcripts were completed by the moderator's comments immediately after their completion to be sure that they memorize the aspects directly related to the objectives the study.

The video recording took place only for the parallel groups, the methodology itself working only by direct transmission of the situations discussed in the experimental group. For the data collection, within the parallel groups and one of the focus groups (i.e., the one moderated in Timisoara), we collaborated with two distinct on-site moderators whom we

trained following the suggestions mentioned in the discussion guide attached to this work so that we could reduce to a minimum the moderation bias. Consequently, no differences were observed in the moderation styles, and the groups had substantially equal timeframes. One of the study's limitations, present during both the qualitative and quantitative stages, was the discussion focused on rather abstract concepts. It was almost impossible to examine the impact of authenticity per se using this term alone, which is why, to keep this situation under control, social actors involved in the research were asked to build synonyms for the concept of authenticity and to explain/define them.

As far as the quantitative research is concerned, the data collection took about a week, and the application of the questionnaires applied by phone, by the (CATI) method, was possible due to the help given by the colleagues of the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy. The institute operators contacted for questioning about 1500 people, finally reaching a total of 1019 valid questionnaires. The difference to the total number of questionnaires, represented by the invalidated responses, was calculated after being invalidated by the people who could not provide synonyms to the evaluated concepts and whose answers were found to be irrelevant to the study.

However, the study is relevant at a national level, even though a significant percentage of questionnaires have been invalidated due to the respondents' degree of ignorance of the concepts tested. In practice, the concept of authenticity has never been tested individually, and the study does not necessarily aim to verify the knowledge of this concept, but rather the social phenomenon behind the social players' need for authenticity.

The collected data was stored in a database analyzed in the SPSS software, with the title *Autenticitate complete sav* and encoded in Excel in conformity with the respondents' answers to the open questions. To export the tables analyzed in the chapter named "Quantitative Analyze," I also used the SPSS software of statistic. For a deeper understanding of the results, I created a series of tables to correlate the variables besides exporting the data frequencies. As a result of this operation, I could identify several situations where the investigated variables were linked together. The output added value to the results and established the frequency of the participants' responses to the study.

The database is too complex to be included in the annexes, but, as well as the transcripts of the focus groups, and it can be made available on request to the commission for the evaluation of the thesis for the validation of the data obtained from the application of the

research tools. During the phase dedicated to the quantitative data analysis, we took into account, one by one, a single factorial characteristic when we tried to establish correlations between the open responses and the socio-demographic data to determine a single resultant characteristic and more than two factorial characteristics when I tried to outline the profile of the authenticity consumer.

**Presentation of research limitations**

The study's main limitation is precisely the problem of operationalizing the concept of authenticity, which, as we have seen, is treated multidisciplinary and from different perspectives precisely because it is a concept that defines complex situations, strongly influenced by space-time and even socio-economic or political contexts.

This was an essential argument in achieving the qualitative stage, with respondents being asked to provide in-depth descriptions of the tested concepts (the sought values). The people who were chosen for group discussions and interviews were selected based on criteria similar to those with from which a part of the quantitative questionnaires was excluded, and the respondents concerned being rather chosen from among the social actors creative and vocal enough to create complex judgments thus giving voice to emotions, experiences or other values of a sensitive nature, which are difficult to capture in a mostly rational, evaluative discussion.

However, the participants' selection for discussions did not target people who necessarily knew the meaning of the concept of authenticity but were subject to relatively short conversations on abstract subjects (about 10 minutes) – the view of the professional future, Romania's journey in Europe and soon. In this way, we sought to establish people's ability to analyze a situation and the language used in this respect (people who used as many synonyms as possible to capture nuances at the expense of those who described different conditions with only one term).

In the survey, question G5 was only addressed to the operator who collected the data and was trained to select the participants according to their ability to provide answers to the questions during the questionnaire's first stage. The purpose of this measure was to keep under control a possible evaluation of concepts which, while strongly recognizable and emotionally validated, could not be adequately described and defined because of the high degree of abstraction. This is the reason why, for 28,7% of respondents, the survey stopped

immediately after the first set of questions, because the operators determined that they were talking to people incapable of interiorizing the tested concepts.

Another methodological limit was the slight overrepresentation in the representative sample, at a national level, of the number of people with higher education. This was also due to how selecting people who responded to the questionnaire was made, as I mentioned above, targeting people with a high capacity to discuss rather abstract subjects.

### Results

The views expressed by the respondents in the interview outline the perception of development in the way people interact in recent times. The main reason for this, said the interviewees, would be developing the technology that enables people to get closer to each other and diminishes the distance between people. According to respondents, the ability to interact with someone via phone devices, smartphone apps, and social media is a step toward human interaction.

The development of technology increases the number of communication opportunities for both young and older people, as long as both categories are willing to learn how to use the technological tools referred to by respondents (social networks, smartphones, mobile applications, etc.). The only barriers perceived by respondents, in terms of communication and interaction, are similar to those mentioned by by Ștefan Boncu (2005), in his paper "*Interpersonal Processes"* more precisely the reluctance to reveal negative aspects: "we were certainly put in the situation of asking ourselves when we must disclose negative information about ourselves to others so that they do not cease to sympathize with us. The timing of the disclosure of such information may indeed affect interpersonal attraction" (p. 111). Thus, here are some of the answers from the interviewees:

- *"....now, whether you are chatting via Skype or over a cup of coffee in a restaurant, it is important how much you choose to share with the other person. You can do this sooner or later, and you have to weigh things accurately, I would say...."* (FGD4 Bucharest)

Regarding the essence of the discussions and their content, the respondents also consider that it is possible to talk about certain evolutionary dynamics in the last years due to increased access to information. The reasoning of the interviewees is based on the fact that instant access to knowledge and the extent of news sites that have invaded social networks are

two elements that present a generous set of conversation topics, generate even more debates and, implicitly, a fiercer interaction between people:

- *"We have got Facebook, Instagram, talk shows, stand-up comedies and all kinds of shows that are broadcast both on TV and online, and all these things mean more conversation topics"* (IDI7 Bucharest).

The standard of living is also seen as being very closely related to how human interactions have evolved in recent years, with respondents often referring to the fact that the plans they and their acquaintances make are more and more intricate, holidays tend to be longer more abundant, the perception being that their income would directly influence the plans and relationships between people.

Regarding old friends versus people recently included in their circle of acquaintances, the discussion participants have pointed out both similarities and differences. Thus, they had been manifesting a sort of externalization of negatively connoted actions and an assumption of the desired ones, which were, of course, positively connoted. More specifically, the respondents assert that the way they approach their new friends, those they have just met, hardly differs from how their behavior is defined about their old friends. Simultaneously, the participants emphasize that they expect old friends to be more relaxed toward them. However, it would be erroneous to generalize this perception. The emotional side is also being included in some of the conversations when respondents admitted that around certain people, even those they barely know, they *feel* they can open up those new friends being perceived as *trustworthy*.

- *"No, there are situations when you instantly have a connection with someone, and you feel that they are trustworthy"* (IDI8 Bucharest).

This approach is quite similar to Boyle's (2005, as cited in Vannini and Wiliams, 2009), description of the concept of authenticity, a notion he describes as bearing a strong connection to 18th-century romanticism when the emphasis was placed on virtues such as intuition, imagination, and feelings in general. Thus, "the*n I think, therefore I exist* notion was replaced by a philosophy more related to *I feel, therefore I exist*" (p.65). In defining the concept of authenticity, we will see that both the theories that approach this concept and the qualitative analysis, which is the subject of this thesis, often converge in the emotional area, comprising ideas that are difficult to verbalize and describe by the respondents. One such idea is the attraction between people and how people who share common goals or similar

preferences tend to make friends more easily. In groups and interviews, respondents appeal to emotion to describe these situations. However, Boncu Ștefan (2005) said in his paper: "As individuals get to know each other, certain factors come into play and decide whether their relationship will turn into a friendship or not. One of these factors is similarity.

Additionally, the idea that interaction between people with similar attitudes generates mutual attraction has a long history" (p. 12). Another author, Theodore Newcomb (1961), came up with the first ideas that proved the attitudinal similarity between people as the cause of attraction. He experimented at the University of Michigan, where students were asked to complete several questionnaires about their attitudes and values. The results were fascinating, proving, after the first weeks, that initially, the students interacted in terms of proximity. As time passed, they gradually formed groups around the ideas and values that defined them, which they had previously completed at the beginning of the semester. Another experiment, more revealing and with a more complex methodology, is that of (Vannini and Wiliams 2009), who handed students a 26 item questionnaire. They were asked to choose one of the six possible answers for each question. They would receive the same questionnaire either completed with their previous answers or with different ones at an interval of several weeks. Results indicated that the respondents appreciated people who had completed the questionnaires similarly, to a far greater extent than those who chose differently. However, this experiment remains relevant in the future, especially in political correctness, becoming the new "litmus test" for normalcy. It is for this reason that authenticity can prove to be a much more generous umbrella concept. Authenticity can tackle interpersonal attraction without excluding the differences in vision between people who might admire each other.

Regarding the methodology, it should be mentioned that the moderator always insisted on the situations in which the participants to the conversation used emotional evidence to validate their ideas, rather than reasoning. This aspect is essential to mention in the light of the studies on authenticity, which aim to define this concept from a 360° perspective so that, if authenticity is included in future talks about human interaction, the present study will represent the first step in this direction.

Concerning the definition of authenticity, except for two interviews, where "authenticity" was mentioned as a synonym for "sincerity," spontaneous associations were deprived of this term. The following question was posed: *if you had to use the word "authentic" to build a sentence to characterize your relationship with your friends, how would*

*you proceed?* It was interesting to find out the extent to which the respondents use words to describe real interaction experiences or just projections:

- *"My friends show authenticity when they do not hide things from me; my friends have been honest with me every time they found out things about me; I think I am a trustworthy friend, as long as they decide to share a lot of activities with me"* (FGD2 Cluj-Napoca).

- *"Authentic friends are the ones who do not let you down, no matter the situation; I appreciate sincere people because you do not have to hide from them and become paranoid when conversing with them; I can suggest to those from the office that I am a trustworthy person if I do not interject in discussions about colleagues"* (FGD4 Bucharest).

We notice a slightly higher tendency among respondents to use the term "trust" in sentences that describe their image in front of others rather than their perception of other people in this mental exercise. This occurrence is supported methodologically, all the more so as this situation developed both in interviews and focus groups and from one group to another, although the order of investigation was changed each time. Therefore we can speak of a somewhat higher similarity between the terms "authenticity" and "sincerity." The word "trust" is also close, but it covers an unspecific area for the previous two.

By asking the question*, "what does it mean for you to be an authentic person in your relationship with others?"* the moderator focused on an in-depth exploration, intending to extract a great set of verbatim phrases from the respondents in the attempt to outline a complete definition of the term "authenticity." And this time, it was not long before the emotional elements appeared:

- *"You need to assure the other person that they can trust you"* (IDI1, Timisoara);

- *"You must say it to their face, to call things by their name..."* (IDI6, Iași);

- *"You have to make the other person believe you, open up to you"* (IDI8, Bucharest).

Instead, this time around, the emotion was the foundation for the sense of authenticity, rather than an alternative to rational thinking. Authenticity is primarily about people and can be easily spotted right from the first interaction. This idea is supported by Jean Klaude Kaufmann (2005), who discusses the emphasis on situations that lead to "instantly shaped perceptions" (p.196). Specifically, they believe that the first interaction is often decisive for future interactions between people. Thus, we could say that prejudice plays an essential role

in creating sympathies, the interaction time being quite limited. Under these circumstances, people tend to project an image of the person they just met based on the little information they gather at the beginning and supplementing it with similar situations from their past. These situations seem to complete the picture of the people they interact with.

When asked to describe in a few words the authenticity or lack of authenticity they show in their relationship with others (friends or acquaintances), two aspects were observed that are in turn related to the form and substance of the matter: on the one hand, the interviewees insist that they choose the positive side, suggesting that this way they show more authenticity. On the other hand, by assuming the exercise of authenticity, respondents seem to attach themselves to concreteness more than when they are asked to define this term:

- *"To be authentic with someone means to tell them what you think about their actions, about their image, it means not to be afraid to hurt them, because you look from a constructive perspective. It means giving advice rather than criticism"* (IDI3, Cluj-Napoca).

In turn, although oriented toward the positive, desirable side, the participants' responses are somewhat more divided when it comes to things they would like to change about how they address each other and how they relate:

- *"I should have less confidence in people"* (IDI4, Cluj-Napoca);

- *"I should be more open to others and not be so skeptical, after all, if things degenerate, then I can say goodbye"* (IDI8, Bucharest).

The differences seem to be more a result of age influence on inter-human interactions. Thus, as one of the female participants from a group from Timișoara says, young people, victims of speechlessness, tend to look at authenticity more reluctantly and are inclined to answer that they prefer not to reveal themselves so quickly in interactions. However, the reported experiences prove that such phenomena exist, and more often than not, thoughts remain at the idealistic level. As for the older, more experienced groups of people, things are a bit antithetical. The elderly consider that "I have been protected long enough, and I have nothing to lose in being honest with the other person. If I am deceived, we loosen the ties and befriend other people as well; it is not the end of the world" (IDI8, Bucharest).

Regarding the perception that one of the Romanian ethnicity characteristics is authenticity, more precisely their ability to be authentic and the fact that this quality comes to differentiate the Romanian people from other nations, opinions are not homogeneous. Instead, small groups of responses are formed. Older people are more likely to such prejudices, while

young people or those who make exact references to (more or less relevant) evidence believe that authenticity is an independent concept that is not a distinctive feature of a people.

But authenticity is not just about humans. At least the hypothesis on which this thesis is based took into account other objects that can be perceived as authentic. One such item is the class of consumer goods, the idea being to check the extent to which various products can be viewed through the filter of the need for authenticity. The first question of this chapter was about *the things that matter most when thinking of shopping*. This question was not specifically aimed at observing the degree to which people spontaneously say that they follow the authenticity of products when conducting a decision-making process, but rather sought out product features capable of using that cluster of terms to compare the results to the way people define the authenticity of the products. Synonyms would serve as a definer in this case.

- *"The quality and price of the products are the most important aspects"* (IDI3, Cluj-Napoca);

- *"I look at the origin: if it is local, the chances are that the products are made responsibly, with durable materials, fresh food, etc."* (FGD2, Cluj-Napoca).

The main categories of products investigated were: real estate, cars, consumer products (weekly basket), service subscriptions, and professional products (sports equipment). In addition, when answering the question "What are other categories of products that will not buy unless they meet certain conditions?" many participants added body care products. A respondent from Iași included products for adults on this list, a category of products that, later in the discussion, he reclassified as professional products.

However, the key to reading this question lies in the common elements of these product categories: guarantees, value for money, and brand, the latter being understood as a set of values that respondents appreciate or resonate with. All three become, sooner or later, in discussions, synonymous with what the participants to focus groups and interviews understand through authenticity. Therefore, product authenticity is based on *quality* (not being dishonest or fraudulent), the related *guarantee* (which validates the new and durable properties mentioned earlier with authenticity), and *branding* (which emphasizes people's need for sharing satisfying decisions — "everyone uses this type of product…. it is no wonder, I tell you" — and being in the company of objects rather than people, confining themselves to the status display. This idea is also found in the work of Baudrillard (2008), who argues that frankly speaking, other people no longer surround people who are busy

leading a life, but by objects and in their everyday relationships, they no longer have partners similar to their peers, but receive and handle more and more goods and messages, starting with the extremely complex domestic organization, with its dozens of technical slaves, the urban furniture with all the actual arsenal of communications and professional activities, to the perpetual spectacle of celebrating the object in advertising and the hundreds of daily messages from the media, from the petty bustle of quasi-obsessive gadgets to the symbolic psychodramas fueled by nocturnal objects that come to it haunts us even in our dreams" (p. 29).

In terms of spontaneous associations with the idea of a quality product, the respondents tend to describe concrete consumer objects and find it challenging to assign synonyms to the concept of "high quality" when discussing it at an abstract level:

- *"To be of high quality, that is, to be good"* (FGD2, Cluj-Napoca);

- *"Bread quality means it has to be fresh and warm, furniture quality means it has to be durable, TV-quality means it must have all kinds of options, to be smart. One certain quality does not fit all products, only if we were to talk about them being very good"* (IDI2, Timisoara).

However, when they indicated a common feature for quality products after the moderator insisted, the respondents stressed the need for guarantees. The paradox identified at first sight is that if the participants talk about a quality product that offers an included guarantee, the discussions should not encourage additional proofs. Nevertheless, this idea has also appeared in other sociological works, where the cause of this conflict of ideas has been attributed to evolution, the passage of time. When life insurance was first introduced on the market, people considered it morally repulsive: the idea of paying a policy for such insurance seemed macabre because death was seen as a lottery; but after the turn of the 19th century, the families of people with average status reconsidered their position and understood their benefits in situations where the family provider was going to die (Fligstein & Dioun, 2015, p. 6).

This perspective becomes significantly valuable in decoding what respondents understand by authenticity about products. Conversely, the guarantees, used by the participants to the discussions to find similar meanings for the concept of authentic products, split into two directions: on the one hand, the quality guarantee on the time axis (the respondents consider that an authentic product is characterized by durability, no incidents or

very distant expiration date), and on the other hand, they invoke the idea of quality assurance validated by history or place of origin. A solid proof to back this idea is found in the stereotypes, which are often brought up in discussion groups: "a German car is a German car," "Topoloveni jam is authentic, nowhere can you find a recipe as good as this one." In this way, in terms of products, the respondents indirectly associate the idea of originality as a guarantor and main descriptor with the definition of authenticity.

R: *"It has to be on the spot, made in that very place."*

M: *"DO YOU MEAN DOMESTIC, LOCAL PRODUCTS?"*

R: *"Yes and no. It is about being sure that it was made there or by the seller. You are not deceived; the seller is not a trader, but a representative of the factory, of the product."* (IDI8, Bucharest)

**Quantitative analysis**

The quantitative part of this study was not a standalone objective, but after identifying certain trends from moderation, it seemed rightful to assess the amplitude of what I considered the *need for authenticity*. As it has been placed in the research hypothesis, the validation of this phenomenon is a secondary objective but is nonetheless of great interest from the perspective of unlocking new research frontiers in the field of consumer segments and how mass marketing messages are built, but also in political marketing or even in understanding how interpersonal relationships are being shaped.

The questionnaire used to investigate the perception of social actors toward the concept of authenticity was divided into four distinct dimensions: authenticity in interpersonal relationships, authenticity in marketing and communication, authenticity in consumer decision-making processes, and authenticity concerning the broader concept of policy.

Given the novelty of the tested concepts, the verification of the terms represented, at this quantitative stage, a special point of interest. The mere verification of the perceived degree of authenticity, in correspondence to all four dimensions investigated, would have been insufficient before this point or independent of the understanding of how this concept is constructed in the respondents' perception. Specifically, I considered it prosaic to assess the degree of knowledge of a certain concept to the detriment of understanding the implications of the term's social phenomenon. Authenticity becomes a metaphor for a certain label that products, brands, or people receive from social actors based on certain opinions or thoughts that they nurture about those objects.

The questionnaire comprises a total of 38 items (excluding socio-demographic data) adequate in building consumer profiles and traits of social actors for whom authenticity is an essential key in decoding the world around them.

An important aspect to mention is the caution with which data interpretation must be executed. In the pioneering stage of the investigation of social authenticity, I believe that directions and trends regarding the answers should be followed, even though I also try to outline other ways to segment the investigated population. Moreover, even these profiles have the role of helping us to find out where we should look further in crystallizing these personas. To ensure a more honest representation of Romanians' perceptions and attitudes toward the concept of authenticity, we inserted in the data collection tool both control questions (the same question asked at two different times, but slightly altered the second time) and scales containing middle response variants and also the possibility of non-response.

Even so, as we will see at the beginning of the analysis, some of the answers strongly contrasted. The situation of the answers that seem discordant can be interpreted in terms of an "irrationality" on the part of respondents, the irrationality that can be caused by several factors including social desirability (the fact that it is acceptable to present yourself as being in fashion, the desire to belong to a reference group, the suspicion of data collection) or the possible perception that shared opinions are heard/read by friends or acquaintances. Overall, participants' opinions are shaped and nuanced by a multitude of factors, subjective or objective, that a quantitative perception study cannot fully grasp. This is also why we included both a qualitative and a quantitative stage, as they complement each other to a high degree.

In terms of the quantitative analysis results, there is generally a certain note of pessimism that designates how the interviewed social actors represent their reality. This attitude is divided into several levels, including how they perceive others' attitudes toward themselves and how they perceive the way leaders represent them; in both cases, the respondents are broadly reluctant to describe others positively. Comparatively, the first two questions suggest validating skepticism, even if the simultaneous existence of both opinions shared by the same respondents can be paradoxical.

One such example is the link between the question in Table G1 (*"Considering interactions between people in our society, would you say that most are rather authentic or lacking authenticity?"*), 59% of the respondents replied that a lack of authenticity

characterizes relationships between people. The question in Table G2, where 62% of the same group of people think about themselves as the exact opposite, displays authenticity when interacting with others. We can interpret these answers in the same key, namely a strong skepticism wave that depicts social actors' perception toward others in relation to themselves and a high degree of perceived inequity to stratum. This second example is also backed by the question in table G25, where the respondents indicate, in a tiny percentage (3%), the existence of authenticity as a Romanian political class trait. Considering this paper's results and other studies provided by the same research institute that supported me in the data collection stage, this trend is consistent, continuous, and growing. Romanians tend to feel unrepresented in advance by the people they willingly place in leadership positions by popular vote.

The sample used to collect quantitative data is stratified and probabilistic. The stratification criteria followed were the historical region (where the three regions were taken into account, as follows: Transylvania + Banat; South + Bucharest + Dobrogea; and Moldova), the type of locality (three categories were followed: urban >= 100,000 inhabitants; urban concerning habitants; rural). Regarding the selection of subjects, this was done randomly with the amendment that people considered unable to describe in detail the experiences or even the concepts tested, in the sense of providing synonyms to prove understanding of the terms, were removed from the database, thus reaching to a total of 1019 valid answers.

In order to weight the results as to align the sample structure with the population structure according to the data provided by RPL 2011, the variables taken into account are sex of respondents, age (four categories: 18-35, 36-50, 51-65, 65+), living environment (mentioned above), historical region (mentioned above), education of the participants to the discussions (three categories: no school + primary school + gymnasium; vocational school + high school + post-secondary school; three-year college + university + postgraduate studies). The weighting was done directly in the data processing statistical software, using the *ranking* technique with 20 iterations.

By weighting, there is a very slight over-representation of the population with higher education in the sample. There are two reasons for this situation: on the one hand, it is the self-selection of respondents due to the topic addressed in the questionnaire, the degree of abstraction of the concepts discussed is relatively high, and on the other hand, there is the methodological option to maintain the level of weighting indices between the limits 0.3 and

5.10, to limit the distortions that may occur after applying the post-sampling techniques. Relative to the population, the difference in the structure of the sample is negligible. Therefore, we can talk about nationally valid data and implicitly, after seeing the data analysis, a trend that captures the Romanians' need for authenticity. It was explored in four dimensions: interpersonal relations, politics, consumption, and advertising.

**Data analysis**

*Authenticity in interpersonal relationships*

One thing that can be observed from the respondents' answers is Romanians' tendency to be skeptical toward the outside world. The large discrepancy between the perception of one's own actions and that of other people can be explained to the low degree of trust in people with whom Romanians interact. Almost two out of five (39.6%) Romanians answered that they have little trust in the people around them (see G.34), and this degree of trust decreases as those people are more distant from the respondent's family circle. Being asked *who is the person they trust the most*, among family members and acquaintances, 38.3% of Romanians answered they trust their life partner, followed by one of the parents (23.3%), one of the children (11%), and, at the very end, a neighbor (0.1%) and a co-worker (below 0.1%). Also, the difference between the percentages of the first two questions precisely suggests a high disproportion between the way people project their person, the Self, to others and vice versa, how they see others performing on the social scene concerning them (Goffman, 2007).

Relevant in this context are question G1 (*Considering the interactions between people in our society, would you say that most of them are rather authentic or lacking in authenticity?*, where 58.6% people answered with *rather lacking in authenticity*), and the question in Table G2 (*if you were to consider your interactions with those around you, would you say that these are rather authentic or lacking in authenticity?*, where the highest percentage (61.6%) of people chose *authentic* as their answer). The cause identified by the respondents concerning the perceived lack of authenticity toward the people around them (G.21) indicates a problem outside the interviewed social actors, which supports precisely the above idea: over 31% of the answers are centered on people and hypocritical actions (such as *lacking in authenticity*).

Regarding the frequency with which respondents perceive the lack of authenticity in the behavior of those around them, the results still indicate a slightly lower degree of skepticism, answers like "sometimes" and "rarely" being in the top with 35.2% and 34.1%

each. "Frequently" comes in third place with 20.9%. The answers from questions G4 (*what is your relation to the person with whom you last felt the lack of authenticity?*) and G35 (*who is the person you trust the most, among family members and acquaintances?*) are particularly noteworthy.  In the case of the first question (G4), over 31% of Romanians consider that the lack of authenticity is rather a trait of co-workers, while only 18.5% blame this on neighbors and 13.6% on strangers. From here, we can conclude that the reason for question G35 placing neighbors in the last place is also caused by the lack of frequent interactions, even less frequent than interactions with colleagues. We can now assert that authenticity is decoded to a greater extent when people interact with each other for prolonged periods. This idea validates a conclusion of the qualitative study in which some respondents suggested that to decode an authentic approach or even an authentic person (a politician), the test of time is necessary:

- *"I cannot figure it out right away; we will see in time what he is capable of"* (ID1);

Authenticity is, therefore, a concept proven by facts. It is not a completely abstract value; the respondents' answers instead confirm Van Leeuween's theory, which speaks of this concept as having an evaluative role (Van Leeuween's, 2001).

As I mentioned in the chapter on methodological limitations, question G5 (*respondent understands the concept of authenticity or has no difficulty in answering questions*) had the role of controlling the share of people with a greater ability to describe and characterize the concepts discussed to the detriment of those who prefer non-answers or avoid providing consistent answers to open-ended questions. To this question, the operators indicated 71.3% who held a discussion focused on abstract topics, which is why only these answers (1,019 in total) were considered relevant for the data analysis.

**Figure 1**

*The respondent understands the concept of authenticity/does not encounter any difficulty in answering the questions.*
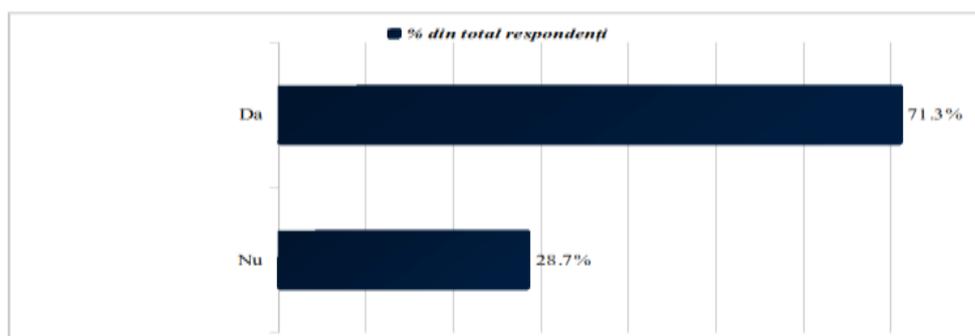
This did not necessarily mean that all non-answers were eliminated, but rather that those who offered only non-answers to the first set of questions were not asked further details.

Regarding question G6 (*do you consider yourself a rather authentic/unauthentic person?*), there were no surprises; it was one of the questions meant to control the veracity and consistency of the answers, with over 89.4% of respondents suggesting that they consider themselves rather authentic, consistent with answers to G2. The same can be said about the answers to question G7 (*to what extent do you think that you show authenticity when interacting with others*), with over 64% answering that they do so *mostly* and 20%.

G7 (*if you were to find a synonym for authenticity, what would it be?*) was the first open question of high importance concerning the research objectives, respondents answering *sincerity* (13.9%), *originality* (12.1%), *real* (7%), and *true* (5%) these being in the top of preferences (non-answers included). At this stage of the questionnaire, the definition of authenticity is built on the dimension of interpersonal relationships. The respondents give a high value to sincerity in the interaction between people in terms of exercising authenticity.

When responding to the question *"to what extent do you think that authenticity is a specific trait of Romanians?"*, participants chose a *positive* response in over 50% of the cases, while 41% replied with *"to a lesser extent*." This question has the role of "X-raying" the perception of Romanians toward the people they feel close to and comes in addition to the questions aimed at evaluating how Romanians perceive those around them in terms of authenticity. The resulting information is, therefore, relevant in the idea that it validates a conclusion that people with whom certain values are shared are rather perceived as authentic. Such situations suggest that the stereotype formulas are not entirely assumed by Romanians, even if they tend to use certain prejudices in the evaluations they make. Decisions seem to be made not necessarily on preformed judgments of value but on emotional criteria.

This is also indirectly suggested by the answer to question G9, where over half of the respondents claim that it is best to be authentic when interacting with others. We can speak, in the case of these questions, that they attract socially desirable answers. Still, this very assertion suggests emotion and self-image, as projected in the interaction with others, are the ones that prevail.

A question that digs deep into adopting authenticity as a defining element of interpersonal relationships is G10, which comes to clarify the situations in which it is best to

be authentic. The answers support the respondents' initial opinions, the relationships with the closest acquaintances being placed first in this evaluation scale in the following order: 1. Relationship with children, 2. Relationship with parents, 3. Relationship with the life partner, 4. Relationship with other family members, 5. Relationship with close friends, 6. Relationship with subordinates, 7. Relationship with customers (at work). We could say that these answers represent a projection of others' expectations in the Self; the questionnaire's last question also supports this. Respondents over 64% of the participants responded that they feel the need for more authenticity in general.

The answers are validated by comparison with the results of question G11, where the wording is mirrored compared to G10 (*but more specifically, in the following types of relationships, is it better to combine authenticity with its absence?*). This is also the case with answers from G12, the question being meant to validate the image already acquired through the results of the analysis of the answers to previous questions.

The way the Romanians outline the authentic person's profile validates the answers from the qualitative study, *sincerity* being the feature that gathers the most consensus in this sense (22.1%), followed by *open*, with only 5%. This suggests a very accurate understanding of the definition of authenticity in interpersonal relationships and also outlines a real need that is easy to define and, therefore, easy to assess. Sincerity is described as a synonymous term for authenticity in interpersonal relationships in 76% of the cases.

The concept of trust is also attributed to the idea of authenticity. However, it is supported by a lower percentage of only 67%. This will count in understanding the role of authenticity in how the image of politicians and political messages are shaped.

### Discussion and conclusion

From the opinions expressed by the interviewed respondents, the perception of an evolution of the way people interact lately is outlined. The interviewees argue that the main support would be developing technology that allows people to get closer and cut distances between people. The possibility to interact with someone through telephones, smartphone applications, social networks, respondents say, is a step forward in terms of human interaction.

The development of technology leads to an increase in the number of communication opportunities for both young and older people, as long as both categories are open to learning how to use the technological tools mentioned by respondents (social networks, smartphones,

mobile applications, etc.). The only barriers perceived by the respondents, in terms of communication and interaction, are similar to those mentioned by Ștefan Boncu (2005), more precisely the reluctance of revealing the negative aspects "we were certainly put in the situation of asking ourselves when we must disclose negative information about ourselves to others so that they do not cease to sympathize with us. The timing of the disclosure of such information may indeed affect interpersonal attraction".

Therefore, the quantitative analysis conclusions are the validation of the working hypotheses while supporting the trends identified in the qualitative stage. In Romania, social actors have developed a certain need for authenticity in a country where original and authentic things are hard to reach, and people which can be considered as sincere, trustworthy, and therefore authentic, are almost non-existent, their empathy being closer to zero as relationships are more and more distant. The degree of skepticism among Romanians is also high, as they are confident in themselves and their potential to be fair to others, but they are not all that certain when they have to trust messages received from outside their selves.

Strategically speaking, an optimistic note of this rather worrying situation is the respondents' potential to identify anomalies, distinguishing between authenticity and lack thereof and being experts in recognizing it, especially in emotional terms or applying the test of time to validate it. Therefore, the need for authenticity exists, but so do the solutions to cover it.

In support of the hypothesis, one of the study's conclusions indicates a real need for social actors to be treated correctly, originally and sincerely, proving their trust through an emotional channel that is easy to decode, which leaves no room for interpretations and suspicions. However, as we have seen, authenticity is rather a concept constructed at the level of individual perception. How can you, in this situation, simultaneously be both surprised and the element of surprise in the construction of the authentic?

Analyzing the public opinion, I realized that I end up in an extremely sensitive process, the one in which I analyze the way references and evaluation standards are built. Perceived authenticity is, for a world oversaturated with choices, the key to decoding unique experiences. Interestingly, all we can do now is calculate the point when all experiences will visibly overlap in a common form.

To understand how the perception of authentic objects or relationships is constructed, we reviewed both theories that discuss rational decisions and those that capture the emotion

behind these branches of decision. This approach proved relevant as it became increasingly difficult for respondents to indicate an authentic situation or to define the term "authenticity" other than by appealing to the emotional area, often using the phrase "because I feel like (because I sense so)." Thus, one of the objectives of the paper was outlined, that of examining the elements that make up the spontaneous and emotional assessment of authenticity.

My study followed two directions: the first (theoretical), was meant, on the one hand, to provide a local definition of the concept of authenticity and, on the other hand, to identify consumer behaviors specific to groups of people brought together by similar values and their counter-reaction to mass consumption, which is driven by prejudices and stereotypes. Also, in connection with the first direction, I was interested in checking the extent to which the authentic can be an independent trigger of consumption, be it ideas, messages, goods, services, or other values.

The second direction of the study remains the practical one, meant to facilitate understanding a new trend in consumer behavior, opening new communication opportunities to a homogeneous audience among consumers.

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