

Towards a new understanding of brand authenticity: seeing through the lens of millennials

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *The purpose of this study is to explore millennials' perceptions of brand authenticity in relation to their experience with well-established brands.*

Methodology: *This study pursues a mixed approach, applying survey and focus groups as research methods. The quantitative study used cluster analysis to verify the differences and homogeneity of millennials' brand authenticity perceptions of well-established Italian brands (Vespa, Peroni and Cinecittà Studios). Then, it goes on to explain and explore the quantitative findings, focus groups revealed how and why millennials judged these brands to be (in)authentic.*

Findings: *Four clusters of millennials (i.e., the Engaged, the Cheated, the Believer, and the Skeptics) emerged, each ascribing a specific hierarchy to brand authenticity attributes. In contrast, qualitative results show a transversal construct that unifies millennials' quest for authenticity, namely coherence (i.e., coherency over time, coherency between brand promise and its delivery, and coherency between the brand identity and the consumers' identity).*

Research limits: *This study only considers millennials and well-established brands. Therefore, the specific sample of respondents and brands might limit the generalizability of findings.*

Practical implications: *Managers should invest on millennials, paying careful attention to the misalignment of brand values over time and to gaps between brand promise and its delivery. In fact, being the "Digital generation" millennials have a tremendous power in legitimating or de-legitimating the authenticity of brands, especially through e-WOM.*

Originality of the paper: *This study suggests a shift from a historically-based approach to a more holistic one that takes into account the multifaceted nature of brand authenticity related to its quest for coherency.*

Key words: brand authenticity; millennials; Italian brands; brand coherence

1. Introduction

Brand authenticity can be considered as one of the "cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (Brown *et al.*, 2003), a response to current trends of hyperreality and globalness (Arnould and Price, 2000; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006), and a new business imperative of the experience economy

(Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Being a socially constructed phenomenon, several scholars have claimed that brand authenticity has the power to legitimize a brand within its context (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005; Beverland, 2006; Thompson *et al.*, 2006; Beverland *et al.*, 2008, 2010). Concordantly, Aitken and Campelo (2011) underlined the importance of customers in engaging in the brand community and in co-creating brand meanings (Bertilsson and Cassinger, 2011). Nevertheless, non-customers might also have a crucial role in the construction of brand meanings, especially when they reject brands that are considered not authentic, generate brand avoidance through anti-branding communities, and diffuse a negative doppelganger of the brand image (Holt, 2002; Gustafsson, 2006; Thompson *et al.*, 2006).

In particular, the new generation of millennials (i.e., the cohort born between 1982 and 2000, Howe and Strauss, 2000) plays a relevant role in creating brand communities that might sustain or reject brands depending on the perceived brand authenticity (Lantos, 2014), which could undermine the legitimization of well established brands. In addition, the construct of brand authenticity has an objective dimension that is strongly linked to the heritage of the company and related to the preservation of the brand's historical identity over time (Postrel, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Chhabra, 2005; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Balmer, 2011; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). This time-related dimension of brand authenticity could be challenged by the millennials' quest for innovativeness, triggered by their daily use of technology and social media (Raines, 2002; Tanner, 2010; Sashittal *et al.*, 2015).

Drawing on the above, the aim of this study is to explore millennials' perceptions of brand authenticity in relation to their experience with well-established brands (Vespa, since 1946; Peroni since 1846; Cinecittà Studios since 1937). In particular, we address the following research questions: Do millennials share similar perceptions of brand authenticity? How and why do millennials attribute (in)authenticity to a brand?

To answer to these questions, this study first explores the theoretical background, highlighting current perspectives on brand authenticity. Second, it offers a detailed methodology section, explaining the research environment, research objectives and the adopted research methods. Third, it encompasses two research stages: the first, which makes use of a quantitative analysis to segment millennials' perceptions on brand authenticity using cluster analysis; and the second, which is based on qualitative analysis (i.e., focus groups) to explain the results of the cluster analysis, highlighting how and why millennials attributed (in)authenticity to a brand. Finally, findings are discussed and future research avenues are proposed.

2. Consumers' perceptions on brand authenticity

The literature on brand authenticity presents several definitions, from its early roots that contemplated authenticity as being strongly tied to an object (Bendix, 1997) to later advancements that consider it as "a claim

that is made by or for someone, thing or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others” (Peterson, 2005, p. 1086), or “a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed rather than inherent in an object” (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p. 839), and “A subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers” (Napoli *et al.*, 2014, p. 1091).

In general, scholars from this stream of literature have tried to answer the question: “How do consumers attribute authenticity to an object/service brand?” Starting from Bendix’s definition of brand authenticity (1997), scholars and practitioners have investigated consumers’ ability to determine the difference between what can be conceived as real or fake (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Woods, 2005; Chalmers, 2008; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Corciolani, 2014). Empirical findings have revealed that consumers struggle to discriminate the real from the fake (Rose and Wood, 2005; Corciolani, 2014). Nevertheless, results highlight that consumers have the power to negotiate brand meanings, finding authenticity also in the fake and attributing, for instance, authenticity to fictional places (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Rose and Wood, 2005). Therefore, brand “hyperauthenticity” (Rose and Woods, 2005) may emerge when different consumers perceive the same brand as authentic or inauthentic (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). The complexity of brand authenticity actually fully emerges when considering its three main dimensions: objective, subjective and self-referential.

2.1 *The objective dimension of brand authenticity*

The objective dimension of brand authenticity is related to an object and strongly tied to its heritage related constructs (Postrel, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Chhabra, 2005; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011; Mohart *et al.*, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Grayson and Martinec (2004) called it indexical authenticity, claiming that an object is authentic when it is original, and not a copy or an imitation. Therefore, consumers could evaluate this type of authenticity by relying on objective cues that imply the non-alteration of historical characteristics (Postrel, 2003; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). In line with this reasoning, the objective dimension requires the preservation of brand heritage, including the maintenance of the historical brand’s identity (Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Pine and Gilmore, 2008; Balmer, 2011). In truth, the main dilemma that surrounds the objective dimension of authenticity is related to the tension between remaining true to the past and adapting to the ever-changing consumers’ demand (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Beverland, 2005; Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Balmer, 2011; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011). In fact, heritage could be a liability when consumers seek new products (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Accordingly, Beverland (2005) suggested a slow process of adaptation of the intrinsic characteristics of an object and the strategic decoupling of internal practices and external communication (Beverland and Luxton, 2005).

2.2 *The subjective dimension of brand authenticity*

The subjective dimension of brand authenticity is the result of socially constructed brand meanings in relation to every market offering, which can be evaluated by consumers (Brown *et al.*, 2003). In fact, consumers may differ in evaluating brand authenticity by mediating the meanings ascribed to a brand (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Peterson, 2005; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). This is especially true within brand communities that share and shape brand meanings (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). In this scenario, authoritative performances derive from communities and help in achieving a collective sense of identity that fosters the consumers' quest for belongingness and iconic relations with brands (Arnould and Price, 2000; Beverland *et al.* 2010). In particular, a second cue that consumers use to assess authenticity has been called iconic, being "something whose physical manifestation resembles something that is indexically authentic" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 298). In this context, this subjective dimension requires a deeper relationship with consumers who socially construct brand authenticity within their brand communities (Kotzinets, 2001; Fine, 2003; Kates, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Wilson and Morgan, 2011; Charmley *et al.*, 2013). For instance, in examining brand authenticity co-creation within a particular context (i.e., the skateboarder community), Charmley *et al.* (2013) found that consumers co-created brand authenticity meanings by drawing on social comparison (i.e., the inauthentic other). Similarly, the gay community and the MG community co-created the authenticity of two products' brands, namely jeans and cars (Kates, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006).

2.3 *The self-referential dimension of brand authenticity*

The self-referential dimension of brand authenticity mainly derives from Arnould and Price's notion of authenticating acts, which are "self-referential behaviors actors feel reveal or produce the true self" (p. 140). This in line with Holt (2002), who suggests that brands might help consumers in producing the self and cultivating their identities. Thus, a brand is authentic only if it is "a genuine expression of an inner personal truth. I like this because I am like that" (Postrel, 2003, in Beverland, 2005, p. 1007). Beverland provides further insights to this stream of research by proposing three types of brand authenticity: pure, approximate and moral, which are related to the objective, subjective and self-referential dimensions of brand authenticity, respectively (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Beverland *et al.*, 2010). In particular, consumers seek moral authenticity when they want to feel virtuous by looking for a brand connection with personal moral values (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Freedom and excellence are two examples of self-authenticating cues (Beverland *et al.*, 2010). It is important to note that some authors call this last type of authenticity "existential" (Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Özsomer and Altaras, 2008; Morhart *et al.*, 2014); it derives from the self and helps the consumer live fun and pleasurable experiences (Leigh *et al.*, 2006).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research environment

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This section aims to explore the research environment of the present study by explaining the main features that characterize millennials and the selected brands (i.e., Vespa, Peroni, and Cinecittà Studios) for both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Looking through the lens of a specific generation helps in studying different people who share the same time and space grouping them into a collective persona (Mannheim, 1952; Howe and Strauss, 2000). In particular, after the baby boomers (i.e., those born in the 50s-60s), millennials represent the new “Great Generation”, broadly defined as Generation Y (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Wilson and Gerber, 2008; Meister and Willyerd, 2010). In particular, this is the first generation that “contributes, shares, searches for and consumes content plus works and plays on social platforms” (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; p. 245). Making daily use of technology and digital and social media (Raines, 2002; Tanner, 2010; Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Sashittal *et al.*, 2015), the millennials are shaped by the era of the Internet through mass marketing and pop culture (Raines, 2002), the 9/11 trauma, globalization and environmentalism (Tanner, 2010). For this reason, millennials are also claimed to be the “Internet generation”, the “digital generation”, “digital natives”, “digital immigrants”, the “dot.com generation” and the “Nintendo generation”. Alternative labels include “KIPPERS” (Kids in Parents’ Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings), “echo boomers” and “boomlets” (referring to their parents being baby boomers). Nevertheless, as anticipated, the majority of academics and practitioners agree in defining them as Generation Y (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Wilson and Gerber, 2008; Meister and Willyerd, 2010). In particular, the analysis of the literature has highlighted the following specific features that characterize this generation: a) special, as they feel they are smart, and “cool” because of this; b) confident, adaptable and flexible; c) team and teamwork oriented and deeply committed to community volunteering and no profit organizations; d) driven by some conservative values such as moral consciousness and civic duty; e) led by a “Just do it” philosophy of acting and behaving; f) better educated, more affluent and ethnically diverse; g) technologically fluent and good at multitasking and being simultaneously connected; h) raised with e-commerce and great tech advances; i) comfortable with changes, globalization and global perspectives; j) globally connected and open to new businesses and challenges; k) “hyper-communicators” who daily communicate with friends, maintaining constant contact with them; l) possessing a high level of sociability, morality, and high value relationships (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Shepard, 2004; Debruyne, 2006; Raines, 2002; Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008; Wilson and Gerber, 2008; Tanner, 2010; Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Sashittal *et al.*, 2015).

As opposed to the innovative framework characterizing the millennials’ generation, it has been considered relevant to select well-established Italian brands that have represented important assets of Italian

manufacturing (i.e., Piaggio and Peroni), and service (Cinecittà Studios) sectors in the last decades, thus consolidating their brand authenticity over time. In particular, since 1946 the Piaggio company has been producing the globally known Vespa motorcycle, which became a symbol of national development in the 60s. In producing the best known Italian beer since 1846, Peroni has also played a relevant role in the Italian scenario. Finally, the film studio company Cinecittà Studios has constituted an important pillar of the Italian service (entertainment) sector since 1937.

3.2 Research objectives

An analysis of the literature has revealed an increase in scholars' interest in understanding how consumers attribute authenticity to a brand, only recently have researchers engaged in examining this phenomenon by taking a quantitative approach (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). This study aims to contribute, through a mixed methodology, to this relevant academic and practitioner conversation from a millennials' perspective. Millennials have been selected for three main reasons: 1) their quest for innovativeness could challenge the objective dimension of brand authenticity, related to elements such as heritage and place; 2) their commitment to community and hyper communication could challenge the subjective dimension of brand authenticity, related to consumers' social construction and co-creation of meanings; 3) although they are the new great generation of consumers, they are still under-researched in the marketing field (Nowak and Newton, 2006; Bolton *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, this special cohort could pose challenges for the branding domain in the future, highlighting the current need for further research. In this framework, the scope of the present research is to explore if millennials share the same perceptions of brand authenticity (quantitative analysis), how they attribute (in) authenticity to a brand, and why they evaluate the considered brand as (in)authentic (qualitative analysis).

3.3 Research methods

To achieve the research objectives, two studies combining quantitative and qualitative research methods were planned. We firstly collected quantitative data by means of a structured questionnaire that conceived brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct where the union of quality, heritage, originality, sincerity and reliability defined a brand as authentic. Then, a hierarchical cluster analysis was performed to explore similarities and differences in millennials' perceptions of brand authenticity. In particular, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method, which has been deemed an appropriate tool to investigate multidimensional constructs (Staake *et al.*, 2012). The universe population consisted of 2, 880 units with a final sample of 382 respondents (13%) (July 2014, Italian students of Management at the University of Rome Tor Vergata; mean age of 22.6 years; mixed email responses 24% and face to face administration 76%). In particular, the main criteria considered in selecting the sample were age-related, as indicated by existent literature

(Howe and Strauss, 2000). Respondents were asked to provide their opinion using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). The elimination of questionnaires with missing values led to 382 valid responses. The questionnaire included three sections: 1) demographic information; 2) brand authenticity dimensions (brand heritage, quality commitment, sincerity, Napoli *et al.*, 2014; originality and reliability, Bruhn *et al.*, 2012); and 3) brand-related constructs (brand image, brand trust and premium price, Wiedmann *et al.* (2011). Before the questionnaire's administration, the survey items were translated into Italian and then back-translated by a translator whose mother tongue is English. This procedure ensured scale validation, allowing the new scales to share the same psychometric properties of the original scales (Brislin, 1986).

To explain and explore quantitative results, qualitative research encompassed focus group discussions as suggested by Kitzinger (1994, 1995). This methodology was deemed appropriate because it helps when examining how people think and why they think and relate in a certain way (Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999), therefore highlighting people's attitudes and behaviour (Greenbaum, 2000; Hydén and Bülow, 2003). To analyse the focus groups results, a thematic analysis was applied (Wiggins, 2004), using an a priori template (i.e., the questionnaire) (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2008). Only codes were deductively developed, whereas the whole analysis of themes and sub-themes was inductively conducted (Boyatzis, 1998). 33 students attending the "Marketing, Media and Communication" advanced course were selected to recruit participants into the focus groups. In line with the need for homogeneity in background, interest in participation and high interaction for participants in the focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994; Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014), this group had expertise in marketing constructs and an interest in specific aspects of marketing. In March 2015, the aforementioned questionnaire was administered again. Analysis of the data was manually performed having in mind the two main dimensions used to cluster the previous sample: customer/non-customer and high/low scores on brand authenticity. A total of 18 students mirrored the retrieved clusters and participated in the four focus groups, namely the Engaged, the Cheated, the Believer and the Skeptic, with at least one male or one female for each group (see Table 1). No incentive was provided for participation, but the majority of the participants showed great enthusiasm for the initiative (R17 "I have never had such a positive and realistic experience about marketing a brand"). Before starting the interviews, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to gain insights into their perceptions on brand authenticity and they were guaranteed the freedom to express their true opinion, also communicating which brand the participants were supposed to talk about. Then, the way in which each segment of millennials attributed (in)authenticity to a brand was explored. More specifically, the addressed questions were: what should a brand do to be authentic in general and in relation to quality, heritage, originality, sincerity and reliability dimensions; why participants attributed (in)authenticity to the particular brand that was the object of their interviews. Each focus group interview lasted 60-75

minutes and was video-recorded and transcribed. Afterwards, key themes, their commonalities and differences were identified.

Tab. 1: Participants' Profile

Label	Age	Gender	Cluster	Brand (s)
Respondent 1 (R1)	23	female	engaged	Vespa
Respondent 2 (R2)	23	female	engaged	Vespa & Peroni
Respondent 3 (R3)	24	female	engaged	Cinecittà Studios
Respondent 4 (R4)	24	male	engaged	Vespa & Peroni
Respondent 5 (R5)	23	male	engaged	Peroni
Respondent 6 (R6)	23	female	believer	Vespa
Respondent 7 (R7)	24	female	believer	Vespa
Respondent 8 (R8)	24	female	believer	Cinecittà Studios
Respondent 9 (R9)	23	male	believer	Vespa
Respondent 10 (R10)	24	female	cheated	Peroni
Respondent 11 (R11)	25	female	cheated	Vespa
Respondent 12 (R12)	24	female	cheated	Cinecittà Studios
Respondent 13 (R13)	25	male	cheated	Cinecittà Studios & Peroni
Respondent 14 (R14)	23	female	skeptic	Peroni
Respondent 15 (R15)	23	female	skeptic	Peroni
Respondent 16 (R16)	24	female	skeptic	Peroni
Respondent 17 (R17)	23	female	skeptic	Cinecittà Studios
Respondent 18 (R18)	25	male	skeptic	Cinecittà Studios

Source: our elaboration

4. Results

4.1 Clustering millennials' perceptions on brand authenticity

The SPSS 8.0 software has been used for the statistical analysis. First, the constructs' reliability was ascertained by means of Cronbach's alpha (Table 2).

Tab. 2: Constructs' reliability

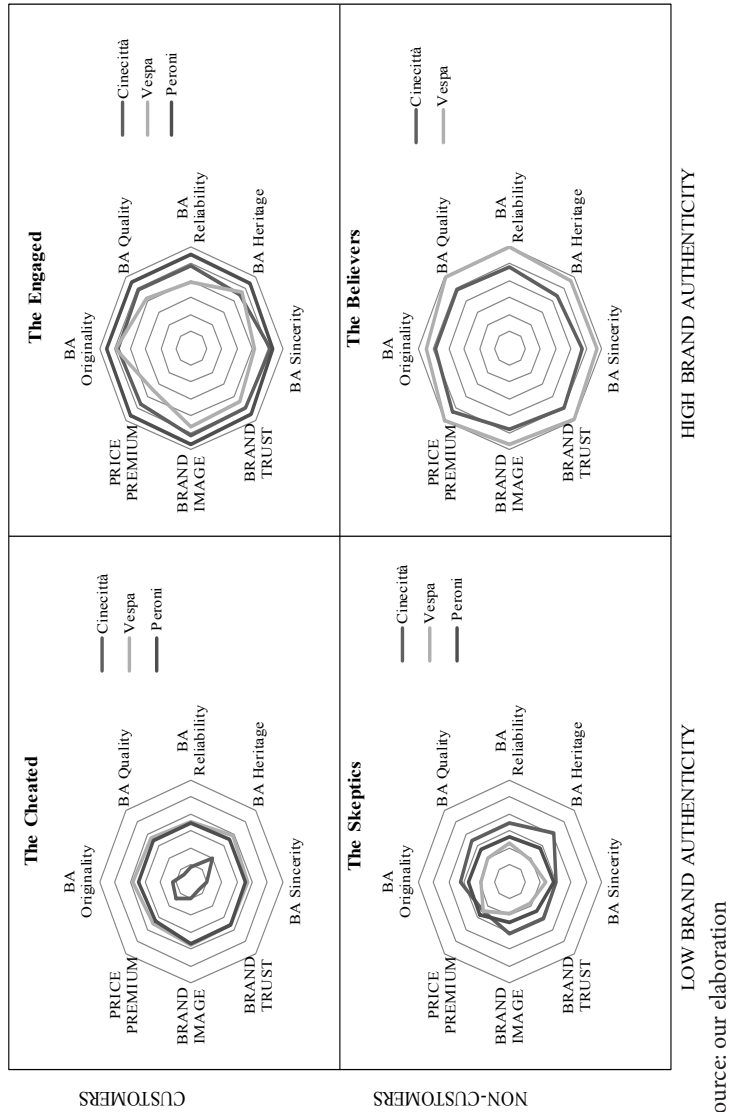
Constructs	Cronbach's alpha
Brand authenticity dimensions	
Quality commitment	.933
Heritage	.901
Sincerity	.793
Originality	.867
Reliability	.889
Brand related constructs	
Brand image	.734
Brand trust	.783
Premium price	.793

Source: our elaboration

This test helps in verifying the internal consistency of the variables by measuring a specific construct (Malhotra, 2008) and its values vary from 0 to 1, where values above 0.60 indicate good internal consistency (Janssens *et al.* 2008). Then, the hierarchical cluster analysis was performed. Four clusters of millennials (i.e., the Engaged, the Believers, the Cheated and the Sceptics) emerged (Figure 1). In general, high and low consumer perceptions of brand authenticity corresponded to high and low scores respectively of consumers' perceptions on brand image, brand trust and premium price. It is interesting to note that no hierarchy between brand authenticity dimensions was found. The detailed analysis of the four clusters distinguished:

- 1) The Engaged: Consumers that conceive the brands as authentic, have high perceptions of the brand image and brand trust, and are willing to pay a premium price. The highest brand authenticity has been attributed to Peroni and the least to Vespa. Despite Vespa's customers having already paid a premium price to purchase it, they reported the lowest scores in their willingness to pay a premium price for such a motorcycle.
- 2) The Believers: Respondents with no prior experience of the brand but showing positive perceptions of brand authenticity, brand image, brand trust and premium price. This group of non-customers showed higher values than those reported by their Engaged counterparts. These high scores, based on mere perceptions of potential customers, confirm the strong appeal of these well-established brands. In particular, Vespa was perceived as the most authentic brand, followed by Cinecittà. Because Peroni did not appear in this cluster, prior experience of the beer seems to be necessary to appreciate this product brand.
- 3) The Cheated: Actual (or former) customers who do not conceive the brand as authentic, and show low scores for brand image, brand trust and price premium. In particular, manufacturing companies showed the highest values with respect to service ones, indicating that customers might feel most cheated when they had a negative experience of services in relation to products. In particular, customers attributed the lowest scores of brand authenticity and brand related constructs to Cinecittà Studios.
- 4) The Sceptics: Non-customers who perceive low brand authenticity, brand image, brand trust and premium price. In particular, Cinecittà was perceived as the most authentic brand, followed by Peroni and Vespa.

Fig. 1: The four-cluster solution



4.2 Millennials' quest for coherence

Results from the group interviews did not mirror the segmentation that emerged in the quantitative cluster analysis. In fact, qualitative findings revealed a main theme that integrated millennials' perceptions into a unified framework, namely their quest for coherence. Basically, to be authentic, millennials require a high degree of coherency from brands and attribute authenticity to a brand when it shows coherency over time, coherency between brand promise and its actual delivery, and coherency between the brand's identity and the consumers' identity.

4.2.1 Coherency over time

The first dimension required by millennials in order to be authentic is the coherence of the brand identity and of brand meanings over time. Firstly, coherency over time highlights the origins of the brand quality, which is related to the continuity of the brand promise over time. In fact, it certifies the reliability of the brand and its uniqueness, confirming that the brand has not been contaminated by economic and social trends. Of course, companies that are not coherent over time are not considered as authentic. This can be seen from the two statements below:

R1, R2, R3: “These companies endure over time because their excellent quality never decreased”.

R3: “If you have a great heritage, you are surely authentic, like Cinecittà Studios, which has never been contaminated by the economic crisis. This company has been able to be coherent over time and also to renew itself with the opening of the Cinecittà Shows Off Exhibition”.

Another element that impacts on coherency over time is the nostalgic feelings of consumers. In fact, this type of millennial is strongly tied to the past, even though they never experienced it. This is especially because they recognize the conversation and the happy feelings of their parents and friends who grew with these types of brands. Therefore, an authentic brand should be able to communicate a glorious past that sometimes has been recently lost. In particular, what millennials blame is the change of the brand identity and, importantly, of brand values, which are now threatened by globalization and driven by utilitarian principles. This is easily readable from the comments below.

R7: “An authentic brand makes me understand that all generations are similar. My father had to fight to have a Vespa. The Vespa represents his engagement to my mom, it represents my mom and dad’s emancipation”.

R6, R7, R8, R9: “I am tied to the Italy of the 60’s”, “Vespa reminds me of the Italian golden age”. “Cinecittà Studios also reminds me of golden times for Italy”, “It’s strange, we miss the 60’s even though we never experienced them. Maybe it is because we now live in a bad time for the economy”.

R12: “Cinecittà Studios has a unique heritage but has currently lost its cultural and artistic values. From being internationally known, the brand turned into a money machine focused on profits to survive”.

4.2.2 Coherency between brand promise and its actual delivery

The second dimension required in order to be authentic is the coherency of the brand promise and its actual delivery. Therefore, millennials do not care about heritage, which is not their main purchase driver. In particular, millennials define a brand that does not conform with the expectations they have of it as inauthentic. For example, they highlight that if they expect a brand to be informal and unsophisticated, the brand can not communicate exclusivity. Therefore, brands should keep the promise they make when dealing with millennials.

R4: "My purchase driver is the correspondence between my expectations and the brand's actual delivery. Can I drink Peroni? Yes! Is it good? Yes! Does it have a good quality/price ratio? Yes! Well, then this is a quality product. Regarding Vespa, is it comfortable? Yes! Does it take me wherever I want to go? Yes! Well, then this is an authentic brand to me!"

R3: "Its authenticity also stands out in its good price/quality ratio. For example, I went to The House of Peroni, which is a sort of pub, and I really found it inauthentic because the prices were too high, the tables were very clean and the atmosphere was too formal. This was not what I expected: Peroni is unsophisticated, it is not elitist or exclusive".

As a consequence of millennials' quest for coherence between brand expectation and brand delivery, the misalignment between brand communication and its actual delivery has been strongly criticized. In fact, millennials conceive communication as a vehicle for transparency and sincerity. Authentic companies should also strongly communicate their negative aspects. In other words, this generation asks for the transparency of brand values, meanings and importantly, identity. For example, some millennials felt cheated when they discovered that two product brands shared the same corporate brand (i.e., Peroni and Nastro Azzurro), while some of them became suspicious of partnerships between brands they felt were misaligned (i.e., Peroni and Eataly, which is the internationally well-known retailer of Italian artisan food and beverage).

Moreover, when consumers do not know the brand, they rely on the comments of others, such as parents or friends (word-of-mouth) to certify the authenticity or inauthenticity of the brands. In fact, it is important to note that social communities, such as those present in Facebook, may play a crucial role in the legitimization (or delegitimization) of brands by creating an echo of new brand meanings that might destroy its authentic image.

R15: "Sincerity is a verifiable quality, and I usually do not trust what I have not tried before. In this case I will rely on the comments of other consumers. For example, when I went to Eataly, my boyfriend noticed that Peroni was there. We considered the Peroni-Eataly partnership so incoherent!"

R16: "Can a brand be sincere? A brand is never sincere! That's the point, every brand has a negative side and companies never show it. If a brand were 100% sincere it would also have to communicate its negative aspects and companies never do anything of the kind! Are you pretending that Peroni and Nastro Azzurro share the same corporate brand and this has never been communicated to consumers? That is insane! I want to buy Nastro Azzurro, not Peroni! Do you see any sincerity in it?"

R16: "I also appreciate the comments of experts, like bloggers who ensure the brand's authenticity".

R14: "I trust only what I know. When I do not know I trust my friends and they told me that Peroni is not authentic, they prefer craft beers".

R17: "I also trust what I know, but if I do not know a product or service I rely on my mother or my grandmother. I do not need the comments of experts".

R16: “I would never drink Peroni with my friends. This beer is totally unoriginal, why should I choose it? I would order a Belgian beer, or a German one, those are cool! If you drink Peroni, you are a loser. To give an example, a friend of mine posted a photo on Facebook of him or herself holding a Peroni and someone commented: What are you drinking? Peroni? Such a loser!”

4.2.3 Coherency between the brand identity and consumers' identity

The last type of coherency required by millennials in order to consider a brand as authentic is the coherency between the identity of the brand and customers' (or non-customers') identity. Therefore they do not require a strong heritage (i.e., coherency over time), or a fulfilled brand promise (i.e., coherency between the brand promise and its actual delivery). In fact, this type of millennial asks for the alignment between expectations about the brand (i.e., perceived brand identity) and his or her self-identity. Therefore, for example, if they perceive they have an identity which is chic, the Vespa, coming from the 60s, is considered authentic as it is a brand with an elegant identity (R1: “Vespa also makes me feel more elegant and feminine, in the 60s everyone was so elegant!”). It is important to note that many of them identify their identity connected to their national identity (i.e., Italian). In fact, these Italian brands have been considered authentic or inauthentic respectively when they mirror (i.e., are coherent with) their national identity or when they do not respect it (i.e., when the brand identity is not coherent with its national identity). Therefore, these millennials can be considered strongly patriotic, as it seems that they reject the brand because they feel cheated in their Italian pride/Italian identity, or accept the brand when it mirrors their national identity. Some of them associate the brand's meanings with various product or services whose image is strongly related to the Italian one. For example, when Peroni's conceived identity is perfectly aligned with the national one, millennials associate it with the national product or service they use when they drink Peroni, as highlighted by following comments:

R4: “I drink Peroni in my free time with my friends, especially when I go back to my homeland. Peroni is drinking quality with some good food, like pasta. Peroni is: friends and pasta”.

R5: “I drink Peroni when I watch a football match with friends and when I eat pizza. Peroni is: friends and pizza at home. It is the Italian championship.”

R12: “I feel cheated in my Italian pride. Cinecittà Studios should elevate the quality of its services to honour its originality and uniqueness instead of losing its values”.

R13: “These brands have completely lost their uniqueness. Heritage is not enough. Peroni is sincere and reliable, but by being a discount brand it's the shame of the Made in Italy label. It is actually the beer of the Romans!”

R10, R11, R12, R13: “I am sorry for this sort of ending. My beloved country should be more appreciated!” “So many countries sell products and services of low quality that are not unique and original yet endorse and appraise their assets better than Italian brands!”

5. Discussion

Based on a mixed methodology, this study aimed to answer the following questions: Do millennials share similar perceptions of brand authenticity? How and why do millennials attribute (in)authenticity to a brand?

The quantitative findings provided a general overview of the potential segments of millennials, thus contributing to the development of the literature on brand authenticity. In fact, the cluster analysis highlighted the heterogeneity of millennials' brand authenticity perceptions, revealing four different clusters segmented into two main dimensions: customer vs. non-customer, and high vs. low perceptions of brand authenticity. In particular, high perceptions of brand authenticity were found for Engaged and Believer millennials, whereas the opposite was found for Cheated and Skeptic millennials. These results substantiate that companies should deal with brand authenticity as a relevant component of successful brands (Beverland, 2005; Kapferer, 2008) that is strongly linked to consumers' brand trust (Balmer, 2012a; Schallehn *et al.* 2014).

The segmentation that emerged represented a starting point for a qualitative research that contributes to theoretical advancements on brand authenticity. Although we divided the interviews into the previously obtained four clusters, qualitative findings show a different segmentation of millennials. Actually, no segmentation emerged because qualitative findings revealed a main theme that integrated millennials' perceptions into a unified framework, namely their "quest for coherence". This article, then, contributes to a new understanding of millennials' perceptions on brand authenticity by proposing that organizations seek for coherence in order to deliver an authentic brand. In particular, millennials attribute authenticity to a brand when the brand shows coherency over time, coherency between brand promise and its actual delivery, and coherency between the brand identity and consumers' identity. Therefore, this study confirms the multifaceted nature of brand authenticity, which has been highlighted by many scholars of the field (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, its multifaceted nature now seems to be linked to a new construct, namely coherence. Although coherence is a new construct in this domain, the three types of coherency somehow recall scholars' previous research on brand authenticity, which suggested three dimensions of the construct, namely the objective, the subjective and the self-referential dimensions highlighted in our theoretical framework.

Nevertheless, this article goes beyond previous literature by adding the construct of coherency. First, we suggest that millennials don't require just heritage linked to past (Postrel, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Chhabra, 2005; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011; Mohart *et al.*, 2014; Napoli *et al.*, 2014), but also coherence of brand identity and values over time. From this perspective, their quest for continuity seems to somehow clash with their young age and their quest for global connection and openness to change (Raines, 2002; Tanner, 2010). Nevertheless, other scholars found that millennials may show some conservative values, such as moral consciousness and civic duty (Howe

and Strauss, 2000; Shepard, 2004; Wilson and Gerber, 2008; Tanner, 2010). Therefore, in substantiating previous research, this article highlights the conservative side of millennials, who ask for the continuity of brand values over time rather than innovation.

Moving towards the subjective dimension highlighted by some scholars (Beverland *et al.*, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), we suggest that, in comparison with past studies, our analysis reveals again that millennials are conservative and tough consumers to be satisfied. In fact, to them, the coherency between the brand promise and its delivery is at the base of an authentic brand and the premise for a trustful relationship between them and the brand. In doing so, they also rely on others' comments to verify the authenticity of the brand. Therefore, it seems that this type of consumers asks for a collective dimension of brand authenticity. As a result, if the brand does not keep the promise it made to the entire community, it may drive towards a negative word-of-mouth, triggering a "domino effect" that continuously challenges the authenticity of the brand. Of course, this is in line with the image of millennials as hyper-communicators. In fact, they daily communicate with friends, maintaining constant contact with them, especially through brand communities (Tanner, 2010; Sashittal *et al.*, 2015; Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

Concordantly and finally, while coherence between the brand promise and its delivery is more related to communal experiences, we also suggest a third type of coherency, which is more related to the individual construction of the self, namely the alignment between the brand identity and consumers' identity. Therefore, this study also highlights that a brand is able to enhance millennials' self-referential quest for authenticity. For example, our results show that the Vespa brand has been able to foster consumers' individual identities in search of freedom and elegance. These findings substantiate freedom and excellence as self-referential authenticating cues, as suggested by Beverland and Farrelly (2010). Of note, millennials show strong engagement and attachment to their country of origin. In fact, they conceive Italian brands as an extension of their identity, so if these brands do not respect the Italian values of quality, design and excellence, they felt cheated.

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical contributions, this study highlights relevant implications for managers. First, millennials give strong importance to the continuity of the brand's historical path and to the stories and experiences of their peers. Therefore, marketers must be able to build relevant brand communication through new media platforms (such as social networks and mobile devices) and shared connections maintaining great continuity - i.e. coherence - with its past actions and values. Second, to accomplish millennials' quest for the delivery of the brand promise, managers should be very careful in managing gaps and misalignments between the brand promise and its actual delivery. As a result, managers should remember that communication is a primary source of knowledge and that it should mirror the symmetrical positioning of the customers. In this context, the company should enforce some core values to create the brand's offer (and therefore, millennials' expectations) and to deliver it as promised, including the communicated "reason why". This is strictly

related to the third type of coherency (i.e., self-referential). Therefore, a brand should present a clear positioning that is also recognizable by consumers, who will adhere to it (joining the brand) or reject it. This is also true for communal experiences (family, peers, traditional and social communities) that surely enhance the self-expression of the individual. In particular, present times are a meta-managerial challenge for Italian companies to avoid creating a negative country-of-origin effect that makes Italian millennials feel somehow “cheated” by the brands, even if they are aware of the structural Italian economic situation and conjunctural political one. They feel somehow betrayed by their Italian identity and “patriotism” towards Italian brands. Companies have to actively struggle against perceptions of the brand’s loss of quality, coherence, values and, in other words, authenticity. They must be able to rebuild and communicate innovation as they exceptionally did during the Baby Boomers’ period (50s-60s) by means of extraordinary manufacturing, products and services, and unique emotions which, although linkable to the past, are always seen as a “golden age”.

Through a very operational approach, and in relation to quantitative findings, this study suggests managers protect engaged millennials and enlarge this group by actively managing a sophisticated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategy and program; the technological relational platform should be strictly projected and connected to social media channels (blogging, microblogging, social networking) and their influencers should be monitored and measured in their opinions. The company should, nonetheless, invest in the Believer and Sceptical groups of non-customers through communicative actions in social media channels (to act in the awareness, image and reputation domains) but also through advertising and promotion to solicit millennials’ price-sensitivity and emotional engagement. The brands should finally invest in public relations strategies (including online public relations) and plans to target the Cheated groups of customers who might seriously evolve into Engaged and even catalyze negative words-of-mouth, as well as national and international antibranding communities and boycott consumerist movements.

To summarize, organizations should invest in this cohort of generation because millennials represent not only the future generation of buyers, but also tomorrow’s managers. Moreover, being the “Digital generation”, they have (and will have) tremendous power in legitimating or de-legitimating the authenticity of brands, especially through e-WOM (electronic Word-Of-Mouth).

6. Conclusions

From the digital generation perspective, this study offers a new understanding of the brand authenticity construct. Therefore, although our quantitative analysis divided this type of consumer into four clusters (i.e., Engaged, Believer, Cheated and Sceptic millennials), qualitative results show a transversal construct that unifies millennials’ quest for

authenticity, namely coherence. Consequently, and in line with recent research proposing a relational-based approach to brand authenticity (Ilicic and Webster, 2014), this article suggests moving from a historical-based approach towards a more holistic one that takes into account the multifaceted nature of brand authenticity in relation to coherency.

Building on the above, future studies focused on conceptualizations of relationships between brand authenticity and coherence are strongly needed to address the following relevant research questions: “How can companies achieve each type of brand authenticity coherency?” and “Is the simultaneous alignment of these three types of authenticity attainable?”. Moreover, this study could be a valuable starting point for the development of the conversation on corporate brand alignment between academics and practitioners (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Balmer, 2012b; Urde, 2013). Valuable research questions to be investigated could be: “Does the alignment of corporate brand attributes or identities help in achieving brand authenticity?” and “What is the relationship between the multifaceted nature of corporate brands and the multifaceted nature of coherency?”

The main limitation of this work is related to the specific sample of respondents (Italian millennial Management students) and brands, which limits the generalizability of findings. Although millennials represent a relevant part of actual and potential customers for several brands, respondents of different ages could generate different segmentations and hierarchies of brand authenticity attributes. Therefore, future studies could investigate a different cohort of generation or combine millennials with other generations (i.e., Baby Boomers and Generation Xs) to understand if there are similarities or differences in their perceptions of brand authenticity. Furthermore, to avoid cultural biases, cross-national studies that include several age groups and brands operating at national and international levels, are strongly needed. This study could also be usefully replicated by selecting a non-italian sample of millennials to explore their perceptions about the authenticity of Italian brands.

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