Uncovering the sources of brand authenticity in the digital era: evidence from an Italian winery[1]

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *The purpose of this study is to explore the sources of brand authenticity of a well-known Italian vineyard through the digital age lens and an organizational perspective.*

Design/methodology/approach. *This study adopted a qualitative single case study design. Antonelli San Marco, an Italian brand with an estate located in Montefalco was selected. Eleven interviews with members of the family who own and manage the business, as well as their employees, were conducted. After transcribing and translating the interviews when needed, they were coded and their content analysed.*

Findings. *Findings confirmed the dimensions of brand authenticity of previous studies in the wine industry. This study also confirmed the objective, subjective, and existential sources of brand authenticity from previous research. Remarkably, the existential source, which was traditionally linked to integrity elements, emerged here as the result of Antonelli's care for the brand ecosystem, including people, the terroir and the entire location. In addition, a new category of brand authenticity was found, in relation to a brand's competitive side, to be fundamental in competing in the digital age and focused on the importance of narrating the real brand story while engaging in collaborative relationships and carefully managing eco-capabilities, technological skills, and digital capabilities.*

Originality/value. *The framework that is presented in this paper provides an original view on wine brand authenticity from a managerial standpoint, highlighting new challenges that must be faced to successfully compete in the digital era while maintaining brand authenticity over time and across diverse stakeholders.*

Key words: Brand authenticity; wine brand; digital era; brand ecosystem; sustainability; coopetition; Italy

1. Introduction

In the digital era, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter boast many users and fans. In addition, there are review sites like Yelp and TripAdvisor that post reviews from thousands of consumers (Gandomi and Haider, 2015). These sites influence other consumers, and this can lead to altered consumption patterns. As there can be a mismatch between what a brand manager intended in their company's marketing strategy and

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consumer expectations of product quality and performance, marketers need to constantly monitor their brands on social media, blogs and review sites (Shirdastian *et al.*, 2019).

Consumers demand authenticity and they generally seek authentic products and experiences, including from luxury wines (Beverland, 2006). It is therefore important to study brand authenticity as it influences consumer consumption patterns. There is still no universally accepted definition of brand authenticity, nor is there agreement about its dimensions, despite its role in branding research. This is because the construct is complex and, as a result, inconsistent in its conceptualization (Beverland, 2005a,b; Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Pace, 2015). Throughout the literature, authenticity is repeatedly described as "genuine, real, and true" (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Numerous authors have defined authenticity as an evaluation of the perceived extent of genuineness (Fine, 2003; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Postrel, 2003; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

The very first article focusing on brand authenticity can be traced back to 2005, with Beverland (2005a) exploring the authenticity of luxury brand wines. He conceptualized brand authenticity as including heritage and pedigree, consistency, quality, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives (Beverland 2005a,b; 2006). After Beverland's seminal articles, various scholars continued to explore this domain and considered new markets, such as beer, skateboarding, sports, music, and high-tech (e.g., Alexander, 2009; Charmley *et al.*, 2013; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Corciolani, 2014; Gundlach and Neville, 2012; Mingione *et al.*, 2017), thus enriching the current understanding of brand authenticity dimensions.

The economic, cultural and social changes that are faced by organizations in this third millennium have had tremendous effects on consumers' behavior, brands and of course, their related markets. In particular, the wine sector, which has always been considered a traditional market, is facing new and difficult challenges. First, the wine industry must face the problem of climate change, which consequently highlights the need for product sustainability (Flores, 2018; Szolnoki, 2013). For instance, it is interesting to know that the decrease of the carbon footprint is considered to be a "*necessary contribution to be made by the wine industry. Approval for this is highest in Italy (81%) and lowest in Germany (65%)*" (ProWein Business Report 2019, p. 11). Second, social media assume a new key role in the wine sector, with a significant and positive influence on wine consumers' buying intentions, especially those who frequently use social media (Pucci *et al.*, 2017). Third, new generational cohorts increasingly impact on the wine sector. Recent research has inquired into millennials' preferences for wine attributes and their behavior related to fine wine (e.g., luxury wine) (Lategan *et al.*, 2017; Roe and Bruwer, 2017).

Given these ongoing changes and challenges faced by the wine sector, it was necessary to explore the concept of brand authenticity through a digital age lens and an organizational perspective. Accordingly, the purpose of our study is to explore brand authenticity in the context of a well-known Italian vineyard, Antonelli San Marco, by focusing on how

management and employees deal with brand authenticity in the digital era. This study thus provides a unique perspective on brand authenticity by exploring what it means to be authentic in the digital era and what responsibilities and challenges a wine brand must face when attempting to create, manage and maintain its authenticity over time and across stakeholders. In particular, in addition to the objective, subjective and existential sources of brand authenticity (Beverland, 2006; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Spielmann and Charters, 2013), this study found a new source related to a wine brand's competitive side by focusing on the importance of narrating the real brand story, engaging in collaborative relationships, enhancing eco-capabilities, carefully developing digital skills and cautiously managing digital capabilities. The brand's competitive capabilities represent a crucial strategic marketing view on brand authenticity, as they involve strategic marketing decisions that stem from and by virtue of their long-term performance implications (Varadarajan 2010).

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2. Literature review

Fundamentals of brand authenticity

Consumers' quest for brand authenticity appears to be particularly evident if we consider the positive effects stemming from a brand strategy based on authentic dimensions. First, it increases brand and consumer trust, legitimization, reliability, and credibility (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006; Beverland, 2006; Eggers *et al.*, 2013; Moulard *et al.*, 2016; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Portal *et al.*, 2018). Second, the authenticity of a brand might help in achieving consumers' identity and experience-related benefits (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Chhabra and Kim, 2018; Gundlach and Neville, 2012; Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Thompson *et al.*, 2006; Thyne and Hede, 2016). Third, it increases consumers' willingness to purchase (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Ilicic and Webster, 2014; 2016; Napoli *et al.*, 2014); their inclination to pay a price premium (Assiouras *et al.*, 2015; Beverland, 2005a,b; 2006; Hasselbach and Roosen, 2015; Moulard *et al.*, 2015a); and their brand loyalty (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Lalic and Weismayer, 2017; Mody and Hanks, 2017). Lastly, recent studies have highlighted its positive effects on brand love (Manthiou *et al.*, 2018; Mody and Hanks, 2017), brand engagement (Preece, 2015) emotional brand attachment (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Guèvremont and Grohmann, 2016; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Morhart *et al.*, 2015) and Word of Mouth (WOM) (Assiouras *et al.*, 2015; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

In general, there is still no universally accepted agreement about the dimensions of brand authenticity. In recent studies, scholars have provided 40 brand authenticity-related dimensions, which substantiates the fragmented framework characterizing this domain of interest (Akbar and Wymer, 2016; Wymer and Akbar, 2017). However, throughout the literature, authenticity is repeatedly described as that which is sincere, genuine, real and true (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Pace, 2015; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006), and can take on three diverse forms,

namely objective, subjective and existential (Beverland, 2006; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

Objective lenses imply the inclusion of the following characteristics: heritage, tradition, stylistic consistency, quality, place, provenance, and the naturalness of raw materials and ingredients (Alexander, 2009; Assiouras *et al.*, 2015; Gundlach and Neville, 2012; Kadirov, 2015; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Postrel, 2003). The objective form has been alternatively defined as indexical, which implies being original, "not a copy or an imitation" (Grayson and Martinec, 2004, p. 297).

Brand heritage and its preservation over time strongly emerge as two of the main sources determining the essence of an authentic brand (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). Creating and maintaining the heritage of a brand requires the coherency and continuity of brand identity and brand values over time (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Chhabra and Kim, 2018; Pattuglia and Mingione, 2017). Brand heritage has significant connections with quality commitment because authentic brands that refuse to compromise are perceived as having been manufactured to a higher standard of quality, and having a long history (Assiouras *et al.*, 2015; Beverland, 2006; Napoli *et al.*, 2014, 2016).

Similarly, to be authentic, brands should not alter their traditional methods of production over time, which on the contrary should make use of handcrafted techniques and natural raw materials (Beverland, 2005b; Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Groves, 2001). According to Bruhn *et al.* (2012), this dimension can be defined as "naturalness," as opposed to artificial and manipulative techniques. Moreover, authentic brands should deliver a stylistic consistency of their logos, reflecting the historical visual identity of the brand and telling the story of the company's roots (Beverland, 2005b, 2006; Van den Bosh *et al.*, 2005).

The source of localness and provenance is particularly crucial for some industries, such as the food and beverage and luxury industries (Assiouras *et al.*, 2015; Cheah *et al.*, 2016; Collins and Weiss, 2015; Gundlach and Neville, 2012). In order to strengthen their relationship with their location and to increase their authenticity, some businesses have resorted to co-branding with national brands, thus achieving a cultural-based brand identity (Alexander, 2009). Objective forms of brand authenticity, especially when referring to the heritage of long-established brands with stable characteristics, appear to be particularly important during uncertain times and are usually vital for brand outcomes such as brand trust, credibility, and reliability (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Urde *et al.*, 2007).

Moreover, indexical cues seem to be crucial in emerging markets such as South Africa or, for instance, in the private label market (Carsana and Jolibert, 2018; Stiehler and Tinson, 2015).

Subjective lenses imply the inclusion of the following characteristics: sense of community, participation, originality, uniqueness and innovativeness (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Carsana and Jolibert, 2018; Chhabra and Kim, 2018; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Thyne and Hede, 2016). The subjective form of brand authenticity has been alternatively defined as

iconic (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and implies the social construction of brand meanings and values (Leigh *et al.*, 2006). In other words, authentic brand value is co-created with consumers (Charmley *et al.*, 2013; Corciolani, 2014; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Thyne and Hede, 2016). Thus, it implies consumers' participation in communal experiences, (i.e. those who feel connected to a community), strongly emerges (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Brands establish an iconic relationship with the community and are "reflective of the wider community's view of lifestyle" (Beverland *et al.*, 2010, p. 706). The community can punish or reward (in)authentic brands, (de)legitimating them from the considered cultural context (Charmley *et al.*, 2013; Holt, 2002; Kates, 2004; Thompson *et al.*, 2006). Brands should offer genuine brand promises and, most importantly, there should be coherence between the brand promise and its delivery, especially in the service industry (Charmley *et al.*, 2013; Pattuglia and Mingione, 2017; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). In reflecting the constructivist nature of subjective authenticity, research has suggested that brand authenticity is socially constructed (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Charmley *et al.*, 2013; Corciolani, 2014; Kates, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 2006)

Existential lenses imply the inclusion of the following dimensions: morality, integrity, and ethicality (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Hasselbach and Roosen, 2015; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This form of authenticity derives from the self and embraces post-modernist thinking (Leigh *et al.*, 2006). Thus, it is also linked to the experiential value of the relationship in terms of stakeholders' identity. For instance, consumers call for brands that are genuine and may help them in achieving an authentic identity (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Leigh *et al.*, 2006), by searching for identity benefits such as feeling virtuous and being true to a set of moral values (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010).

Brand authenticity in the wine industry

Beverland (2005a,b) was the first to explore brand authenticity in a study on branded luxury wines. He conceptualized brand authenticity as including heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitment, relationship to place, the method of production, and downplaying commercial motives (Beverland, 2006). It is important to note that commitment to terroir (i.e., the specific territory of the place) is particularly relevant in this industry (Beverland, 2006; Spielmann and Charters, 2013).

According to Spielmann and Charters (2013), three sources are necessary to achieve authenticity in the wine industry. First, an objective source that is linked to tradition and heritage and defines the essence of a brand that cannot be imitated. Second, symbolic and existential lenses drive brand authenticity because consumers experience and identify with authentic wine brands. Finally, commitment to terroir requires an analysis of its legal regulation and protection with a specific focus on processes, "including the rules relating to production, labeling and promotion" (Spielmann and Charters, 2013, p. 319). Additionally, Moulard *et al.* (2015a) explored the relationship between technical terroir (i.e., the use of

technical information about the terroir) and country of origin. They found that while New World wines need an extensive description of the terroir in order to be perceived as authentic, Old World wines do not need any technical information about terroir because their provenance guarantees its quality (Moulard *et al.*, 2015a). In fact, consumers' perception of provenance is of key importance in the wine sector (Maizza *et al.*, 2017). With particular regard to the digital era, scholars have found that tasting and recommendations regarding taste are two key attributes of wine among millennials and that they are mostly communicated via social media for this generation (Lategan *et al.*, 2017; Pucci *et al.*, 2017).

Brand authenticity in the digital era

In general, brand authenticity seems to present itself as an essential attribute of Facebook pages, online communication campaigns, and celebrity endorsement because it helps create a genuine and real relationship with members of online brand communities, thus increasing consumers' participation and engagement (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Pronschinske *et al.*, 2012; Samuel *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, some authors have explored brand authenticity by adapting the lenses of the sharing economy and post-modern consumption behavior, especially in the tourism and hospitality marketplace (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017; Mody and Hanks, 2017). Scholars found that the Airbnb digital platform is perceived as more authentic than traditional hotels because it enhances the culture of the place and increases interpersonal and networking relationships between consumers (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017; Mody and Hanks, 2017). On the other hand, to be perceived as authentic, traditional hotels should rely more on indexical cues linked, for instance, to their legacy, than to iconic and existential ones (Mody and Hanks, 2017).

3. Methodology

To evaluate brand authenticity in the digital era, this study used a qualitative single case study (Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 1994). Amongst luxury brand wines, we selected Antonelli San Marco, an Italian brand, with an estate situated in the Montefalco DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllatae Garantita) area. The estate, once called San Marco de Conticellis, belonged to the Bishop of Spoleto from the 13th to the 19th century, and is described in several medieval documents as a Longobard cohort and one of the most suited territories for the cultivation of vines and olives. In 1883, Francesco Antonelli purchased the estate and, after a radical transformation and modernization of its planting and farming, he became the founder of the Antonelli San Marco brand. The brand currently produces Grechetto and Trebbiano Spoletino for its white varieties and the red varietals Sangiovese and Sagrantino. Moreover, the estate offers wine-tourism hospitality in an antique farmhouse called Casale Satriano as well as "Cucina in Cantina", a service offering lunches, dinners, wine tasting and courses on Umbrian cuisine. Moreover, Antonelli offers guided tours of the Cantina Antonelli.

In July 2017, the two authors of this study spent four days at Casale Satriano and conducted 11 interviews with members of the family that currently owns and manages the business, as well as with employees. The data collection involved face-to-face interviews as a primary source and secondary sources such as observations, internal documents, the corporate website and the Vivino app (Table 1).

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Tab. 1: Data sources

PRIMARY SOURCE (INTERVIEWS)			
Interviews			
Respondent	Role	Language	Timing (2017)
Respondent 1	50% shareholder and chief executive	English	20 July (58m05s)
Respondent 2	Public relations manager	English	22 July (52m08s)
Respondent 3	Marketing manager	English	20 July (1h37m37s)
Respondent 4	Manager of Cucina in Cantina	English	20 July (44m08s)
Respondent 5	Administrator, North America, Asia and Russia	English	21 July (27m41s)
Respondent 6	Administrator, Umbria and northern Europe	English	21 July (20m45s)
Respondent 7	Accountant	Italian	20 July (22m35s)
Respondent 8	Agronomist	Italian	21 July (37m33s)
Respondent 9	Wine production	Italian	21 July (31m44s)
Respondent 10	Field operations	Italian	21 July (15m46s)
Respondent 11	Wine shop assistant and field operations	Italian	21 July (20m46s)
SECONDARY SOURCES			
Observations			19-21 July
Internal Documents			19 September
Corporate Website			July-October
Vivino (digital app)			August-September

Source: Authors' elaboration

After their transcription and translation (when needed), the interviews were coded, and their content analyzed. In particular, the data were manually analysed, and such an analysis consisted of three main steps (Mayan, 2009; Spiggle, 1994): 1) coding, which included the reading and re-reading of the interviews to create a document highlighting retrieved codes stemming from the individual analysis of the two authors of the present study; 2) categorizing and thematising, which contributed to the creation of a document extracting categories and themes from the coding; 3) integrating, to understand the relationships among the different themes and create a whole picture.

It is necessary to point out that themes were created with Beverland's (2005a,b, 2006) framework, thus keeping the six attributes that contribute to creating, managing, and maintaining brand authenticity in mind. Finally, the primary sources' results were triangulated with secondary sources to strengthen the confidence in and validity of the case study findings (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008).

4. Findings

View through objective lens

Our first finding shows that Antonelli respects and cares for its brand heritage. Elements of heritage included 1) family ties to the business; some keywords, such as "family" and the company's year of foundation, strongly emerged. In particular, the latter is linked to the company's existential legacy and acts as the basis for the brand's innate and structural heritage; 2) its visual identity and stylistic consistency over time, including its logo (i.e., an arch, which represents the old entrance to the winery) and label (i.e., Antonelli). This element shows that history is key to the brand's visual identity, for. On the one side, stylistic consistency helps in increasing the brand's recognition, but also the brand's uniqueness and originality (i.e., competence). 3) Place indexical originality: this refers to the authenticity of the terroir, and, in particular, to the respect and care for the place and terroir that the Antonelli brand provides. Respondents highlighted the importance of respecting and preserving the original aspects of the territory from external contamination, which is critical in guaranteeing the brand's authenticity. Thus, in order to deliver an authentic brand, Antonelli preserves the indexical originality of the place and the terroir; 4) its traditional methods of production despite the presence of new methods of production for wine because they are considered the best way to produce high-quality wine, thus further increasing the brand's uniqueness.

The following quotes encapsulate these elements:

"Authentic... for me it is authentic because it is a company that was founded in 1881; it is like a family".

"Our label has been the same for 28 years or something like that… when consumers see a bottle of ours on a shelf or in a wine shop they don't have to look at anything else because that's Antonelli…. Moreover, tourists come back because they felt at ease and remember the logo with the arch".

"Authenticity means to respect the territory, the uniqueness of this territory…Antonelli is a brand that is respectful of the "genius loci"… the fact we have a personal identity that is respectful of the (original) characteristics of the area…in reference to origins, someone has mentioned Plinium, and not many places can boast this much history".

"Historically we have always used large barrels which are not common, but we have always done it this way".

View through subjective lens

Findings strongly highlight Antonelli's care for providing all stakeholders, especially its wine customers, with an iconic brand experience. This is achieved by offering consumers a holistic multisensory and participative experience, as well as a familiar atmosphere and a sense of community and belonging.

Firstly, Antonelli provides a holistic experience with its additional services, such as wine pairing, where consumers can taste the wine and pair it with Antonelli's food products. Moreover, the brand offers wine-tourism hospitality in the antique farmhouse Casale Satriano, where tourists can "experience nature" and walk to the Cantina Antonelli. The pleasure of

living in this place and its natural environment is further enhanced by a service called "Nature Walks". Antonelli also started a cooking school, called "Cucina in Cantina," which offers courses on Umbrian cuisine, and provides lunches and dinners for groups on appointment. "Cucina in Cantina" offers a service called "Cook and Listen," where consumers can listen to employees' stories about the wine while they cook. Twice a year, the brand offers a service called "Cantine Aperte" where consumers can visit the old cellar and taste wine. Therefore, Antonelli offers an iconic experience based on multisensory and participative strategies. These findings underline the importance of co-creation when delivering an authentic brand experience, thus emphasizing the key role of both the brand and its consumers.

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Secondly, the atmosphere of the place was also used by those who interacted with customers on the estate to justify the authenticity of the brand. The multisensory experience also relies on the familiar atmosphere that is created by the brand, especially when employees tell the family history behind the brand.

Quotes that focused on these include:

"It's important for us to offer them an experience that will be remembered. So, the best thing that you can do is what we call Passaparola [i.e., in English word of mouth]… So we founded a cooking school and a restaurant to provide wine pairing, lunches, and dinners, cooking classes... we've also organized walks in the parks".

"Authentic... for me it is authentic, it is like a family, and the people that come here to taste feel at home, sit, ask questions, drink… tourists come back because they felt at home".

"But I think the most important thing when people come [to the wine] shop is to feel, to transmit the sensation and to share the sensation that you are in a winery that was built in 1881. I want to communicate that there is passion and there is a family".

View through existential lens

The existential dimension identifies Antonelli as caring for the brand ecosystem, which includes people and the terroir of the place. Firstly, this stems from the passion and alignment of internal stakeholders, not only with the brand but with the terroir and society as a whole. The values of the CEO, managers, and staff are all aligned with the brand values. In particular, the identity alignment of internal stakeholders with the brand emerged throughout the interviews, and showed the managers' and employees' passion for the brand's structural (i.e., objective) elements, such as the ancient arch or the wine's flavors, but also to more emotional-based (i.e., subjective) characteristics, such as nostalgic feelings, which are also linked to the family concept.

Secondly, the brand's integrity and core values are also strongly linked to the brand's care for quality products, which is achieved by its "going organic". Again, the respect and care for the territory and the place strongly emerge as fundamental. Thus, the brand not only preserves the terroir's heritage, but also enhances it with ethical principles to respect all those who are included in the brand ecosystem, starting from the workers and

consumers, and going up to the environmental protection of all the animals and wildlife in the terroir, who help in delivering high-quality wine. Here emerges the importance of non-manipulation of the territory through inauthentic practices like fertilizers, thus underlining the importance of naturalness, a key antecedent of brand authenticity. All produced wines have been certified as organic since 2012. This is an essential point of divergence, as only three of the 71 wineries in the region produce organic wine, and this also increases the originality of the brand and represents another major antecedent of brand authenticity.

Thirdly, Antonelli's care for the brand ecosystem requires a greater framework of reference, which also includes competitors who produce red and white wine in the same area (i.e., Montefalco) and are considered part of the brand ecosystem. These results shed light on the presence of a strong collective place-related identity. In particular, the brand's respect and care for the territory imply a "friendship" with Montefalco wine brands, because they share the same vision regarding the preservation and growth of the place. Respondents are driven by an emotional attachment to the wines that are produced in Montefalco and the Umbria region.

The following quotes highlight these elements:

"The arch is beautiful; we even go under it every day when we go to work… I love our flavors… I fell in love with this winery when I saw my father's cellar, and I fell in love with the arch of the winery".

"To me, brand authenticity is quality, respect for everything, the workers, the environment and the customers …In making organic products, we respect the soil, the earth and the environment, and we immediately notice any changes in the country: an insect that disappear, snails, those are signals … Fertilizer is dangerous for everybody. Chemicals harm people and the environment".

"There is no rivalry and the other wineries are friends of ours... When I have lunch outside, I never drink Antonelli's wine. Maybe it is an opportunity to try other wines from this area. This is something that Filippo [i.e., Antonelli's CEO] also does. It is limiting to only watch your own place… We want people to just stroll the streets and buy wine from them. It's important that you try to share what you're doing and it's important not to compete with them".

View through competitive lens

The results of our analysis have unveiled a new category of brand authenticity dimensions, i.e. the competitive dimension, which is considered essential in the company's strategic marketing decision-making and is related to a series of skills: *First of all,* brand (real) storytelling: Direct relationships are still meaningful, and a brand ambassador role focuses on building relationships with consumers with limited advertising and promotions. Moreover, the brand distances itself from advertising, which is perceived as an impersonal form of communication and impedes the communication of the real quality of the brand's products. The CEO and managers therefore prefer more direct and personalized communication, where the main promotion tools are the CEO and managers themselves, who act as brand ambassadors and are able to transmit the alignment of

values and the passion for the brand vis-à-vis. In line with Antonelli's aim to tell a story, respondents highlighted the importance of participating in trade fairs both in Italy (e.g., Vivino) and in other countries (e.g., Germany). Trade fairs are especially preferred because it is possible to demonstrate the quality of the brand's products and reach the wine's niche target. Another communication strategy consists in publishing stories in specialized, professional wine magazines, such as articles about the most prominent brands of Montefalco and Umbria's region.

These findings are pointed out in the next quotes:

"You cannot communicate in a commercial way, the only way is to speak with people but it's very difficult, I can speak with just 1, 10 or 50 people per day".

"Mr. Antonelli is the best brand ambassador of our winery because his values are the values we want to communicate to people".

"We don't need to advertise ourselves…Quality is important, it's important for you to express this kind of quality without shouting about what you are doing… this is authenticity".

Second, Collaborative capabilities; Antonelli exhibits a participative vision, which is part of a greater communication intent that imagines the collaboration of various competitive brands from the same region. There is significant promotion of the winery and region through co-branding and coopetition, the latter emerging not as an existential collective identity, but as a competitive form of brand authenticity. The role of the regional wine Consortium was strongly present in the interviews because it unites all producers towards a single intent, namely the awareness and appeal of the territory. Thus, the promotion of the brand is carried out through collaboration among competitors who have non-competitive relationships in order to achieve a greater communicative intent, namely the valorization of the place and the territory with its products. In particular, as highlighted by the CEO, the aim is to transform Montefalco and Umbria into a "top area" for wine excellence.

The CEO strongly emphasized that it is essential to promote the winery as well as the region. The promotion of the place is conceived as more important than the promotion of the brand itself. When the authors asked Filippo about his vision of Antonelli's future, he answered that: "*the big question for me is not about Antonelli, but rather what Montefalco will be like in 10 years…Will it be considered one of the top Italian areas or not?... For me, this is also up to the producers because if we stay united it can happen". Thus, using the CEO's words, "promoting Sagrantino is probably easier and more important (than Antonelli)".* He was the president of the local consortium for 10 years, promoting the Sagrantino wines of Montefalco and is currently president of the Wine Tourism Association in Umbria. This form of coopetition aims not only at promoting the welfare of the region but also at increasing the positive effects stemming from co-branding operations. As highlighted by one of the respondents "*Wine is the product with the highest number of brands on a single bottle. You have the brand of the country, the region… There are so many brands, so it is important for Umbria to be well known*". Cooperation with other wineries producing Sagrantino is the key to promoting the existential

collective identity of Antonelli, which includes all the brands belonging to its ecosystem.

These quotes exemplify the presented framework.

"The consortium represents and promotes what Montefalco, our territory and our idea of wine are".

"If another winery here in Montefalco wins an important prize from a guide, we are all happy about it because that means that more people will know Sagrantino… So the market is huge - they're not competitors, they're friends of ours".

Third, eco-capabilities; in the digital age, brands should embrace sustainability in everything they do, thus demonstrating extraordinary eco-capabilities. As highlighted by respondents, "*Being organic is technically more difficult, but gains more respect…Those who succeed will be successful in the long term*". Thus, despite the greater efforts in terms of the "*time and money*" that are required to be authentic, the brand recognizes that being sustainable is an important challenge of the digital era and that it will have a positive impact in the long term. However, brand managers, and in particular the CEO, were originally sceptical about the addition of a label certifying that the products are organic. Such scepticism derives from the brand's care for heritage, which is substantiated by Antonelli's stylistic consistency. Nonetheless, after thinking about it at length, the CEO decided to add the organic certification to Antonelli's bottles of wine.

The following quote confirms this:

"So, you have to communicate that you are organic. We made a new label that I had just received, it's really small that we want to put on the bottle; green leaves in order to claim that we make it by hand… Mr. Antonelli (recently) made the decision to use those labels but had been thinking about it for quite a while".

Fourth, technological skills; Antonelli has a dual position. On the one hand, employees report that technology may be helpful in the production process, especially when it helps in overcoming problems linked to methods of production, which are sometimes driven by human error, as one respondent highlighted: "*Do you see the capsule? If something goes wrong, the machine stops. Those are (positive) changes of technology, before it was done manually*". However, the brand refuses technology in general because it decreases the authenticity of Antonelli, which aims at preserving and valorizing the rather traditional brand's features. In other words, technology implicates fast production methods that would impede the delivery of an authentic offering, based on the quality of and care for the brand's heritage, two characteristics that are, as previously highlighted, at the basis of brand identity.

"Technology should not be invasive…you do not have to overdo it, otherwise we lose in authenticity because you are running too fast, and while technology goes fast, wine does not like to rush".

Fifth, digital capabilities are also underlined as an essential competitive dimension in building and maintaining brand authenticity, especially in dealing with millennials and brand communities. However, the brand struggles to maintain the authenticity of the brand based on a consistent and heritage-based visual identity and the dynamism that is imposed by

the digital era to appeal, for example, across diverse generational cohorts. Brands should be promoted in the digital era with excellent, owned digital media. The respondents took on two opposing positions, a more critical one and another that acknowledges the importance of these media and the fact that the company definitely underestimates them. Regarding the latter, one interviewee observed that "*the website is far too busy, far too complicated, it's too much to read … too old fashioned … our website is boring*". However, a number of respondents who highlighted the importance of owned digital media, also highlighted the difficulty of managing them, especially social media, which are too complex and fast, as the quote below indicates:

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"It is important to give an identity, it is important to be on social media…if you want to do it, it is important to do so in a good way… I was trying to take care of that, but it's almost impossible because it's becoming much faster than you can follow".

Despite some interviewees highlighting the importance of digital media, many of them hold a different, opposing position. First, the managers and employees believe that no real returns may stem from having a strong presence on social media, as was stated by one respondent: "*I am not sure that the likes that you get will translate in more selling of the wine*," but also "*We've tried with Facebook and other social media. I have never gained a single client from social media. I can say that this has never happened one single time*". Second, and most importantly, managers and employees claimed that worrying about being digital and on social media might diminish the authenticity of the brand. In particular, the use of digital media seems to have had a negative impact on the real brand value, made up of people, personal and direct relationships, and high product quality, as exemplified by the following quotes.

"The more a brand's visibility grows (on social media), the more companies tend to fall into the temptation of selling products of lower quality".

"It's probably more important to have somebody who goes to the vineyard and works there instead of paying somebody to work for a year and take trendy photos to put on the web. You cannot pay one person just to take care of Facebook".

"Perhaps authenticity reduced with the digital era that we're living in… Because there is less personal contact. (Less interaction)… work may seem easier, sure, but sometimes you'll lose something".

The digital era also calls for e-commerce capabilities. However, the Antonelli brand actually decided not to use this digital form of selling and distribution. Therefore, the brand neither sells online, nor does it do so individually or through other distributors. Again, Antonelli relies on direct relationships and "*shipping is a personal or almost personal. Abroad is always personalized*", which is not possible in a digital environment. This choice is driven by the brand's aim of maintaining freedom over decision-making related to product prices. The brand does not disclose its products' prices the managers claim that they "*do not want to have an official price, especially for the US, but this doesn't mean we don't sell to private customers, on the contrary, we send prices and information on shipping, but there is no online shop or website*". The avoidance of e-commerce is also driven by the

aim of creating and maintaining a non-competitive relationship with the commercial activities of the Montefalco area and generally, of Umbrian wine shops.

Finally, the digital era calls for new capabilities that can engage millennials and deal with online brand communities. The CEO, managers and employees showed diverse perceptions of this generational cohort. In particular, some respondents seemed to have a very negative opinion of millennials, regarding them as "*superficial … they look at the alcohol percentage more than anything… they come here for a party, and they pay so much money, they order three glasses of wine and get drunk*". Other interviewees observed that this young cohort is not the target of Antonelli, which aims at drawing the attention of "*people who are slower than the younger generation*". Another respondent confirmed that millennials are not the planned target, adding a sarcastic comment about the needs and tastes of this segment, which is perceived as an inappropriate target for wine producers: "*I don't think we produce wines that are good for millennials. Millennials drink Pinot Grigio and Prosecco. Here we produce wine*". However, not all respondents showed this sense of anger and distance from the millennial generation. It is promising that the CEO and his nephew revealed encouraging perceptions about this segment. However, they observed that it is not only an attractive and promising target, but also a challenging one, mainly because it implies embracing the digital era and dealing with its challenges.

"The generation is ready. We are not ready. So in my opinion, it's very dangerous to be digital if you are not ready to begin".

"They are very nice, they are wine lovers, they are enthusiastic to know, to learn more and more; what I don't like is that everybody tastes the wine and puts it on the Internet, like TripAdvisor".

Online brand communities, such as TripAdvisor, VinoVero, and Vivino, represent another challenge for Antonelli. The risk is that of a potential alteration of the real brand story, in other words, loss of control over brand authenticity. Moreover, online brand communities prevent millennials, who seem to be more interested in "*snapping the bottle to have direct feedback from social media*" than listening to an authentic narrative about the story of a family, a place, and people, from having a real brand experience.

"There should be someone who also checks what has been written about us on the Internet and point out, 'Hey, there is a mistake.' For example, I did it on VinoVero with our Sagrantino 2009, there was a Sagrantino 2013 that was still not on the market, the price was wrong, the history was wrong".

"My colleague was explaining the wines to them (i.e., millennials) and they weren't listening to her, they didn't care about anything she was saying because they were reading stuff about our wines on Vivino. It's crazy because you are on the other part of the world, that you have travelled 24 hours to reach, and you don't want to hear our words, but prefer to read on Vivino".

5. General discussion

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Theoretical implications

This paper explored wine brand authenticity in the digital era. The findings of our study confirmed the sources of brand authenticity from previous studies in the wine industry (Beverland, 2006; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). It also confirmed the objective, subjective, and existential sources of brand authenticity from previous research (Beverland, 2006; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

Significant contributions of the current study stem from findings related to existential sources by highlighting their vital role when brands aim at building an authentic (wine) brand. Traditionally, academics have conceived the existential source rooted in moral, ethical and integral principles (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Choi *et al.*, 2015; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Hasselbach and Roosen, 2015; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Morhart *et al.*, 2015), which find their expression in Antonelli's care for the brand ecosystem, including people, the terroir and the entire location. Thus, these lenses shed light on a potential connection between being sustainable and being authentic (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016; Beckman *et al.*, 2009; McShane and Cunningham, 2012). In particular, this study substantiates previous research, suggesting that integrity and sustainability should be added to traditional antecedents for brand authenticity (Choi *et al.*, 2015; Girardin *et al.*, 2013; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, we concur with Hasselbach and Roosen (2015), who highlighted the importance of being an organic brand in the food industry that, when linked to local provenance, increases consumers' willingness to purchase and pay a price premium. The branch's respect and care for the brand ecosystem and its authentic love for the place and its products highlighted the presence of a collective identity, including competitors, which are regarded as friends. This form of coopetition has been recognized in the wine industry (Dana *et al.*, 2013; Lewis *et al.*, 2015) but in this case it is noteworthy as it is seen as an existential source of brand authenticity that helps in building a collective authentic brand identity. Overall, the existential source linked to care for the brand ecosystem implies the brand attitude of helping all the actors that live in the ecosystem, substantiating Wymer and Akbar's (2018) findings suggesting that construct "attitude towards helping others" represents a significant antecedent of brand authenticity. In the agri-food sector, knowledge sharing could be an important facilitator of sustainable development (Maizza *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to objective, subjective and existential sources of brand authenticity, this study found a new source related to a brand's competitive side, that is fundamental in competing in the digital age, and focused on the importance of narrating the real brand story, engaging in collaborative relationships, and carefully managing eco-capabilities, technological skills, and digital capabilities.

Communicating the real brand story represents the first competitive source of authenticity. This study points out the importance of narrating an indexical and emotional story made of people, heritage, place, and

quality, where internal and external brand ambassadors play a key role. In general, to maintain authenticity, the brand distances itself from commercial practices (Beverland, 2005a,b; Beverland and Luxton, 2005; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2001) and prefers direct relationships. These findings differ from Beverland and Luxton's (2005) strategic decoupling. In fact, these authors have suggested that, in order to successfully manage the tension between telling a real story and being commercial and relevant, brands use strategic decoupling, thus hiding their commercial features and capabilities. Antonelli strategically decided to downplay commercialism, which also represents a challenge in a time when the lenses are pointed to digital capabilities that are necessary to be competitive in the digital era.

When assuming an intentional and planned shape, the collective identity based on Antonelli's existential care for the brand ecosystem, which also includes competitors, , transforms it into a brand cooperative strategy that is implemented to successfully compete in the digital era while maintaining authenticity. Thus, the brand requires collaborative capabilities that can be transformed into a coopetition strategy, i.e., a paradoxical relationship with competitors who collaborate to create and maintain a competitive advantage, while increasing innovation, technological advancement, and environmental protection, with the end purpose of achieving mutual benefits (Bengtsson and Kock, 2014; Bengtsson et al., 2016; Chou and Zolkiewski, 2018; Volschenk et al., 2016). Thereafter, these findings integrated a resource-based view of coopetition, as well as a combination of competitive dynamics and network theory (Bengtsson et al., 2016), by showing that coopetition is embedded in the daily functioning of Antonelli in the region, in its strategic management, and in the competitive advantage of the brand and its authenticity. As coopetition relationships do not happen in isolation, the Consortium seems to be the primary manager and moderator of the ecosystem - the complex web of interdependent relationships in which Antonelli is embedded (Chou and Zolkiewski, 2018; Czakon and Czernek, 2016).

A different scenario emerges when considering digital capabilities, despite researchers having emphasized that the competitive dimensions of a brand should strongly consider digital efforts (Bernal-Jurado et al., 2017). Antonelli is reluctant to use digital-related instruments, such as e-commerce and social media, which are often believed to undermine the authenticity of the brand. Moreover, questions about millennial customers produced responses across the spectrum. Accordingly, this study supports and extends Brown et al.'s (2003) "ambivalent legacy", which sheds light on a challenging side of brand authenticity, especially when this is significantly heritage-based. This study observes that being authentic can be profoundly challenging, especially when considering a technological, fast, and Internet-based scenario that sees growing younger generational cohorts such as millennials and Gen Z, as well as online communities. More specifically, Antonelli is still struggling to understand how to balance heritage-based and authentic features with digital imperatives that are considered necessary to be relevant in the digital age (Bernal-Jurado et al., 2017). Surely, to increase online experiential value while maintaining their authenticity, online communication activities should narrate a brand story

that includes its family-based heritage and region of provenance (Iaia *et al.*, 2016; 2017).

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The interplay between indexical, subjective, existential and competitive sources enabled the achievement of a rich and multifaceted brand authenticity, comprising two main dimensions: brand heritage and originality (Figure 1). This is in line with Akbar and Wymer (2016), who claimed that the existing fragmented framework on brand authenticity could be simplified by considering originality and heritage. Moreover, this study concurs with Moulard *et al.* (2014, 2015b), who conceived the authenticity construct as the brand's expression of rare (originality) and stable (heritage-based) features. In particular, Moulard *et al.* (2015b) observed that whilst young generations prefer original-based features, older people tend to be more attached to stable characteristics. Thus, this study confirms and extends previous findings by suggesting that being original may help in maintaining the relevance - in terms of market and target relevance - of brand authenticity in the digital era, which otherwise risks being linked only to heritage-based features. In other words, the sources of authenticity that are linked to the dimension of originality may counterbalance heritage-based sources, thus helping in overcoming Brown *et al.*'s (2003) ambivalent legacy and achieving market relevance in the digital era.

Fig. 1: Brand authenticity sources in the digital age
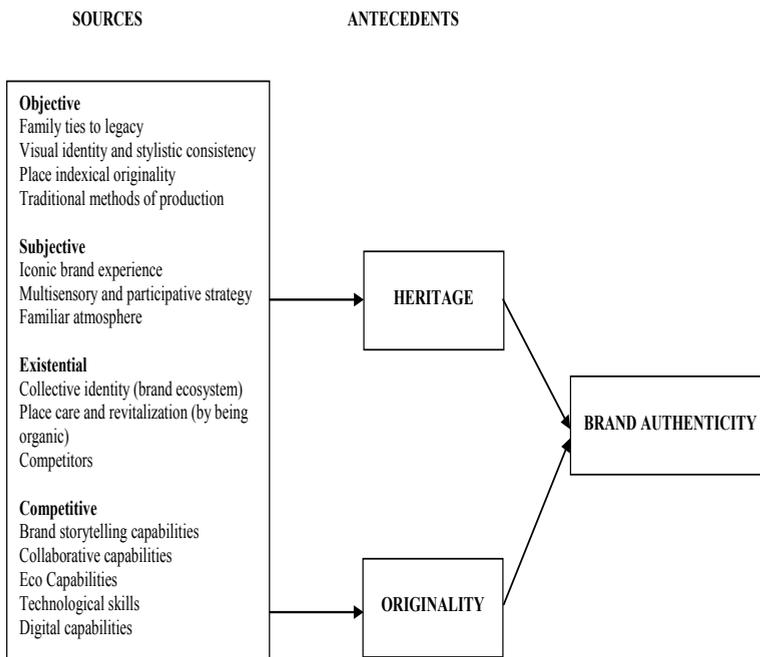
Source: Authors' elaboration

Managerial Implications

In the third millennium, brand authenticity consists of respect for quality, people, place, the environment, production with no manipulation, and being different yet consistent over time. All of this needs to be well managed in the winery's brand architecture and brand portfolio by highlighting the importance of brand associations, where product brands can be strengthened by the country of origin, region, city, and corporate brand itself.

Brand managers need to consider an ecosystem view of their brand authenticity integrating all internal and external stakeholders, as well as an integrated plan of the dimensions of brand authenticity, including the competitive dimension. In particular, the relationship between the objective, subjective, existential and competitive dimensions may affect the final consumer's perception of brand authenticity, individual value, as well as collective socio-economic value. Thereafter, managers should pay considerable attention to the proposed model to avoid a shift from a virtuous, authentic-based process, to a vicious circle. Managers are called to carefully manage and improve their digital capabilities in the attempt to find the right balance between authenticity and commercialism.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the richness that has been provided by this explorative study, the choice of a single case study might limit the generalizability of its findings. Accordingly, future studies could investigate multiple Italian family wineries, including those operating in the wine sector in other countries. Moreover, the sources and dimensions of wine brand authenticity that emerged are contextual, so further research may reveal them to be applicable to other brands and markets. Alternatively, the same study could be carried out on family businesses operating in other sectors where the image of the product is linked to its territory of origin. Another critical point lies in the fact that the difficulty of managing the diversity in the wine consumption behaviour of millennials, as well as the digital environment, are described from an organizational and managerial perspective. Despite Pattuglia and Mingione's (2017) already having described authenticity from the millennials' point of view, their work lacked millennials' considerations on the relationship between being authentic and being digital. Thus, it could be interesting to further investigate this potential link. Is the digital scenario considered as challenging as this study suggests? Or do younger generations have different perspectives? This is also true in the case of other markets. How do commercial brands use digital principles and tools to enhance their authenticity?

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