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# 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 coherence.*

*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