

# **International Expansion based on a Locally Authentic Brand: Issues and Findings from Italian Case Studies**

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*This paper deals with the topic of brand authenticity in the internationalization of a company. It aims at addressing authenticity by proposing the consideration of this concept, its relationships with the one of “made in”, the role of local heritage as well as the internal management of the ‘process’ that combines internationalization with authentic brand values. The paper proposes some preliminary findings and implications regarding the two main research questions: a) How does brand authenticity that is mainly focused on cultural heritage act as a driver of internationalization? and b) How does it relate with the “made in” concept?*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper tries to offer a different perspective on the internationalization of a firm by proposing and discussing the essential role of authenticity. The concept of brand authenticity can be broadly considered as an expression of the true-self that a brand expresses over time (Beverland, 2005). Among all the potential perspectives, the paper considers a concept of authenticity based on the historical heritage of a local community and explores how it relates to brand development in international markets. A relevant antecedent of the paper is the search and appreciation by consumers in international markets of products and brands with specific roots, geographically narrowed (local territories) with respect to a country (Diamantopolous et al., 2017, p. 183). More specifically, from the theoretical point of view, our study follows a recent academic debate that calls for a major and new understanding of the topics of “made in” and “country of origin” through a rethinking of them and the identification of new perspectives (Ko et al., 2017). In particular, it considers the concept of authenticity, discussing its main characteristics and contrasting it with the dominant and abundant literature that points out the “made in” and “country of origin” effects (Bilkey, & Nes, 1982) as the key drivers of internationalization and performance (Elango & Sethi, 2007). Hence, the authors try to go beyond the “made in” concept, pointing out that it is no longer able to explain all the potentialities that a company, especially of a small medium size with local roots, may take advantage of in international markets. In the view of this paper, brand authenticity reflects

both values rooted in a territorial community and values marking the identity of a single organization. Both of them make the company specific and different in its way of being and in its behaviors. Consequently, authenticity is not limited to the relationships with consumers in international markets, but it needs to be read according to a systemic view of the organization. Following this reasoning, the paper aims to explore how brand authenticity that is mainly based on cultural heritage acts as a driver of internationalization and how it relates with the “made in” concept. Empirically, the study presents the results of a case analysis of two Italian small medium-sized companies, “Alpha”, a pasta producer, and “Beta”, a chocolate producer. The cases are based on interviews with the entrepreneurs supplemented with available secondary data on the companies. They show the main features of the concept of authenticity and how this represents a key driver for the international expansion of the companies. The paper is organized as follows. The literature review is presented in the next paragraphs. After a methodology section, the cases are illustrated. Then, the authors discuss the main findings emerging from both the literature and the empirical investigation. In particular, they answer the research questions advanced previously, pointing out the main implications of the research. Finally, the paper ends with limits and directions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Authenticity, Branding and “Made In”**

Authenticity is considered one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing (Brown, 2001) and has attracted a range of researchers, who have investigated, through an analysis of their production and market manifestations (Penãloza, 2000; Ranfagni & Guercini, 2014) how firms and consumers relate to authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The interest in authenticity on the part of the academic community reflects a search for truth emerging in Western cultures (Lowenthal, 1992) in reaction to postmodernism and to its alienating illusionism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In particular, there are individuals who look for truth rather than fiction, mix reason with feeling as a basis of their daily behavior, and build knowledge combining subjective and objective visions of reality. From the perspective of “being”, it is seen as authentic as an individual, who is moved in “owning one’s personal experiences (values, thoughts, emotions and beliefs) and acting in accordance with one’s true-self” (Gardner et al., 2005, p.344). Thus, his aim is to conquer himself by cultivating his true-self. Just as an individual may pursue authenticity, a similar consideration can be made in reference to a company brand. In fact, researchers (Brown et al., 2003; Keller, 2003) highlighted how authenticity could be considered as a core component of successful brands, generating uniqueness in the brand identity. Its production pushes marketers to turn to brand histories, historical associations (Penãloza, 2000) as expressions of a true-self that is pursued and maintained over time. Hence, the construction of brand authenticity is experienced as a path of brand self-authentication based on the brand’s core values (Postrel, 2003). Beverland in his studies (2005; 2008) demonstrated what joins brands that rigorously pursue paths of self-authentication is the self-recognition of the attributes of heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, and quality commitments. Thus, the production of brand authenticity passes through history (see also Handler & Gable, 1997), classification systems, continuity of style, and a particular care for intrinsic quality. In addition to these, other attributes are identified in the relationship to location, traditional production practices, and independence from commercial forces (see also Belk & Costa, 1998; Arsel & Thompson, 2011). Thus, territorial roots, craftsmanship, and a deliberate downplaying of commercial motives mark brands that strive to remain true to themselves. These are the attributes that constitute their brand aura and self-expression transferred to the market. On their basis, a brand builds its image.

Compared to authenticity, the “made in” identified in terms of “country of origin” (from now on COO) is conceived by traditional contributions as “the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country. This image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background; history and traditions [of a country]” (Nagashima, 1970, p. 68). If combined with the brand image, the COO produces bilateral effects (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). On the one hand, national symbols and attributes

characterizing the COO surround the brand contributing to define its image. On the other hand, strong brands may affect the country image and produce spillover effects on other national brands (Kleppe et al., 2002; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). This interaction identifies situations of integration of COO image and brand image, where a country image can be transferred to the brand or brand images can find their synthesis in the country image (Brijs et al., 2011). It emerges that the stereotypes behind a country image can be collectively built; once used, they can be adopted as such. The “made in” concept and authenticity seem to share the origin of the brand in terms of its production place. But we propose to investigate them more deeply by discovering how they relate in the internationalization processes.

### **Authenticity between External and Internal Boundaries of the Company**

Brand authenticity is not only something the company communicates but it is also a tension toward certain ways of being. More specifically, building a differentiating brand authenticity implies necessarily authentic behaviors both at the organizational and individual levels. In marketing literature, it is widely recognized that individual behaviors are important in the successful delivery of the brand’s promise (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Hermann, 2007; Morhart et al., 2015; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Wentzel, 2009). Indeed, it was demonstrated that inconsistency in employee behaviors might result in a perception of decreased brand authenticity, while “brand-congruent employee behaviors [...] is likely to reinforce consumers’ perception of the perceived brand authenticity dimension credibility” (Morhart et al. 2015, p. 206). Further, it was pointed out that “in highly authentic brand-aligned conditions”, the subjects should embody “the sophisticated brand personality in a felt, natural, and believable manner” (Sirrianni et al., 2013, p. 117). In other words, authors suggested that, in such contexts, actors need to internalize the elements of brand personality as if they truly possess those traits in their natural personality (Sirrianni et al., 2013, p. 117). In organization science, the concept of authenticity has not been extensively debated, while some scholars claim that empirical work in this domain is still scant (Roberts et al., 2009). However, in the last decades, a number of organizational scholars have joined an ample debate on authenticity, previously carried out by philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists. Harter (2002) defines authenticity as “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences of beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to ‘know oneself’ and further implies that one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). Some authors in the domain of organization studies refer to the concept of authenticity as “slippery” (Corley & Harrison, 2009) since it arises from an enduring reshaping of its social meaning. Indeed, applying it to a socially constructed entity, such as an organization, needs to consider the organization as a dynamic entity and the concept not in permanent and static terms (“We are authentic”) but rather as an impermanent one, thus leading to the adoption of a process-oriented perspective (“We wrestle with issues of authenticity”) moments of actions, reflections, challenges arising from the how and why of doing new things, in the constant search for self. According to most scholars in this field, authenticity is related to the construct of organizational identity defined as the “meanings that individuals attaches to individual, relational and collective components of his or her self-concept” (Corley & Harrison, 2009, p. 370). According to the authors, authenticity is considered "as a process", meaning, members—and the organization itself—need to be engaged in a search for its authentic self by constantly answering the question: “What does it mean to be who we are?”. The continuous process of inspiring such complex values, deep-rooted in the personality and the behavior of individuals and organizations, implies a huge effort in terms of ‘indoctrination’, which is a distinctive practice of an organization characterized by strong organizational values. Further, other mechanisms can be implemented in order to reinforce values and identities, for example, through ‘rituals and ceremonies’ (Beverland, 2005) or with the enactment of an ‘effective authentic leadership’ (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Indeed, authentic leaders are greatly self-aware and able to promote a general self-awareness and development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). They are defined as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate, and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005: 321). Thus, it was proved that supervisors’ consistency

between words and actions is positively related to employee trust and engagement (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). In order to achieve a general consistency of authenticity, it should be spread out all over an organization's internal and external domains. Thus, authenticity calls for the intertwined, consistent, and balanced management of the "process," which involves the external and internal beings of the organization.

### **Authenticity based on Cultural (Local) Heritage**

In the current competitive scenario, the way for a brand to increase the perception of its authenticity is to create authenticity on the basis of a cultural (local) heritage (Ballantyne et al., 2006) that will be connected to the brand image. In fact, despite globalization, there is an increasing need for research on cultural differences between countries and their impact on business (Leung et al., 2005). Cultural heritage is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the concepts of territorial roots identified by Beverland (2005) and of "history and traditions" pointed out in the definition of COO proposed by Nagashima (1970). Defined as a composite of history, coherence, and continuity of a group or society's distinguishing characteristics (Arantes, 2007), cultural heritage encompasses the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, rituals, objects, and artistic expressions. It also consists of local values and traditions. Building authenticity on a cultural heritage implies pursuing a process of brand authentication on tangible and intangible heritage belonging to a specific community. Doing this, it focuses its identity and assumes a sustainable behavior. The ensuing effect is to "generate transmission from generations to generations of timeless products" (Kapferer & Michaut, 2015) as an expression of an integration with historical heritage. The more the brand is integrated with the heritage, the more it preserves the heritage. This is a way to differentiate the mode of being authentic: self-authentication alone, based on the brand attributes that Beverland (2005; 2006) indicated, can indiscriminately and easily induce some brands to feel and declare themselves to be authentic. Moreover, it is also a way to make brand authenticity a collective good: brand authenticity is not related to something belonging to the company but to the heritage of a community. Apart from its main sources, authenticity exists if it is legitimized by the market. In cases of real attributes ("indexical authenticity") (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) that is tangible historical connections, consumers attribute authenticity to a brand by processing objective information, while in cases of attributes stylized and evocative of real situations ("iconic authenticity") (Peterson, 1997; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), authenticity is recognized by consumers to the extent to which the abstract cues synthesizing brand connections are seen as part of their identity (Arnould & Price, 2000). Market legitimization is an uncontrollable side of authenticity for a company. However, the latter has a role in building brand authenticity: in fact, the process of self-brand authentication depends on it. A way to explore brand authenticity is, therefore, to explore this process, drawing on the obstacles and trade-offs, it must overcome to preserve its true-self that, in the case of authenticity based on cultural heritage, encloses community features. The resulting choices and compromises allow the understanding of how authenticity can become the driver of the internationalization processes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Methodologically, the paper presents the results of two case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). The recourse to qualitative case studies to address emerging issues within the management literature has been pointed out to be extremely relevant (Runfola et al., 2017). Our paper aims to investigate and deepen the concept of authenticity, according to an exploratory approach that fits the features of the case studies and the qualitative research pointed out by relevant literature (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Accordingly, to answer the research questions, we developed two case studies of two Italian companies, Alpha and Beta. The firms are shown anonymously for confidential motives. Both the companies are particularly relevant to the issue investigated, as they are regarded as firms that were able to grow and develop both in the national and international markets because of their ability to rely on authenticity and to maintain it over time. They represent very well-known cases in the Italian context. Alpha operates in one of the traditional sectors considered to be one of the pillars of the "made in Italy" production, the

pasta industry. Beta operates in the chocolate industry, with high-end positioning. The company is strictly connected to strong and rooted local traditions in Italy. The cases that are presented in the next paragraph are built on different data sources. The main and primary data were gathered by means of a qualitative interview with the entrepreneur of the company in the case of Alpha, and with the Entrepreneur and the Marketing Manager in the case of Beta. The interviews were directed toward the analysis of the following issues: a) the main cornerstones in the history of the company; b) the role of the cultural heritage of the specific area in the company's growth; c) the developments in international markets; d) the internal organization to support brand authenticity in international markets. Then, to supplement the data emerging from the interviews, we specifically collected news and information available in other sources (companies' websites, newspapers, annual reports, previous interviews of the manager by the press). The aims of our research were to investigate how authenticity, based on cultural heritage, impacts the brand internationalization and how it relates to the "made in" concept. The following paragraphs present the case studies.

## FINDINGS

### Alpha Case

The company is active in the production of artisan pasta. Its factories are located in a very small place in Italy, where the traditions of craftsmanship and the cultural heritage related to pasta are strongly rooted. The company was founded in the mid-2000s; it also preserves its local values and traditions in a museum, where the heritage of the territory and company are shown to visitors. As is well known, pasta is one of the main product of the "made in" Italy production.

In Alpha, the brand self-authentication process in the local pasta *traditions* developed by relating them with elements of *modernity*. In this regard, it emerges that *manual machinery* has been integrated with more *automated machining*. The entrepreneur says: "We produce traditions, but all stages of the manual production processes are automatically monitored. We are artisans 4.0 but we are not dominated by technology." Moreover, he specifies: "We take advantage of the skills acquired over time, and, today, together with my brother, who is a pasta-maker, and my son, we manage to make pasta of high quality." Thus, specific *competences* foster the ability to measure out and then *control* the technology on the basis of manual skills. This helps to preserve the dignity of traditions in pasta productions. Moreover, technology has been introduced as an instrument to preserve traditions and to guarantee a high qualitative standard. The case investigated shows that *traditions* can find their expression in *product innovations*. The way the company has launched a new kind of craft pasta has granted it visibility in terms of a local production culture. In this regard, the entrepreneur cites a new form of pasta that has been patented. More specifically, he points out how "this invention has made us grow. In fact, since 2008, the company has progressively increased its turnover. Today we are one of the most famous European pasta producers". Product innovation has been used as a means with which the local pasta traditions have been transferred to the market. This was possible due to the direct involvement of the entrepreneur and his family in production, that is, of those in the company who act as the bearers of traditions. Besides, their involvement has made it possible to transfer traditions by integrating a general concept of pasta with a new concept that sees pasta as "the object of desire and gift". The owner is convinced that "instead of giving ties, pens that are standard products, one could gift the pasta that creates another kind of affection".

The authenticity that the company builds is externalized by exploiting a *brand logo* that is an evocative synthesis of the combination among traditions, pasta, and territory that the company preserves. The entrepreneur recounts that "for me, however, the link with the territory represents 75% of the brand". The company not only conveys authenticity but also promotes being authentic. In other words, the brand tradition and the collective values it incorporates are something that people who work with the company share, feel to be their own, and identify with. Moreover, in general, it emerges that the relationship with external actors such as intermediaries, distributors, and the final consumers in international markets is constantly nourished by a huge investment within the organization. Both the entrepreneur and a team of employees manage this process and act to promote the brand authenticity abroad. "There is a great work

of evangelization towards our customers... I and my collaborators make it. We act on several stages ... the first stage is at the fair when we have the first contact with potential importers and, in the second stage, we take the suitcase and go to the place... we speak of evangelization, we have apostles all over the world... among them there are also the Italian restaurants". The entrepreneur stresses how importers, distributors as well as employees are committed to the brand values, being "apostles" of them. In this sense, the organization enlarges its "boundaries" through sharing the inner meaning of its identity with traditional "outsiders"—i.e. intermediaries—who acquire the critical role of "apostles" in which they engage in the assertion and dissemination of the idea, the rituals, and the values of the organization and its community. The relationships with international intermediate clients and importers are aimed at stressing the authenticity of the company, by frequently organizing company visits (two days generally) and meetings with company representatives all over the world. "Through direct experience, we try to make them feel part of the community to which the tradition belongs. We host our importers because living here few days brings them in touch with our world and with an uncontaminated and beautiful environment...; our guests may experience these places, see the workers who manually create, smell the scent in the company emanating from the drying of the pasta; we talk about ourselves and we create indelible moments that make them fall in love and remember us...". Moreover, although the company uses new means of communication such as digital communication, face-to-face interaction with clients remains the key activities to support the diffusion of the brand authenticity. Following this approach, the company, despite its small dimension, was able to successfully penetrate a relevant number of international markets, comprising both very mature markets such as those in Western Europe, Japan, and the USA, and emerging markets such as Brazil, South Korea and the Middle East. The company increased its sales and employees significantly in recent years, achieving roughly 35% of sales in international markets.

### **The Beta Case**

The current entrepreneurial team of Beta comprises three young business partners, who teamed up in 1997 following a process of acquisition. The company, at the time of the acquisition, was an Italian historical reality of chocolate products, with products that were strongly typical of the territory. Today, Beta offers chocolate with a high price position. All the products of the company are based on carefully selected natural and genuine ingredients. The company has always been characterized by the ability to maintain its original identity and offering to the market what was the result of a mix of the partners' passion for chocolate, the place of origin, and the search for uniqueness.

This can be deduced from the words of the entrepreneur interviewed about the logic that led to the brand revival in 1997 by the three new entrepreneurs. The entrepreneur interviewed indeed states that "if we take all the consumers of chocolate in Italy at the end of the Nineties, 70% of them preferred sweet chocolate, snack, or otherwise highly fat and sugary products... we are in a region that is the cradle of the great hazelnuts, the cradle of chocolate, the cradle of so many connections since the dawn of the discovery of cocoa, we try to exploit that". The entrepreneur continues, saying: "What did we say in the end? Let's specialize in the most difficult chocolate to make—the dark and the extra-dark; we went back to recall the cocoa as it was born. Then, I am a great fan of chocolate and chocolate history, because, deriving not from a fruit but rather from a seed, it is a crazy mineral kaleidoscope...". And it is evident that the company's past and the connection to the product's origins are important in business development, as can be seen from the following statement: "We have a beautiful can of the early 20th century that even carries comparative chocolate analyses with veal meat, fish, vegetables, comparing the characteristics of vitamins ... and we were at the very beginning of the 1900s".

In this sense, the enterprise has revived a heritage and local traditions by offering a product that "was good but also functional". The progress in this direction, continues the entrepreneur interviewed, has been to approach the production of chocolate as a "chocolate pharmacist" to achieve a relevant brand awareness and a marked development in the subsequent years. In fact, this is a history of success of a company that had a turnover of around 1.5 million euros at the end of the Nineties, but today stands at around 60 million euros, with a strong presence in the Italian national context and a significant international development. Indeed, as the entrepreneur interviewed points out, the decision to produce

chocolate with functional characteristics, linked to the origins of the product and to natural ingredients, which was good and that had a high-end positioning, found confirmation in the subsequent market conditions.

The market of chocolate, besides an expansion in sales, has been characterized by phenomena such as a pronounced attention to the calories content of foods and the healthiness of the ingredients or possible intolerances. Moreover, the interviewee highlights that “we are a company that also produced gluten-free products because we had developed, very early, sugar-free chocolate, in which the sweetener came from corn, and of which our region is a producer”. From these words, it is clear how tradition passes through innovation; more specifically, the process that led to the innovation of the company’s productions is deeply rooted in the traditions of the region in which it is located. This represents a reconsideration of a local heritage by the organization, which proposes an absolutely original interpretation, combining tradition with innovation, through a constant investment in R&D activities and a strong market orientation. As the interviewee emphasizes, “ours is a made in Beta product, the one that people have to fall in love with... is our philosophy of our brand value, the Italian character is in our way of how interpreting chocolate and handle it”. Additionally, the entrepreneur continues, saying: “When we launch a new chocolate flavor in the market, we have to imagine having a three-star Michelin restaurant with 200–300 places, this is the challenge. Do it good but do it for many”. The company is currently present in a number of countries in the world in three main geographical areas: Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It is the foreign presence that accounts for about 20% of the company's turnover. It is a significant percentage that has grown over the years. As far as the foreign market approach is concerned, the company is committed to introducing a product that has the Italian character in the production, which is highly positioned, and which is good from the point of view of both the taste and organoleptic qualities. It has a positioning that is consistent with the “accessible luxury” logic. This approach drives the process of expansion in any foreign market, where, of course, the ways of relating to the final consumer are different. Indeed, in the European markets, mainly France, Germany, and England, the company's choice is to contact retailers. In fact, in these markets, the company has sales agents to reach a market made up of specialized vendors, such as proximity stores, restaurants, high-end hotels in addition to department store chains. In other international markets, however, the company aims at reaching the final consumer directly through the development of mono-brand stores. This represents a growth path that was first developed in the domestic market, and subsequently in many international markets. The company, indeed, is present with stores in the United States, Brazil, South Korea, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Dubai and China. As confirmed by the entrepreneur interviewed it is possible to “talk to the consumer” through the retail store and this is crucial to “understand how to manage the company, keeping our very DNA, but also”, continues the manager, “to understand what the customer really expected from us”.

Bringing DNA with the customers (final consumers as well as distributors) was crucial, because as the entrepreneur highlights, given the company's size, it benefited from a word of mouth growth process. As the entrepreneur highlights, for example, with reference to the role of the online channel “if you go on the Internet you see our Italian character because is the same consumer who puts the picture with our product alongside an Italian monument”. Attention to the values of the company is constant both in the relationship with customers, retailers, and final consumers, as well as within the organization. As for the production area, all the employees are local. As the business owner confirms, “We have a company brand guide, and the training process in the company is designed to breathe and assimilate the values of the Italian way of production, authenticity, and corporate heritage”. Human capital management is, therefore, crucial. In general, a particularly relevant tool is the corporate newsletter, which disseminates news and information about opportunities within the company. However, as the marketing manager of the company says, “In this company, what's fundamental is that employees here see that passion is interpreted every day by everyone in a very operative way. So it's a continuous interaction, being in direct contact with a property that, with its different characteristics, interprets this way of life from the morning to the evening... and is, therefore, a continual contamination of passion, values that are spontaneously interpreted here, and have managed to reach Naples, New York as well as China. But because the chain is

very short, all are very operative, and this makes it true. The formal document, at the end of a cycle, is all about the personal empathy of the person who lives for the company every day”.

## **DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

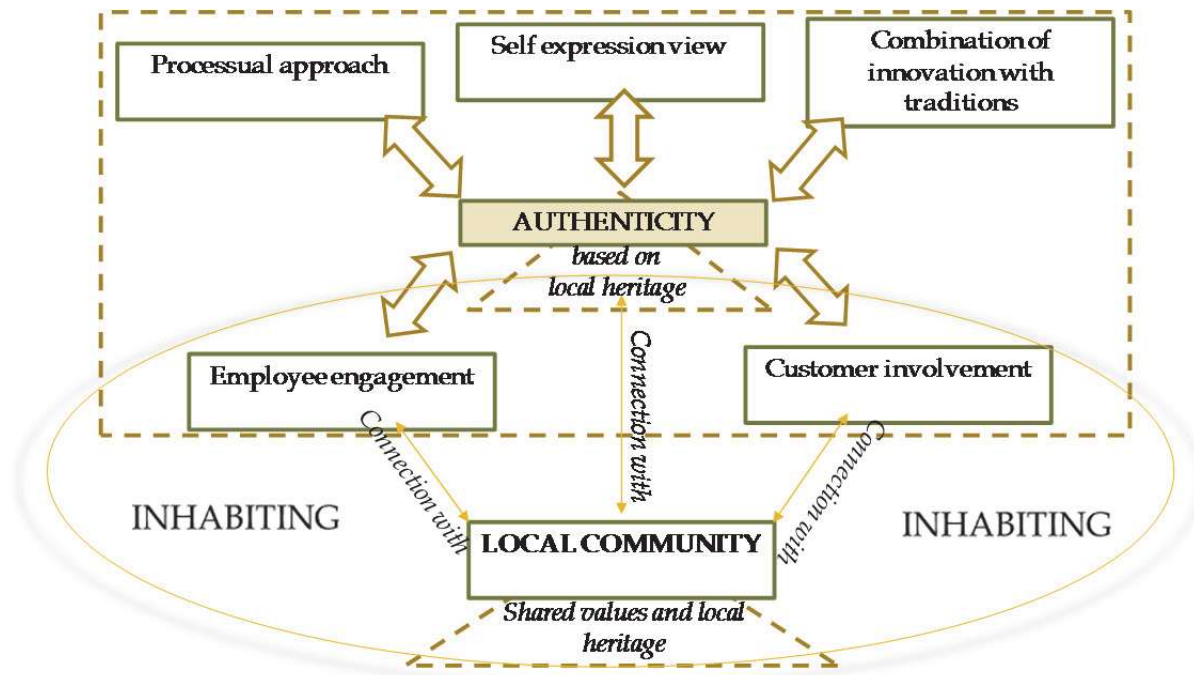
In this section, we try to propose some considerations emerging from the case analysis and considering the theoretical background developed within the paper. We can surely point out how there are many well established Italian brands that have also developed heavily abroad. However, in our case analysis, we investigated how the companies go beyond the “made in” or the “country of origin” effect to penetrate international markets. Paradoxically, while going international, it helps in pointing out the origin of the company, and at the same time, today, it does not let the company to be really distinguishable from others. Its effects, in fact, seem to be exploited by many Italian companies in an undistinguished way. Rather, the concept of authenticity emerges as the key driver of the international expansion from the point of view of the entrepreneurs interviewed. In fact, to point out the specificity of the range of products, the companies are committed to an ongoing process of transferring and translating the intertwining of brand values and the values of the territory in the search for an authenticity that distinguishes it from competitors.

On the basis of both the theoretical review and the empirical investigation, we now propose some preliminary answers regarding the two research questions outlined earlier.

Regarding the first research question (*RQ1*). *How does brand authenticity that is mainly focused on cultural heritage act as a driver of internationalization?* The cases investigated show how building authenticity based on a local heritage as a driver of brand internationalization implies recreating the production traditions with new production techniques and using product innovation to transfer local traditions through new concepts of products (for example pasta as a primary good in the case of Alpha). In this way, it is possible to reduce the perceptual distances between the product (pasta or chocolate in our case), tradition, and territory that are typical of a local identity. Besides, tradition/modernity is no longer a trade-off because modernity is the brand's face on the foreign markets and is used as a way to recover and enhance local traditions. All that we have just described is possible, thanks to the entrepreneurial skills that are able to offer innovative solutions in which tradition does not become a slave to modernity but preserves its dignity. Skills favor a control on technologies. The authenticity that is based on the cultural heritage is, therefore, a narrative that goes through the company's brand. But it is also a way of being: sharing and believing in the values of local traditions belonging to a local community. The evangelization creates new members of this community. These members include distributors and importers. They incorporate its values and lifestyles. They “inhabit” the company. The paradigm of “inhabiting” can be useful to explain the need of activating a particular embedded localism. This is a real challenge for the company. Overall authenticity is a procedural approach characterized by a vision oriented to self-building also by seeking to combine elements of modernity with tradition. It is based on a strong engagement of both the internal organization, with a particular reference to entrepreneur, employees and customers. These actors have to be connected with the local community, although in a different way. The employees' origin is often connected to the local community. More specifically, in the case of “Alpha” the entrepreneur and the employees are local and share a common ground, and this could let the company develop its authenticity more easily. In order to generate a sense of belonging to the community among the other actors (not only customers, but also importers and distributors), the entrepreneur attempts to favor company visits in order to make them “breathe” the community atmosphere. In the case of “Beta”, the employees in the production are all local as well as the entrepreneur. Employees in the retail division, who are in different market destinations, can share the DNA of the company by strictly relating to the entrepreneur. Moreover, in the “Beta” case, the “inhabiting” of the final consumer is mostly allowed by the direct contact provided by the opening of own retail stores in many international markets. It is also achieved by means of online marketing channels and by means of the spontaneous word of mouth among consumers in international markets. These aspects are crucial in order to develop internationally. From our analysis, it emerges that, authenticity is, thus, characterized by the features highlighted in Figure 1.



FIGURE 1  
THE MAIN FEATURES OF AUTHENTICITY FOR INTERNATIONAL BRANDING



Regarding the second research question (RQ2). *How does the authenticity that is cultural heritage relate with the “made in” concept?* We could point to some pieces of evidence regarding the *relationship* between *authenticity* and *made in*. Authenticity, although potentially related, is a different concept from the “made in.” Moreover, while the “made in” or the “country of origin” is a static concept and represents a *shared concept* that joins companies belonging to a certain geographic context, authenticity is, instead, a more *firm-specific concept*, based on a *self-construction process* over time. It is not something predefined but is something that the company *builds* by itself. Moreover, if it is culture-based, the correlated process includes *collective values* of a territorial community. In this sense, authenticity also embeds *sustainable features*: its construction contributes to making community traditions timeless. Authenticity also represents a joining force between branding and organizational values that are locally inspired. These values are, in fact, placed in a specific organizational context that embraces and renders them as part of the corporate identity. The “made in” is not a process but rather a *distinctive feature*, identifying some *stereotypes* that generally refer to a specific country or geographical area. It incorporates a *country-territory*, but not a *community-territory*. It can be used as an attribute of the brand self-authentication process. Even though the latter includes it, it *goes beyond the stereotype* and enhances a cultural heritage, as more circumscribed and much more distinctive. The involvement generated by the “made in” within the company seems to affect collaborators (internal staff, suppliers, intermediaries, etc.) on macro-values rather than on values belonging to communities or even to ethnic groups. Therefore, the “made in” can be part of the process of authenticity, but, at the same time, it can be released from it, representing only a “halo effect” that the company can refer to without building an identity process on it. Likewise, authenticity could be based on values that can be different from those of the “made in.” In essence, the two concepts have common elements, but the concept of authenticity is wider and involves the specific involvement of organizational levers and firm factors, compared to the “made in.” From the company’s point of view, authenticity allows it to make a distinctive offering with respect to other companies. The concept of authenticity relates to something that is appropriable by the company and can be shaped according to the company’s values. Authenticity can be proposed in international markets as the key asset

and could be appreciated by more and more consumer looking for authentic products and brands beyond possible general labels. In other words, authenticity lets the company show what's behind the brand. However, from a company's perspective, looking for authenticity may generate some specific trade-offs. They could be related to the following: a) the trade-off between authenticity and "made in." This trade-off regards the relationship between the two concepts, and considers the supporting and contrasting roles of one with respect to the other and vice versa in the internationalization process of the company. Making "made in" an attribute of brand self-authentication can be seen as a solution to this trade-off; b) the trade-off between preserving traditions and investing in new technologies. This trade-off regards both the implantation of new technologies in production and the use of ICT for communication of the brand. Although new opportunities emerge, the case shows how innovation can act as a way to valorize traditions embedding cultural heritage. In order to reach this, authenticity needs to maintain face-to-face and personal interactions in order to be successfully transferred to the market and within the organization; c) the trade-off between leveraging brand authenticity and maintaining authentic values in the company's development abroad. This trade-off stresses the need to coherently and constantly manage the processes of foreign expansion and the maintaining of the organizational values that nourished such process. The "evangelization" and all the rituals it includes becomes strategic to overcome this trade-off. With the company's growth, the concept of authenticity may evolve with it. In this process, the management of the organizational values is central to support the future international expansion. Hence, it emerges that the inclusion of the "made in Italy" as a possible attribute of the brand self-authentication process, the innovation as an access door to traditions, personal interfaces in business relations and cultural indoctrination are some of the main ingredients to let the cultural heritage of the brand be an engine of the internationalization. From the community's perspective, having companies aiming to pursue authenticity processes may be beneficial from different perspectives. Authenticity, in fact, preserves local values, and permits over time the transmission and the valorization in an international landscape. In other words, the shared values at a territory level may still endure and the community may include international consumers who appreciate those values and tend to be linked with the community. In this sense, the concept of authenticity can be interpreted as sustainable, for it sustains local values, thus contributing to maintain them. Moreover, authenticity may have greater general implications for the community from a more general economic point of view. For example, it could be related to the employment that it can generate at a local level.

Some final observations can be made regarding the future directions of our research. Although relevant, the cases investigated in this paper are limited to two companies. Future research should be directed toward a cross-case comparison of more different companies from different sectors. Moreover, it could be useful to investigate explicitly the role of the local community by involving local opinion leaders in the study of the connections between the company and the territorial community. Finally, a greater understanding of the relationship among authenticity, "made in" and local heritage should be addressed. The relationship among these concepts is crucial. In particular, future research should be directed toward a deeper comprehension of authenticity in the internationalization process both at the external and internal levels, and how local heritage relates to this process. To conclude, the implications of our research regard both theory and practice. From the theoretical point of view, our analysis stresses the importance of authenticity for internationalization and its complex value system. In terms of managerial implications, our analysis proposes key aspects to be considered for expansion abroad, especially for small medium-size companies in competition with large players.

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