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When the past makes news: Cultivating media relations through brand heritage

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with heritage branding, investigating communication and PR models promoted by historical companies representing Made in Italy in the global market, in order to focus on their distinctive approach to media relations strategies and related practices. The study has adopted a multi-method approach, involving a panel of companies in the food & beverage sector. In-depth interviews from PR professionals highlight the potential of heritage branding to develop an authentic form of storytelling, based on quality branded contents and the strategic management of corporate history, thus cultivating long-standing relationships with the media.

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1. Introduction

Heritage branding represents an emerging strategic approach, rapidly rising internationally within the communication market (Misiura, 2006; Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Urde, Greyser, & Balmer, 2007). It is based on the narrative reconstruction and strategic management of corporate history (Martino, 2013), also with reference to a company's products and marketing brands.

In the new millennium, the practice of valuing and communicating industrial tradition has seen a real boom in Italy, as companies started to rediscover their own history and make it a distinctive communication strategy. Representative expressions of such phenomenon are the celebration of company anniversaries, often packaged in the form of communication events with high media potential. Secondly, the opening of historical archives and museums conserving industrial memory and ensuring a permanent fruition by the public. Furthermore, a rich digital storytelling combining the use of corporate website and social media.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of heritage branding concerns especially those historical companies representing a selected niche of the business market. They distinguish themselves for a special longevity, as they are proud of an at least centennial tradition and, generally, of a family ownership which is deep-rooted in the territory (de Geus, 1997; Giaretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013; Stadler, 2011). On the other hand, even companies which are not so ancient can value their own place within collective memory if they do not choose to promote a pure marketing storytelling (Boje, 2008, 2011), but to deeply rediscover their own history and share it with their stakeholders (Panda, 2006; Urde et al., 2007).

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From this scenario, the paper aims to investigate the specific communication and PR models promoted by a group of brands representing the heritage of Made in Italy in the global market, in order to focus specifically on their approach to media relations strategies and related practices by means of an explorative and multi-method approach.

2. Literature review

2.1. From corporate memory to heritage

The rediscovery of memory, representing nowadays a strongly emerging phenomenon, sees the history of organizations and private companies rising into *heritage* and, thus, a form of strategic cultural and relational capital. Especially during the last decade, several international researchers have investigated the strategic-operational models supporting the management of corporate memory and, more marginally, its communication policies and practices.

From this scenario, the literature review has investigated two major fields: on one side, the phenomenon of historical business and its evolution; on the other, the rise of topics concerning corporate memory and heritage within the frame offered by management and PR studies, with special reference to media relations function and its contemporary evolution. The diverse theoretical approaches have been reviewed from an interdisciplinary perspective and integrated by the analysis of the most authoritative sources, professional experiences, and associative networks promoted in both the Italian and international context.

In particular, several contemporary trends can explain the strong rise of heritage branding: first of all, the evolution of strategic communication from a marketing into a corporate approach, promoting organizations beyond their products and services (Argenti, 2009; Cornelissen, 2011; Fabris, 2009; Goodman & Hirsch, 2010). Moreover, the topics concerning organizational *longevity*, *vitality*, and *memory* are attracting a growing interest by both scholars and professionals (Rossato, 2013), since the economic crisis is dramatically challenging life expectancy which is already short for companies. Such a rising sensitivity is also demonstrated by the number of associative networks which have been launched in Italy, especially from 2000, in order to promote historical companies' culture and role in the country.

The phenomenon of *historical companies* has been highlighted by international scholars investigating, mostly in the context of family business, those economic and socio-cultural conditions assuring organizations' vitality and longevity (de Geus, 1997; Giaretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013; Stadler, 2011). Conversely, organizational studies have developed, especially within knowledge management and cultural approach, the concept of *organizational memory* and investigated its role as an intangible asset (Brooking, 1999; Krandsdorff, 2006; Walsh & Ungson, 1991), which can be subject to an instrumental use or, in alternative, to an expressive and narrative one by organizations (Wexler, 2002).

Scholars suggest that organizations tend to rediscover their own memory and roots when they have to cope and adapt to a changing environment (Pethes & Ruchatz, 2002), as the awareness of the past can reinforce corporate identity and relationships, stimulating brand reputation and attitude towards innovation. From this point of view, radical organizational changes and crises, as well as the celebrating of relevant corporate anniversaries (especially centennials) can offer companies decisive occasions for rediscovering their own history and identity, by acting as moments for analysis in their life as well as for future changing (Martino, 2013).

Such an attitude toward cultivating corporate memory concerns primarily those historical companies which are at least centennial (Giaretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013). Indeed, ancient companies represent a specific economic-cultural system and an extraordinary ambassador of Italian excellence worldwide especially in the most competitive business sectors, such as fashion, design, and food & beverage. Not by accident, in the last years many historical Italian brands have been acquired by multinational corporations, wanting to collect these excellences in their own commercial portfolio (Fara & Attili, 2013).

Especially in the last decade, Italian historical and heritage brands are participating to a cultural movement promoting the protection, conservation and valorization of industrial heritage. Indeed, several projects and associative networks have been launched for initiative of both public sector organizations and private companies (Rossato, 2013). In particular, the most specific expression of such a trend is probably the widespread phenomenon of company historical archives and museums, distinguishing the Italian case in the international scenario, since from the Nineties the number of new industrial archives and museums opened to public has been without equal in Europe (Amari, 2001; Bonfiglio-Dosio, 2003; Bulegato, 2008; Gambardella, 2013; Martino, 2015).

2.2. The communication of brand heritage

In the recent years, both practitioners and scholars started exploring the temporal dimension of branding (Burghausen & Balmer, 2014). They have argued the special relevance of memory for corporate marketing and communication strategies in an age characterized by economic crisis and globalization, when companies become conscious that "any brand, but especially those that are struggling, can benefit from going back to its roots and identifying what made it special and successful in the first place" (Aaker, 2004, p.7).

Corporate heritage represents an *attribute of brand identity* that scholars have discussed only marginally within management and PR theory. Its communicational potential, which cannot be imitated by competitors, can provide a basis for a distinctiveness in positioning (Aaker, 1996, 2004; Balmer, 2013; Urde et al., 2007). In particular, several key dimensions define a specific *heritage quotient model*, developed by Urde et al. (2007). According to those scholars, the heritage potential

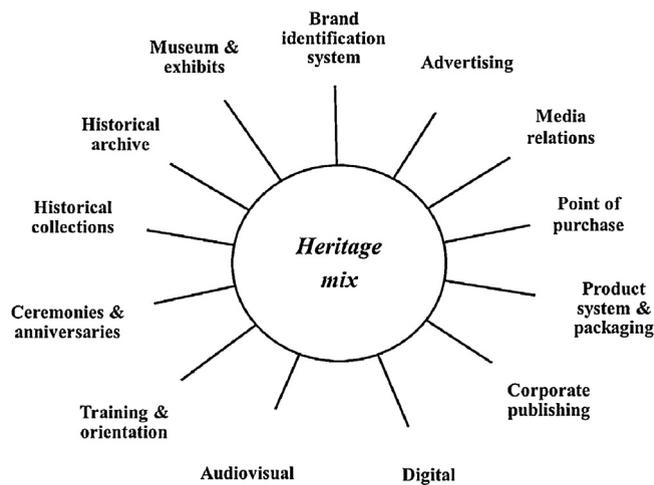


Fig. 1. Brand heritage mix: operational channels of communication.

Source: Adapted from Martino (2013).

residing in a brand results not only from corporate longevity, as a pure chronological attribute, but also from other prerequisites: track record, guaranteed by quality behaviors in order to pursue company's mission; integrity of business ethics and company's core values; brand symbolism, or even "iconism"; use of history as an explicit identity strategy.

Heritage branding process can be defined as a *communication strategy of organizational memory* (Martino, 2013), which implies not a nostalgic effect but rather the continuity of a company and its business among past, present, and future. The management of brand heritage includes different stages, such as analysis, activation, and constant stewardship of the heritage potential by means of internal and external communication policies (Urde et al., 2007).

At the executive level, such a process can combine several online and offline initiatives (Montemaggi & Severino, 2007); not only traditional marketing channels (i.e., advertising, point of purchase, product system, packaging, etc.), but also digital platforms, training and orientation, and media relations. Furthermore, considering the most distinctive heritage communication tools, it is possible to mention historical archives (Bonfiglio-Dosio, 2003), company collections and museums (Amari, 2001; Bulegato, 2008; Coleman, 1943; Danilov, 1991, 1992); corporate anniversaries and ceremonies (Deal & Key, 1998); corporate publishing (Froni & Magagnino, 2010) and audiovisual (Hediger & Vonderau, 2009; Robertson, 2001). In detail, the communication toolkit supporting a heritage brand strategy is summarized in Fig. 1.

In the last decade, several studies have been produced in order to discuss the contemporary rise of heritage branding as an emerging corporate communication strategy (Balmer, 2013). They suggest that the phenomenon strongly connects to the opportunity for companies to cultivate *quality relationships* (Grunig & Huang, 2000) and even long-lasting *partnership* with the media system, as well as with online influencers. Indeed, brand heritage needs not only to be communicated within corporate or paid media, but also to be supported by a specific media relations approach, stimulating an earned coverage by journalists and other influencers.

Specifically, media relations represent a strategic PR function (Shaw & White, 2004; Supa, 2014a), whose value is not only in gaining media coverage, but in establishing a quality relationship with the media in the long term, since the interactions between PR practitioners and journalist have been always seen as problematic (Macnamara, 2014; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). In the last fifteen years PR has been challenged by the great impact of Internet and social media (Lovari & Parisi, 2015; Verčič, Tkalac Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2015) as new digital environments for diffusing corporate messages and relating with traditional and online opinion leaders. Organizations started practicing media relations via corporate websites (Kent & Taylor, 1998), creating online press rooms (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006; Callison, 2003), spreading digital corporate publishing (Macnamara, 2014), and promoting official presence on social media to relate with journalists and digital publics (Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011; Supa, 2014b).

More in general, the diffusion of social media has produced a complex communicative environment in which boundaries between PR, marketing, and advertising are blurring, up to favor new hybridized formats (Hallahan, 2014; Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2015). In particular, companies are discovering the opportunity to invest in *quality branded contents* to be offered to the media system, in order to engage strategic publics and share with them innovative business conversations about brands and products (Gordini & Rancati, 2014; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009).

3. Research questions and methods

From this scenario, the paper aims to investigate what role strategic media relations can play in supporting a heritage branding process. Indeed, the literature review suggested that such aspects remain marginally discussed within the international PR and management studies, in spite of their potentialities in order to assure companies quality branded contents

Table 1
Historical companies in the research panel.

Company	Year of foundation	Location in Italy	Main product
Amarelli	1731	Rossano Calabro (Cosenza)	Licorice
Birra Peroni	1846	Rome	Beer
Cantine Giorgio Lungarotti	1962	Torgiano (Perugia)	Wine
Maglio Arte Dolciaria	1875	Maglie (Lecce)	Chocolate
Pelino	1783	Sulmona (L'Aquila)	Sugared almonds
Poli	1898	Schiavon (Vicenza)	Grappa
Sella & Mosca	1899	Alghero (Sassari)	Wine

and the strategic visibility they are searching for. Thus, the main objective was to explore the ways the communication of corporate memory can foster both publicity in the media and long-lasting relationships with journalists, newsmakers, and other categories of opinion leaders. In particular, two main research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are the most effective communicative contexts and channels supporting a heritage branding strategy addressed to media relations?

RQ2: What strategic function can be played by heritage strategies and branded contents in cultivating quality relationships with the media system?

The study has investigated a multiplicity of case histories in order to focus on the experience of a group of Italian historical companies. According to an explorative and multi-method strategy, previously adopted by former studies in the sector (e.g., [Urde et al., 2007](#)), it includes several stages of investigation and qualitative tools (i.e., analysis of corporate materials, in-depth interviews, observations, etc.), especially addressed to identify new variables and connections grounded in the empirical data ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)).

A first step of the study was a review of best practices, selected from the literature in the field and among over one hundred former case studies investigated by the authors themselves (in particular, cf. [Martino, 2010, 2013; Martino & Lovari, 2014](#)). From such critical overview, the second empirical stage of the study has collected original case studies from a selected panel of big and medium-small Italian companies working in the food & beverage sector (see [Table 1](#)). Such companies, located in different Italian regions and doing their business internationally, are characterized by both a relevant historical tradition (from a minimum of fifty years to nearly three centuries) and a strong commitment to value it, by means of a dedicated associative activity and, in some cases, the creation of a historical archive and/or museum.

Case study research has used multiple sources of evidence, including the analysis of archival records, corporate publishing and communication materials, to reconstruct each single company context. Furthermore, in May 2015 seven in-depth interviews (about 45-min-long) were conducted by telephone with PR managers and other key figures. Interviews' questions have specifically explored the variety of strategies and channels supporting the communication of corporate heritage in the context of traditional and online media relations' policies.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with the formal permission of the interviewees. Transcripts and other materials were analyzed according to an interpretative approach, providing additional qualitative insights to the first stage of the study.

4. Findings

Key findings of the study are presented and discussed, highlighting some excerpts of the interviews, in order to illustrate both the communicative contexts and channels adopted ([Section 4.1](#)) and the content strategies ([Section 4.2](#)) chosen by heritage brands.

4.1. Communicative contexts and channels

Media relations represent a key element in a branding strategy focused on heritage, highlighting companies' responsibility and cultural role in the community. In particular, media relations allow historical brands an innovative and often earned coverage on traditional media system. At the same time, as the companies participating in the research panel suggest, the communication of brand history can offer other visibility opportunities. On the one hand, it stimulates attention in the social web, engaging opinion leaders and other digital publics in different platforms. On the other, these initiatives disseminate contents to a multiplicity of corporate media (i.e., house-organs, books, websites, radios, televisions, videos etc.), supporting a cross-media storytelling managed by a company itself.

In such processes, the *corporate historical archive* play a decisive role. It represents, in fact, the first prerequisite of a heritage branding strategy, since it acts as the major provider of historical materials for media relations' actions and it also feeds the whole communication strategy. It is evidenced by the following excerpts:

“A historical archive offers the opportunity to collect historical materials, organize them, and make them available for the media system” (Amarelli).

“The historical archive represents a sort of «aquarium» fostering our brand storytelling: both PR activities and marketing ones come and glean from it” (Birra Peroni).

For such reasons, the historical archive is expected to work in a close connection with corporate press office and PR department. It is easier in small companies, where

“The connection between the press office and the historical archive is direct and immediate. On the contrary, within large companies the press office finds difficulties to interconnect with the historical archive and, thus, to collect materials which could be immediately spent for communication activities” (Maglio).

Furthermore, historical companies have already discovered the opportunity of leveraging on *corporate collections or permanent museums* to support a strategic historical positioning, up to institutionalizing their own presence in the territory and in the surrounding cultural context. In particular, whether the historical archive plays a decisive storage function, the museum stands as the major communicative channel of corporate memory, thus expressing a great potential as a form of below the line investment.

At the same time, it is not sufficient to create a company historical archive, collection, or museum, if they are conceived as a traditional and static investment. Indeed,

“The historical archive and museum represent inexhaustible sources. It’s not simple for them, however, to raise media attention: it’s necessary to effectively package the information concerning such centers in a way the journalists could find interesting” (Poli).

In particular, such communicative contexts need to be continuously animated with *special events* and communication initiatives involving stakeholders, in order to periodically raise the attention of media and strategic publics. Among the main opportunities emerged in the interviews, it is possible to mention in-house exhibits and events, strategic partnerships, participation to external events (i.e., exhibits, prizes etc.), and networking activities with major sector associations:

“In many initiatives dedicated to the media system, as well as to visitors, events are organized just starting from corporate museum” (Lungarotti).

“Using the museum as a communication tool has meant to bring it outside. At first, it was possible to increase its visibility as digital heritage by means of both corporate website, restyled and enriched with a museum’s virtual tour, and the communication on social networks. Then, three years ago we began to bring the museum outside especially by means of exhibits” (Birra Peroni).

In order to enhance their own brand heritage, the companies studied are aware of the strategic function played by anniversaries and other historical celebrations. Such ceremonies can be the driving force of the entire communication process giving a special guiding role to PR departments, as they represent decisive corporate rituals reinforcing the empathetic connection with both internal and external stakeholders. Interviewees strongly highlighted how corporate and product “birthdays” can represent a context for hosting exclusive media relations activities addressed to journalists and online influencers (i.e., previews, special events, tours), as well as for promoting media partnerships and providing contents for the media system:

“We celebrated a brilliant centennial together with employees, journalists, consumers, suppliers. In such occasions, you need to be careful and not exclude anyone. It was a wonderful and exciting moment for us, a real event: we chose to let the public participate in a ceremony which is actually very intimate. A part of the program was reserved to journalists, involved in tours, visits, distribution of materials” (Sella & Mosca).

Furthermore, a heritage branding strategy is usually played on a third decisive field, *digital communication*, combining the use of corporate websites and new participatory platforms supporting press release activities as well as media monitoring and relationship building with digital publics. PR and communication managers strongly confirmed the importance to integrate official social media channels with corporate website:

“News posted on official social media channels are automatically reported in the corporate website, producing a digital activation for every company’s event and press reception. In this way, when a press release is issued offline, in real time it is also delivered online on corporate website and social networks” (Birra Peroni).

“Social networks represent an ideal vehicle to spread historical information, which a company would communicate with difficulty in other media. Indeed, if traditional corporate channels require the users the effort to search for information, social networks reach the public in a quicker and more direct way, also stimulating the use of additional sources to deepen information” (Poli).

Thus, news concerning corporate museum, as well as special company celebrations and initiatives, can generate a continuous communication flow with strategic publics.

4.2. Cultivating media relations through corporate memory

Media relations are variously managed by the companies participating in the panel, by using different tools and actions. In any case, media relations' activities support the whole communication strategy. As reported in an interview:

“We are entirely committed to value our history and the press office takes the role of supporting and amplifying every corporate initiative” (Amarelli).

Among the major opportunities, interviewees mention the *facilitation of brand storytelling process*, by making it credible and continuous over time. Indeed, whether today most of the companies are searching for stories to involve and activate their publics, a relevant corporate history can offer a ceaseless source of contents for PR strategies. Thus, a heritage brand approach is called not to *invent a tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) or new stories, but rather to rediscover company roots, being credible and authentic for the stakeholders:

“Some companies can prove a long history, some other shorter; the importance is to tell a true story, because only what is true can stand against time, while invented stories are destined to fall, sooner or later. Thus, for resisting in the information market and being attractive for the media system as well as for other stakeholders, you need to be credible” (Lungarotti).

Heritage branding implies the PR managers' capability to select those elements reflecting corporate identity at the present. For this purpose, media relations function must assure consistency between the current news and the communication of the past, thus producing a balanced brand storytelling mixing tradition and innovation.

If conceived in this way, the uniqueness residing in an illustrious history can stimulate interest, making companies attractive for media and public opinion. Such condition guarantees these organizations the opportunity to “pull” journalists and engage influencers, rather than to chase their attention and try to push news along media channels with a traditional press office activity. As reported in the following excerpts:

“In most of the cases, when media decide to make a piece on our company or museum, they act autonomously and not because we have asked them. Of course, the press office represents the first contact and, at a later stage, the structure accommodating journalists and offering all the materials they need” (Poli).

“Journalists usually attempt to contact us more than the contrary. We limit to make ourselves available when they ask to make a service on the museum. Thus, our activity consists in housing every professional who is interested in our history. We arrange accommodation, an employee who could explain our history, and satisfy all curiosities” (Pelino).

“Media excite for small realities, which are little known or unique in their own genre. They spontaneously talk about us, want to come and visit, ask if we have news, review our products. Even the financial press contacts us, as we make trend also from that point of view” (Sella & Mosca).

Not least, heritage branding strategies can help companies to closely *identify themselves with local territory and the Made in Italy tradition*, also by stimulating specific corporate partnerships and networking activities. Indeed:

“Our reputation depends on the symbiosis between the company and its town. They are two symbiotic realities, as corporate history is also the one of Pelino's family and Sulmona” (Pelino).

“One task for the press office is to promote strategic partnerships with other organizations sharing some values with us: history, quality, Italian character” (Maglio).

Moreover, among the major findings, PR managers reported not only a widespread and quality coverage on media, but also a large number of contacts with the external context (i.e., visitors of the museum, exhibits etc.), and an increase of corporate reputation in the middle-long term. Not every companies participating in the research panel have implemented a systematic PR monitoring, although some of them can exhibit a prestigious national and international press coverage, often made available on corporate website. This testifies historical and heritage companies are capable to gain resonance in specialized media context as well as in high-visibility mainstream ones. Especially the international press is usually responsive to the Italian cultural heritage, as stated by some interviewees:

“To arrive to the international press has been the major satisfaction for us: I'm referring, for example, to the resonance we have had in Japan” (Amarelli).

“The paradox is that: our excellences are recognized abroad, while in Italy they hardly emerge. This is a very curious situation: the ‘New York Times’ reviewed our Museum of Wine in Torgiano as the best Italian one in its category” (Lungarotti).

Some of the companies have developed a specific set of media relations strategies and tools in order to cultivate, sometime after a first unexpected contact, an effective relationship with the international press. Other companies, including some of those participating in the study, began investing in their own memory, as a strategic brand asset, only after they have been acquired by multinational corporations.

5. Discussion

The study has investigated the way heritage branding strategies can enrich the corporate media relations' toolkit and facilitate innovative ways to connect and relate with journalists and other strategic publics. As previous studies suggest (c.f. Martino, 2013; Martino & Lovari, 2014), key findings confirm that a heritage branding approach can obtain relevant and even surprising communication results.

Purposely to respond to RQ1, heritage branding approach is supported by three major assets, which every company variously combines in its own communication strategy: *corporate anniversaries*, celebrating the major stages of corporate history; *historical archives and museums*, assuring a stable investment in conserving and communicating companies' memory; and *digital heritage*, combining the use of corporate website and social media to spread branded contents toward online communities (Balmer, 2013; Martino, 2013; Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Urde et al., 2007).

To respond to RQ2, PR and communication managers converge in highlighting the special role played by heritage strategies in cultivating *quality and long-standing relationships, based on trust, with the media system and the online influencers*. Historical companies tend to prefer a typically "low profile" communication approach, based on the value of brand heritage itself rather than on an explicitly promotional and advertising investment (Balmer, 2013; Balmer, Greyser, & Urde, 2006; Urde et al., 2007). Indeed, for companies adopting a heritage branding strategy, the opportunity is to gain a qualified presence within an informative and not commercial context, by means of a privileged relationship with the journalists and, thus, an earned visibility on traditional media, at the same time stimulating participation and engagement in the online communities.

On the one hand, for the companies involved in the panel, media relations represent a strategic function, fostering a mutual beneficial relationship between PR practitioners and journalists (Shaw & White, 2004; Supa & Zoch, 2009). These companies consider journalists not simply as an intermediary to feed with press releases, but rather as *partners* involved in an interactive relationship (Macnamara, 2014).

On the other hand, the study suggests that companies practice media relations according to different approaches. For example, they do not always manage strategically social media (Supa, 2014b; Wilson & Supa, 2013): indeed, although most of them have created official profiles on the most popular social media, they prefer rather to invest on corporate website and interpersonal channels for relating more directly with journalists.

The exponential extension of media environments plays a decisive role in encouraging companies to reveal their own history and, more in general, in consecrating worldwide the fascination of Made in Italy tradition. Digital platforms offer companies the opportunity both to write autonomously their own story, and to spread it toward a potentially global audience, including a remarkable sector of digital influencers. At the same time, journalists are willing today to offer a widespread publicity for those historical and cultural aspects connected to products and brands, as traditional media have become more dependent than in the past on companies and on the social web to find informative contents (Supa, 2014b).

Thus, in the new hyper-media environment, media relations function is expected to construct not only single news, as in a recent past, but rather a wider *narrative frame* which could assure consistency to a multiplicity of communication messages. In other words, a coherent and official brand story which could integrate both the information produced by a company itself and the grass-roots contents circulating within social media and interpersonal networks (Zerfass et al., 2015). From this point of view, findings suggest that the investment in heritage branding can actually support the contemporary evolution of media relations into a relational process based on the dissemination and exchange of branded contents, engaging online influencers and, through them, reaching public opinion (Zerfass et al., 2015) by making advantage of a radical *inter-media agenda setting process* (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991).

For all the organizations, the autonomous production of quality contents has become an imperative (Gordini & Rancati, 2014; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009) in an environment characterized by "new hybridized PR/advertising/product placement formats and sites of journalism-PR convergence" (Macnamara, 2014, p.747). In this sense, companies are expected to express an innovative publishing role as culture and information producers to support their own primary business. They are searching for new strategies and channels which could be able to bypass the filter imposed by the mass media system and to emerge from the online communication flows by means of a credible and transparent storybrand.

Indeed, corporate history becomes on the web the starting point for a *cross-media storytelling* orchestrating company's communication strategy, as the historical contents can feed not only external and paid media, but also earned and owned ones. That is the best example of how companies can actualize their own history, by handing over it toward publics and experimenting innovative languages.

6. Conclusions

The study points out the relevance of heritage branding strategies in order to cultivate quality relationships with mass media and digital influencers. In continuity with previous international studies (Balmer, 2013; Urde et al., 2007), the empirical evidences suggest that heritage represents a strategic and not imitable asset, playing nowadays a special role in communicating the food & beverage sector, as it is exposed to both a typical "country of origin effect" and a strong request of transparency and reassurance expressed by customers and other stakeholders.

From this point of view, the study confirms that the revisiting of brands' and products' past can offer engaging stories, played in an anti-nostalgic perspective and with a strong bet on the present and future. Furthermore, such evidences suggest

that tradition is not the exclusive prerogative of an elite group of ancient companies, but a strategic communication field for all the organizations claiming a role within collective culture.

The study also presents several limitations. For instance, the limited number of historical companies investigated in the research panel, as well as their exclusive belonging to the food & beverage sector preventing to fully extend insights to other markets. Moreover, the study does not consider the point of view of journalists working in the media systems when they relate with companies' PR departments.

In the light of the international debate, a further step of the research could be to discuss quality prerequisites for extending the PR and communication models which distinguish the historical companies, as well as other ancient organizations (Balmer et al., 2006), to other companies and products representing the largest part of the market. In addition, further studies could compare the Italian case with other countries to identify common trends and cultural specificities characterizing the phenomenon of heritage branding in different cultural contexts. Not least, among the future research directions, it could be interesting to investigate also a possible *World Expo 2015 effect*, since such a mega-event (in which, not by chance, most of the companies studied decided to participate) can represent an unique occasion consecrating the reputation of Made in Italy as a global heritage brand itself in the international scenario (Bucci, Codeluppi, & Ferraresi, 2011; Ferraresi, 2014). Indeed, heritage branding shows extraordinary PR opportunities, as it highlights both the quality of Italian productions and their enormous symbolic potential, which can help especially small-medium companies in connecting to their stakeholders.

In a globalized and rapidly changing world, historical brands have actually much to teach to younger ones at the relational and ethical level. First of all, the relevance of cultivating both a strong identity and the competence to express it toward all stakeholders with authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). For the Italian companies, it means to fully comprehend the narrative potential residing in Made in Italy, which can transform ordinary products and services into *complex cultural experiences* (Bettiol, 2015) for the final customers and other strategic publics worldwide. Recognizing the value of tradition and putting effort into actualize it, a company can actually feel part of one story along with the territory and its stakeholders. That is the deep relational intelligence that is due to heritage.

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