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Telling heritage to see the future. A content analysis on the institutional websites of long-running Italian agrifood brands

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Abstract

In recent years, the theme of brand heritage has gained significant relevance. In an era of globalization and rapid cultural change, companies increasingly recognize that leveraging their history and legacy can convey trust and assurance in the minds of their customers. This is even more true for agrifood companies. The study employs content analysis to extract the main topics from the heritage information published by long-running Italian agrifood brands on their websites. The companies chosen for the analysis (n = 126) were identified using the Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest". The research revealed that the primary focus areas for the long-running Italian

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agrifood companies are Longevity, Roots, Product Offering, Pioneerism, Business Performance, and Core Values.

Negli ultimi anni, il tema dell'eredità di marca ha acquisito una rilevanza significativa. In un'era di globalizzazione e rapido cambiamento culturale, le aziende stanno sempre più riconoscendo che sfruttare la propria storia e il proprio lascito può trasmettere fiducia e sicurezza nella mente dei loro clienti. Questo è ancora più vero per le aziende agroalimentari. Gli autori hanno utilizzato l'analisi del contenuto per estrarre i principali argomenti dalle informazioni sull'eredità pubblicate sui siti web delle aziende storiche italiane del settore agroalimentare. Le aziende scelte per l'analisi (n = 126) sono state identificate utilizzando il Registro speciale dei marchi storici di interesse nazionale. La ricerca ha rivelato che le principali aree di interesse per le aziende agroalimentari italiane di lunga data sono la longevità, le radici, l'offerta di prodotti, il pionierismo, le performance e i valori fondamentali.

1. *Introduction*

In recent years, with globalisation and rapid cultural change, companies increasingly recognise that leveraging their history and legacy can convey trust and assurance to their customers. Brands that embody stability, longevity, and familiarity have a valuable chance to enhance their identity by incorporating values of authenticity, genuineness, and integrity. Brand heritage is the aspect of brand identity that reflects its traceability in collective memory. Rather than viewing heritage solely as a historical concept, it also encompasses the present and future dimensions. It signifies longevity and assures stakeholders that the brand's fundamental values are authentic[1]. This is particularly important in the food industry, where many companies have long histories. Brand heritage in food encompasses the traditions, customs, and cultural practices passed down through generations, influencing various aspects of our lives. Therefore, exploring and understanding the value of heritage for food companies has profound implications for market positioning, consumer perceptions, brand loyalty, sustainable business practices, and long-term success[2].

Brand heritage encompasses consumers' historical, cultural, and emotional associations with a specific brand. It has been extensively explored in the marketing literature, as testified by the growing number of studies since the early 2000s[3]. From an internal perspective, brand heritage has been interpreted as a valuable dimension of brand identity that can be discovered, utilised, and safeguarded[4]. Evaluating the existence and use of brand heritage involves re-

[1] Mainolfi 2018; Wiedmann *et al.* 2012.
[2] Baer, De Luce 2019.
[3] Aaker 1996; Urde *et al.* 2007; Hudson 2011.
[4] Urde *et al.* 2007.

searchers examining recognisable traits, such as symbols in promotional material, longstanding track records among stakeholders, or organisational interest in history[5]. Brand heritage is also viewed as an extrinsic attribute, namely, a collection of brand associations. Researchers have analysed how consumers perceive the importance of brand heritage and its consequent influence on their overall perception of the brand[6]. For example, Rose *et al.*[7] showed that brand heritage facilitates trust and brand attachment. More recently, Pecot *et al.*[8] operationalised brand heritage as a set of temporal brand associations (i.e., stability, longevity, adaptability) and found that brand heritage positively influences brand credibility and feelings of personal nostalgia.

While marketing scholars acknowledge brand heritage as a unique and valuable asset for brand identity, research has revealed limitations in the theoretical understanding of the construct. These limitations can be traced across three stages in developing brand heritage literature, each with its scientific gaps.

First, initial proposals aimed at defining brand heritage in relation to brand identity relied heavily on an inductive approach[9]. This approach, however, limited the development of a solid theoretical foundation due to insufficient differentiation between conceptual categories. Second, to address the limitations of the inductive approach, subsequent studies employed quantitative designs to develop a measurement scale for brand heritage based on consumer perceptions[10]. However, these studies faced methodological issues due to the use of both formative and reflective indicators for the same construct, highlighting the need for a unified conceptualisation of brand heritage. Third, only recently have there been noteworthy attempts to achieve a more rigorous conceptualisation of the construct. However, empirical research has operationalised the construct using studies from vastly different sectors, potentially limiting the representativeness of the analytical context[11].

Our study addresses the business problem identified in the literature: the need for a rigorous operationalisation of the brand heritage construct. This operationalisation entails a scientifically sound approach to categorising the key dimensions that define a brand's heritage[12].

Building on this identified need, the present research aims to contribute to brand heritage by examining its digital communication within the agrifood

[5] Urde *et al.* 2007; Hakala *et al.* 2011; Hudson 2011; Wiedmann *et al.* 2011.
[6] Rindell *et al.* 2015; Rose *et al.* 2016.
[7] Rose *et al.* 2016.
[8] Pecot *et al.* 2019.
[9] Urde *et al.* 2007; Hakala *et al.* 2011; Hudson 2011.
[10] Rose *et al.* 2016.
[11] Merchant, Rose 2013 ; Pecot *et al.* 2019; Pecot *et al.* 2023.
[12] Middendorp 1991.

sector. Focusing on established companies in Italy, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How is the brand heritage construct operationalised in the agrifood sector?

The agrifood sector is a particularly fertile ground for studying brand heritage due to the prevalence of long-established companies[13]. This is particularly true for the Italian context, where a panorama of food and wine excellence thrives, often built upon knowledge passed down through generations[14]. Furthermore, Italy ranks among the top 10 global exporters in the agrifood sector, according to the Italian Trade Agency[15]. "Made in Italy" food products have gained widespread recognition internationally for being synonymous with superior quality, safety, prestige, and tradition. As a result, Italian exports reached over 42 billion euros in 2022, and the demand for these products continues to grow steadily[16].

Furthermore, the relevance of investigating this sector is also linked to another aspect. The agrifood sector is the only one where the link between traditions, heritage, and innovation is vital for creating a competitive advantage for food companies. However, not all food innovations are readily accepted by consumers due to concerns about health risks or unclear benefits[17]. This consumer resistance to new things (neophobia) highlights the importance of heritage and tradition. Research suggests these dimensions can act as a "reassurance" factor, reducing resistance towards process and product innovation in the food industry[18]. Following this reasoning, it is evident that the agrifood sector is a rich environment in which to explore and gain valuable insights to answer the study's research aims.

To address the identified gap in the existing literature, this study adopts a marketing analysis perspective to develop an initial framework for understanding brand heritage in the food sector. Following a brief review of the critical findings on brand heritage from existing research, we present the results of a content analysis of the web communication related to heritage employed by long-established agrifood companies in Italy. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we opted for the content analysis technique.

This study advances marketing literature by introducing a novel theoretical framework – the brand heritage chain – that operationalises the brand heritage construct. The findings highlight the value of a multidimensional perspective beyond just temporal dimensions to offer a richer understanding of brand her-

[13] Baer, De Luce 2019.
[14] Garofano *et al*. 2020.
[15] ICE 2023.
[16] *Ibidem*.
[17] Vidigal *et al*. 2015.
[18] Rabadán 2021.

itage. Regarding managerial implications, the study equips brand managers with a valuable tool for monitoring, managing, and fostering brand heritage through communication strategies.

The paper is structured into six sections. Section 2 presents the literature background. Section 3 is dedicated to the methodology applied in the study. Findings are presented in Section 4. The main theoretical and managerial implications are discussed in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 addresses the study limitations and proposes potential future research paths.

2. *Theoretical background*

Heritage has been a subject of great interest in marketing literature over the last few years. The initial and most notable area of study pertains to heritage in the context of corporate marketing research. This field has gained recognition within the broader domain of corporate marketing. Various scholars, such as Balmer[19] and Balmer and Greyser,[20] have extensively examined the practical significance and conceptual effectiveness of corporate heritage and different forms of historical references in general[21]. Corporate heritage refers to the enduring characteristics of a company that persist throughout time[22]. Existing research has investigated various aspects of corporate heritage, including corporate heritage branding[23] and the management of corporate heritage identity[24]. The overall argument mainly supported by corporate marketing scholars is that corporate heritage symbolises a distinctive institutional trait – or a system of traits – owned by an organisation[25]. Due to its perceived timelessness, this unique trait encompasses past, present, and future, carrying contemporary significance and future value. The "heritage trait" represents a potential or actual corporate asset and strategic resource, which can be used for several purposes, such as brand positioning and communication. So far, corporate marketing literature has detailed some general characteristics of corporate heritage brands, such as omnitemporality, institutional trait consistency, authenticity, and multigenerational stakeholder affinity[26]. Moreover, the "heritage trait" is imbued with various identities that serve multiple roles.

[19] Balmer 1998, 2001, 2011.
[20] Balmer, Greyser 2003.
[21] Urde *et al.* 2007.
[22] Fraboni *et al.* 2023.
[23] Balmer, Burghausen 2019.
[24] Balmer, Chen 2015.
[25] Balmer 2013.
[26] Balmer, Chen 2015; Santos *et al.* 2016.

As a result, different stakeholders may perceive heritage differently, leading to diverse interpretations and a sense of affiliation. Consequently, heritage undergoes evolution, transformation, and reinterpretation over time[27]. From this perspective, managing corporate heritage poses several challenges for big and small enterprises. Through an investigation of 20 long-running Italian companies, Riviezzo *et al.*[28] proposed a four-stage strategic framework for developing and implementing the heritage marketing strategy. The initial stage involves auditing, which entails the crucial task of pinpointing heritage elements. The narrative goals and intended audience for corporate heritage marketing initiatives are established in the visioning phase. During the management phase, a strategic heritage management system is configured based on skills and competencies entrusted with defined tasks to coordinate actions to be implemented. It is necessary to research, collect, and analyse the material and immaterial traces of the organisation's experience to construct the narrative framework. The tangible and intangible traces create a mix of tools to convey heritage narratives. Internal and external stakeholders evaluate and reconstruct the tangible and intangible aspects of the identified heritage elements from the previous stage. Once the organisational and operational model for communicating corporate legacy has been defined, the company will begin implementing corporate heritage marketing communications and activities. The final phase, control, entails monitoring outcomes related to the set objectives and considering corrective measures when necessary[29].

A second stream of research is associated with consumer marketing, and although it has received less attention, it has still captivated the interest of several scholars[30]. Specifically, this field of study is geared towards exploring and investigating the influence of brand heritage at the product or service level on brand management and consumer responses. It is of interest that more recent studies point to the primary need to circumscribe the boundaries of the brand heritage construct[31]. Even if the corporate marketing literature – as mentioned before – has contributed to shed light on the relevance of heritage in a business context through conceptual directions, essential precepts, and empirical research, the micro-level, that of the brand heritage from a consumer marketing perspective, suffers from a scarcity of empirical research addressed to propose a measurement model of the brand heritage[32]. Urde *et al.*[33] defined brand heritage «as a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core val-

[27] Fraboni *et al.* 2023.
[28] Riviezzo *et al.* 2021.
[29] Fraboni *et al.* 2023; Riviezzo *et al.* 2021.
[30] Rose *et al.* 2016; Pecot, De Barnier 2018; Mencarelli *et al.* 2020; Song, Kim 2022.
[31] Pecot, De Barnier 2017.
[32] Mainolfi 2018.
[33] Urde *et al.* 2007, p. 4.

ues, use of symbols, and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important». Accordingly, Banerjee[34] stated that history, image, expectancy, and equity are the four pillars of a brand's heritage. It should be noted that the above definitions – outcomes of conceptual studies – show evident theoretical limits since the constitutive elements used in the definition of brand heritage overlap and are not fully discriminated. Moreover, the definitions proposed for describing brand heritage do not explain how to measure brand heritage.

After the conceptualisation of Urde *et al.*[35], a few studies have tried to propose a categorisation of a brand's heritage. In 2020, Huaman-Ramirez *et al.* developed a scale for measuring brand oldness, interpreted as consumers' perception of a long brand existence. The scale consisted of 18 items and six dimensions: decline, expertise, maintenance, reminiscence, timelessness, and tradition. However, brand oldness only depicts the longevity dimension of heritage, and the study's objective is to measure brand oldness associations, defined as «characteristics related to brands perceived as old and activated in consumers' memory»[36].

The first attempt to propose a categorisation of brand heritage – adopting a more holistic approach – can be found in Hakala *et al.*[37], where the authors propose a measurement model based on a history, consistency and continuity of core values, product brands and use of symbols. A subsequent study by Wuestefeld *et al.*[38] proposes a measurement instrument composed of formative indicators obtained through explorative interviews. Fifteen items emerged from this analysis: continuity, success images, bonding, orientation, cultural value, cultural meaning, imagination, familiarity, myth, credibility, knowledge, identity value, identity meaning, differentiation, and prestige.

Looking at the items, the tremendous heterogeneity of elements does not help to stigmatise the phenomenon of brand heritage. Only recently, building on previous research,[39] Pecot *et al.*[40] developed a measurement scale for brand heritage perceptions characterised by four dimensions (longevity, symbols, outdatedness, adaptability) for a total of 12 items. This proposal has two significant merits. First, focusing on brand identity it provides conceptual clarity of brand heritage in relation to other constructs (i.e., nostalgia, authenticity, and credibility) and emphasises its temporal connotation. Second, the measurement scale is obtained through empirical studies conducted in a cross-national context involving three countries. However, this study shows some critical issues. The brands under investigation are related to different sec-

[34] Banerjee 2008.
[35] Urde *et al.* 2007.
[36] Huaman-Ramirez *et al.* 2021.
[37] Hakala *et al.* 2011.
[38] Wuestefeld *et al.* 2012.
[39] Pecot *et al.* 2019.
[40] Pecot *et al.* 2023.

tors, namely food & beverage, apparel, and automobile, whose choices must be more clearly motivated. Similarly, the selection criterion of brands and their matching with the sample of respondents could be more precise. Following this reasoning, the choice of sector is decisive for understanding the constituent elements of heritage. Therefore, a proposal for operationalising the brand heritage should be sector-based and consider the brands' longevity[41].

Thus, taking a cue from these reflections, namely from the fact that the interpretation and operationalisation of the construct still suffers from significant deficits and from the fact that the reference sector plays a vital role in brand heritage studies, the objective of this work is to focus on a first exploratory analysis aimed at bringing out the conceptual categories that characterise the brand heritage for long-lived companies starting by an investigation within the Italian agrifood sector.

3. *Methodology*

3.1. *Data collection*

To understand how companies in the Italian agrifood sector present and deliver information on brand heritage to their audience, this study examined the textual content present within the companies' official websites. The choice of using websites rather than other communication channels as the source of the units of analysis is motivated by several factors. First, from a heritage marketing perspective, websites are considered an effective tool to implement digital storytelling also aimed at delivering a "historicising representation" of the company[42] by enabling the creation of albums, timelines, and multimedia narratives showcasing the brand's history through text and images. Consequently, many companies are allocating a dedicated section on their official websites to document their corporate history[43]. Second, in the context of the food sector, previous research has underlined how, in a new context in which the customer is increasingly an active part of the marketing process[44], it is precisely the information, content, and services offered by the website that attracts the consumer towards the agrifood company[45]. Thus, the user decides which websites to visit based on the contents that interest him and how and when to use the information[46].

[41] Mainolfi 2019.
[42] Garofano *et al.* 2020; Cerquetti, Romagnoli 2023.
[43] Cerquetti, Romagnoli 2023.
[44] Caiazza, Bigliardi 2020.
[45] *Ibidem*.
[46] e.g., Huotilainen, Tuorila 2005; Olsen *et al.* 2010.

Furthermore, various scholars[47] have highlighted the significance of website utilisation, indicating that along with other information and communication technologies (ICT), they have enhanced company productivity. Additional notable advantages involve the capacity to ease information and organisational knowledge dissemination to stakeholders and provide high-quality customer service[48].

The analysed companies were identified by consulting the Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest", set up at the Italian Patent and Trademark Office[49]. The data collection was carried out at the end of October 2022. The Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest" has returned 154 long-lived companies operating in the agrifood sector in Italy. After dividing this first sample by year of business startup and type of agrifood industry based on the materials and products used, we applied two exclusion criteria for the analysis. Initially, we verified which of the 154 companies had a corporate website. From this first screening, we removed eight companies because they did not have a company website. Of the 146 remaining companies, we subsequently examined which ones had references on their website for enhancing their brand heritage and/or sections dedicated to the company's history. Following this second step of analysis, a final sample of 126 companies was identified, equal to 82% of the initial sample (Tab. 1). To determine the most relevant texts for our study, we concentrated on comparing those whose content was objectively aimed at communicating and enhancing the history and heritage of the brand and therefore aimed at involving consumers within this latter, thus making them emotionally involved and, at the same time, aware of the values in which the company has always believed. Specifically, to select relevant website sections, the study employed a two-pronged approach. First, keywords associated with brand heritage were identified from the literature[50], including "history", "tradition", "past", "chronology", "memory", "heritage", "patrimony", "family", and "origins" (and related variants). Second, the website structure itself was examined, with a focus on sections titled "About", "About Us", "History", and similar designations.

[47] Bhaskaran 2013.

[48] López-Becerra *et al.* 2016.

[49] By concession of the Ministry of Economic Development, only the owners or exclusive licensees of brands that have been enrolled for at least fifty years and continuously renewed over time are eligible to register their brand in this register. Alternatively, for unregistered brands, it is possible to demonstrate continuous and effective use for at least fifty years if they have been used for marketing products or services manufactured by a nationally renowned company that has a historical connection to the national territory. In other words, the application must be voluntarily submitted by the companies themselves and will be accepted only if the company's brand meets these requirements. See: Ministero delle Imprese e del Made in Italy 2020; Article 31 of Decree-Law n. 34 of 30 April 2019 (the so-called Growth Decree), converted into law, with amendments, by Article 1 of the Law of 28 June 2019 n. 58, available at: <https://uibm.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/marchio-storico-di-interesse-nazionale>, 5.09.2024.

[50] Wiedmann *et al.* 2012; Urde *et al.* 2007.

1	A. BARBAGALLO DI MAURO
2	ACQUA E TERME FIUGGI S.P.A.
3	ALBERTENGO
4	AMARENA FABBRI
5	AMARO LUCANO
6	AMARO MONTENEGRO
7	ANGELO PARODI
8	ANTINORI
9	BARBERA... DAL 1870
10	BEI & NANNINI
11	BELTION
12	BERGIA
13	BIRRA FORST
14	BONOMELLI
15	BORGOGNO
16	BURRO DELLE ALPI
17	CAFFAREL
18	CAFFÈ CORTESE
19	CALLIPO
20	CANELLA
21	CANNAMELA
22	CANTARELLI 1876
23	CAPETTA
24	CASTELLINO
25	CATARÌ
26	CIRIO
27	CONTE D'ATTIMIS - MANIAGO
28	CRIK CROK
29	DE CAPUA
30	DE NIGRIS
31	DEMAR
32	DERBY
33	DIVELLA
34	DONNA MARZIA
35	DUKE GRANDI MARCHE
36	EGIDIO TORREANO & FIGLI SAS
37	ERIDANIA
38	ERMES FONTANA
39	F.LLI DE CECCO
40	FABBRI
41	FATINA
42	FELSINEO
43	FERRARI GRAN SPUMANTE
44	FONTANAFREDDA
45	FRANCOLI
46	FRATELLI CARLI
47	GALATINE
48	GALLETTO VALLESPLUGO
49	GALUP
50	GENTILINI DAL 1890
51	GHIOTTO GALFRÈ
52	GOCCIA D'ORO
53	GOPPION
54	GRANORO
55	ILLY
56	IRCA
57	JOLLY
58	JOLLY CAFFÈ
59	KRUMIRI ROSSI
60	LA CANELLESE
61	LA CASA DEL PROSCIUTTO - SAN DANIELE DEL FRIULI
62	LA MONTANARA
63	LA SPIGADORO
64	LEGUMI SELECT
65	LEPORATI
66	LETE
67	LEVONI
68	LIBARNA
69	LOISON PASTICCERI DAL 1938
70	LUXARDO
71	MARCHESI DI BAROLO
72	MARUZZELLA
73	MASSOLINO
74	MAURI FORMAGGI
75	MAURO CAFFÈ
76	MAZZETTI D'ALTAVILLA
77	MELETTI

78	MIRAFIORE
79	MMF MASCARELLO MICHELE & FIGLI
80	MOCA
81	MONINI
82	MONTANA
83	MUCCI
84	NOBERASCO
85	NURZIA
86	PAI
87	PALUANI
88	PAN DUCALE
89	PASTICCERIA CRISTIANI
90	PERLINO
91	PERNIGOTTI
92	POLENTA VALSUGANA
93	POLLI
94	PUCCI
95	RANA
96	RIGAMONTI
97	RISO GALLO
98	ROBERTO
99	ROSA SALVA
100	ROSSO ANTICO
101	RUFFINO
102	SAILA
103	SALUMIFICIO BRUGNOLO
104	SALUMIFICIO LA ROCCA
105	SAN BENEDETTO
106	SAN CARLO
107	SANTA ROSA
108	SASSO
109	SIMMENTHAL
110	SORINI
111	SPERLARI
112	SPUMADOR
113	STAR
114	SUCCHIYOGA
115	SUPER ZAFFERANO LEPROTTO
116	TONITTO
117	TONNOCAPRI
118	TOSCHI
119	TOSTI
120	TRAVAGLINO
121	VECCHIA ROMAGNA
122	VéGé
123	VISMARA
124	WALCOR
125	ZAFFERANO MARCA 3CUOCHI
126	ZANETTI

Tab. 1. The list of investigated companies (Source: Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest", Italian Patent and Trademark Office, 2022)

3.2. *Text network analysis*

This study uses text network analysis and topic modelling techniques to extract valuable insights from the collected text corpus. Text network analysis is a computational method that reveals the interrelationships among words by representing them as a network graph[51]. In this graph, the words are represented as nodes, while the co-occurrences between words are depicted as edges[52]. By visualising text as a network, we can then apply topic

[51] Hunter 2014.
[52] Paranyushkin 2019.

modelling to identify hidden topics within the text corpus and determine the groups of words associated with each topic[53]. To conduct our data analysis, we utilised the cloud-based version of InfraNodus, accessible at www.infranodus.com. InfraNodus uses a graph theory-based approach instead of probabilistic methods such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to assign words to specific topical clusters[54]. By leveraging graph theory, InfraNodus divides the words within the text into distinct groups, each offering unique information about the underlying themes present in the text corpus. This alternative approach provides a valuable perspective on the organisation and relationships of words within the text.

4. *Results*

InfraNodus analysed a text corpus comprising 47,704 words and 7,643 unique lemmas. Regarding the text modularity, a metric gauging the existence of distinct communities or clusters within a network graph[55], findings suggest that the analysed textual corpus is focused (Modularity = 0.36, Influence Distribution = 80%). This means that the discourse presents moderate variability and diversity. A focused text network implies that the content is organised around specific themes or topics, with solid connections and coherence within those thematic clusters. While there might be some diversity, the primary emphasis remains on a particular subject or set of related subjects. Words such as "anni" (years), "azienda" (company), and "prodotti" (products) demonstrate the highest betweenness centrality measure, indicating their frequent occurrence on the shortest paths connecting any two randomly chosen nodes in the network[56]. As pivotal communication junctions between words, these nodes play a crucial role in facilitating the flow of meaning within the text. Figure 1 shows the nodes with degree > 20.

[53] Berger *et al.* 2022.
[54] Paranyushkin 2019.
[55] *Ibidem*.
[56] *Ibidem*.

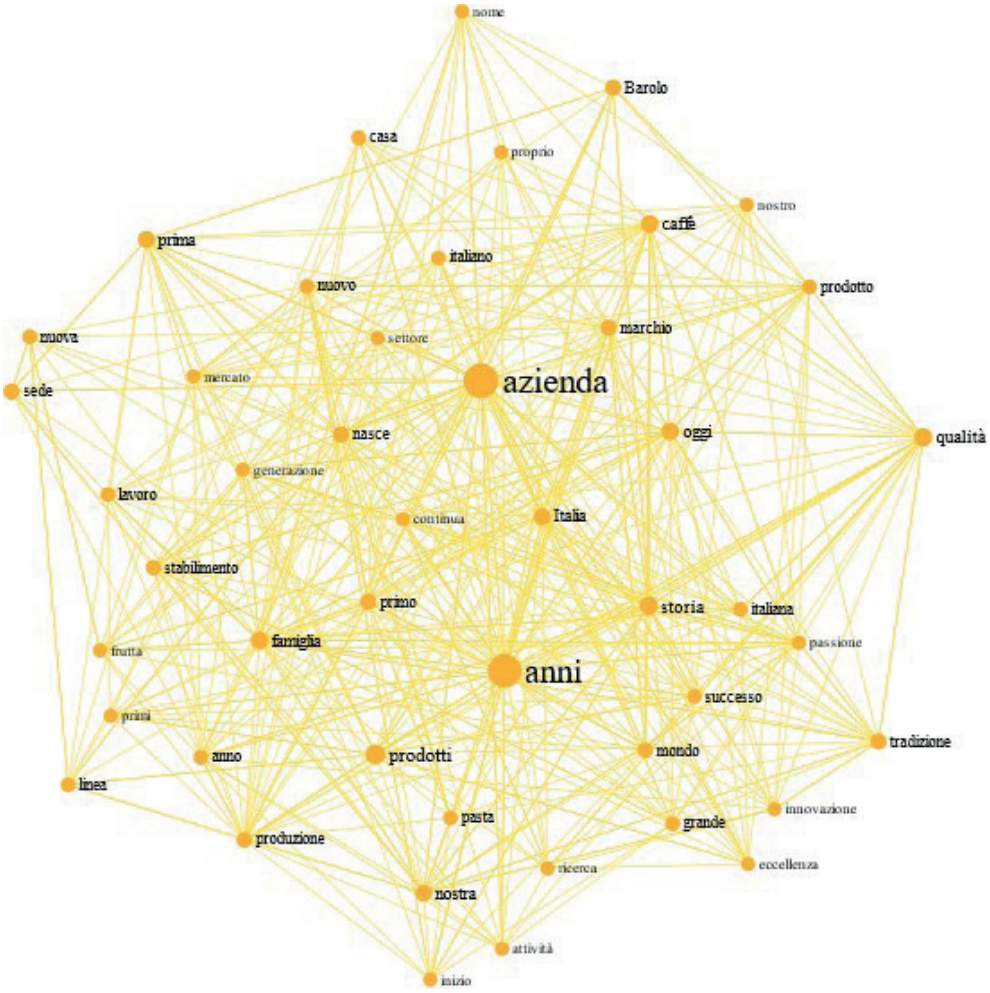

Fig. 1. Visual representation of main keywords (Source: authors' own elaboration)

These nodes are central to the network's structure and significantly influence the text analysis. Table 2 depicts the results of topic modelling. The words in the text are divided into six groups. Each group denotes a specific aspect of the brand heritage discourse. Specifically, as depicted in Table 2, the discourse about the brand's heritage focuses on the following subtopics: longevity, roots, product offering, business performance, pioneerism, and core values.

Table 2 also displays the degree distribution, betweenness, and conductivity distribution for each topical group, providing various measures used to analyse and comprehend network graphs alongside the corresponding node names. According to Paranyushkin, degree distribution refers mainly to the pattern or distribution of degrees (i.e., the number of connections or links) of nodes in a

network[57]. It helps identify the most connected or influential nodes within a network. Degree distribution analysis provides insights into the overall structure and connectivity of the network. Betweenness centrality is a measure that quantifies the importance or centrality of a node in a network based on its position as a bridge or intermediary between other nodes. It measures how much a particular node falls on the shortest paths between different nodes. Nodes with high betweenness centrality are crucial for communication and information flow within the network. Finally, conductivity distribution is a measure used in community detection algorithms to identify and assess the quality of communities or clusters within a network. It quantifies how strongly connected nodes within a community are compared to the connections between different communities. Conductivity distribution helps in understanding the cohesive structure of a network and the presence of distinct communities.

Topical cluster	*Nodes (n = 150)*	*Frequency*	*Degree distribution*	*Betweenness*	*Conductivity distribution*
Longevity	Anni (Years)	291	117	0.457714	39.1
	Azienda (Company)	284	105	0.443679	42.3
	Storia (History)	133	133	0.067386	9.9
	Marchio (Brand)	92	47	0.037094	7.9
	Generazione (Generation)	70	28	0.002086	0.7
	Tempo (Time)	45	10	0	0
Roots	Famiglia (Family)	129	53	0.069155	13
	Tradizione (Tradition)	80	39	0.02875	7.4
	Casa (Home)	65	21	0.013332	6.3
	Figli (Sons)	45	14	0.000907	0.6
	Figlio (Son)	39	16	0.039089	24.4
	Nome (Name)	39	22	0.000907	0.4
	Fondatore (Founder)	36	13	0.000816	0.6
	Padre (Father)	21	3	0	0
Product offering	Prodotti (Products)	138	59	0.118493	20.1
	Qualità (Quality)	133	58	0.078043	13.5
	Prodotto (Product)	89	39	0.007074	1.8
	Certificazione (Certification)	40	11	0	0
	Gusto (Taste)	29	16	0.000181	0.1
	Gamma (Assortment)	28	13	0.00136	1
	Cultura (Culture)	25	9	0.001451	1.6

[57] Paranyushkin 2019.

Topical cluster	*Nodes (n = 150)*	*Frequency*	*Degree distribution*	*Betweenness*	*Conductivity distribution*
Business performance	Produzione (Production)	135	56	0.049678	8.9
	Mercato (Market)	72	20	0.000227	0.1
	Stabilimento (Plant)	67	29	0.012403	4.3
	Successo (Success)	42	24	0.010475	4.4
	Clienti (Clients)	31	14	0.000091	0.1
	Mercati (Markets)	30	13	0	0
	Crescita (Growth)	29	17	0.000091	0.1
Pioneerism	Primo (First)	100	42	0.027299	6.5
	Nuovo (New)	84	37	0.003371	0.9
	Italiano (Italian)	48	20	0.00984	4.9
	Innovazione (Innovation)	39	19	0	0
Core values	Passione (Passion)	52	39	0.002358	0.6
	Eccellenza (Excellence)	29	20	0.000091	0
	Territorio (Territory)	29	12	0	0
	Rispetto (Respect)	22	6	0	0

Tab. 2. Main topical groups (Source: authors' own elaboration)

The first topical group concerns longevity, encompassing words of significant relevance or high frequency, such as "anni" (years), "azienda" (company), and "storia" (history). To enhance the passing of time as an ability to reinforce the power of the brand, agrifood companies tend to adopt the following bigrams (a sequence of two adjacent words) in their heritage discourse: "nostra, storia" (our, story) (weight[58] = 61), "anni, azienda" (years, company) (weight = 39), "anni storia" (years, story) (weight = 23), "generazione, azienda" (generation, company) (weight = 23), "storia, azienda" (history, company) (weight = 13), "nome, famiglia" (name, family) (weight = 11), "famiglia, tradizione" (family, tradition) (weight = 6). The following excerpts demonstrate how the topic of longevity is formulated in the web content of the analysed agrifood brands:

For over three generations, our family has dedicated itself with passion and knowledge to the production of vinegar in the continuous search for the best possible product. A story that began more than 120 years ago, when Armando De Nigris inaugurated the first vine-

[58] In InfraNodus, the term "weight" refers to the strength of the connection between two nodes (words or phrases) in the network graph. The weight typically does not have a fixed value and depends on the proximity of the words in the text (Paranyushkin 2019).

gar factory, immediately obtaining important recognition from his customers[59].

Generation after generation, the company evolves and becomes one of the most important independent family-run businesses in the brewing sector, producing high-quality beer specialities[60].

By order of relevance, the second topical group concerns the brand's roots. It is the theme that examines the origins of the brand in more depth and includes other relevant words such as "famiglia" (family) and "tradizione" (tradition). Specifically, to disclose the roots of the brand, companies use the following bigrams: "tradizione, famiglia" (tradition, family) (weight = 25), "nostra, famiglia" (our family) (weight = 16), "azienda, figlio" (company, son) (weight = 15), "fondatore, figlio" (founder, son) (weight = 13). The excerpts below provide examples of how agrifood brands organise their discourse around the roots of their business:

Tradition, passion and family life are the ingredients of Amarena Fabbri. Its recipe is the same one created in 1915 by grandmother Rachele and handed down from generation to generation by the Fabbri family[61].

From the Monte di Calvene district, between the mountain pastures of the Asiago plateau and the Venetian plain, Giovanni Maria Brazzale, born in 1837, passionately carried out the same activity as his father and grandfather. Travelling along the mountain paths in the moonlight, the butter was collected in the mountain pastures and sold in the markets of the plain, which at the time constituted the most precious derivative of the milk of which it retained the most precious part. At the end of the nineteenth century, with the bag of gold marenghi that contained the savings of generations, Giovanni Maria went down to Zanè. He bought a large farm on the outskirts of Thiene, the Venetian cheese capital and a free market since 1492. The business grew relentlessly, and the grandchildren arrived one after the other, soon all involved in the family business[62].

Granoro has its roots in the history of the Mastromauro family and its founder, Attilio. Over time, the feeling of belonging and sharing joy and daily challenges intertwined with the events of over a century of Italian history has remained intact[63].

The third topic is related to the product offering. Agrifood companies

[59] Acetificio De Nigris – text available on the website <https://www.denigris1889.com/it/azienda/storia-di-una-passione/>, in the "History" section, 5.09.2024.

[60] Birra Forst – text available on the website <https://www.forst.it/it/il-mondo-forst/>, in the "Forst world" section, 5.09.2024.

[61] Amarena Fabbri – text available on the website <https://www.fabbri1905.com/chi-siamo/chi-siamo-fabbri-1905.kl>, in the "About us – History" section, 5.09.2024.

[62] Burro Delle Alpi – text available on the website <https://www.brazzale.com/i-marchi/burro-delle-alpi/>, 5.09.2024.

[63] Pastificio Attilio Mastromauro Granoro srl – text available on the website <https://granoro.it/en/>, in the "We are family – the story of a family" section, 5.09.2024.

strengthen their competitive position over time in part because their products have superior features that enable them to maintain excellent performance in terms of quality and taste. To this end, "qualità" (quality), "gusto" (taste), and "certificazione" (certification) are frequently used to highlight manufacturing excellence. The following bigrams are those characterising the discourse focused on the product features: "prodotto, qualità" (product, quality) (weight = 12), "qualità prodotto" (quality, product) (weight = 11), "certificazione, prodotto" (certification, product) (weight = 9), "gusto, qualità" (taste, quality) (weight = 4), "qualità, cultura" (quality, culture) (weight = 4). The following excerpts illustrate how the analysed agrifood brands communicate their characteristics and competitive positions to the market:

Felsineo obtains Export USA, BRC, and IFS certifications, and it is the first company in the meat sector to obtain ISO 22000 certification, specific for the food industry[64].

We have never stopped dedicating extreme attention to each wine's harvesting, winemaking and ageing processes. Maintaining the quality of traditional production methods unchanged is the challenge we have been pursuing for almost a century, without compromise[65].

The fourth topical cluster is "business performance". This cluster explores how companies navigate the interconnected aspects of target market, customers, and growth strategies, significantly influencing a business's success. Specifically, Italian agrifood companies use the following bigrams: "nostri, clienti" (our, clients) (weight = 25), "mercato, estero" (market, foreign) (weight = 10), "successo, azienda" (success, company) (weight = 10), "produzione, stabilimento" (production, plant) (weight = 9). Below are some examples illustrating how the analysed agrifood brands communicate information about their target market and strategies:

Over the years, and with the passing of generations, Beltion's production has seen its product range and export markets grow. First, Giacomo Giannandrea and then his sons Francesco, Angelo and Roberto gave impetus to company growth, with the opening of a new factory equipped with latest generation technological systems and a laboratory for the development and control of production, without ever forgetting attention to the absolute quality of the products[66].

Between 1950 and 1980, the foresight of Bruno Cantarelli, who managed to combine commercial ability, profound knowledge of the production area, and experience in the

[64] Felsineo S.p.a. Benefit company – text available on the website <https://gruppofelsineo.com/storia/>, in the "Group – history of group" section, 5.09.2024.

[65] Mascarello – text available on the website <https://mascarello.com/cantina/>, in the "Our story" section, 5.09.2024.

[66] Beltion – text available on the website – <https://www.beltion.it/en/company/>, in the "Company – Our values" section, 5.09.2024.

selection of excellent cheeses, made the company the protagonist of further important growth both abroad and in Italy[67].

The fifth theme, pioneerism, translates to the pioneering orientation of the brand. Being the first to have created or launched a new product ensures added value to the company and gives the consumer a more excellent guarantee that the product will align with expectations. The experience gained by a company in a particular field can reinforce the competitive advantage by differentiating it from competitors. Within this topic, we can find the following bigrams: "primo, italiano" (first, Italian) (weight = 14), "primo, Italia" (first, Italy) (weigh = 11), "marchio, primo" (brand, first) (weight = 10), "innovazione, ricerca" (innovation, research) (weight = 9), "primo, settore" (first, sector) (weight = 9), "primo, mondo" (first, world) (weight = 6), "inizio, nuovo" (beginning, new) (weight = 6). The excerpts below provide examples of how agrifood brands emphasise their pioneerism:

At the same time, we work daily on research and innovation, seeking better solutions to the needs of the main moments of consumption that we oversee. CRIK CROK was among the first in Europe to start the production of "Chips". Under the CRIK CROK brand, the company gradually established itself in Italy and abroad[68].

In 1856, at the age of 20, Francesco Cirio was among the first in the world to give credence to the growing technique of appertisation (the inventor was, in fact, the Frenchman Nicolas Appert), and with this conservation method, he surpassed the problems related to the perishability of fruit and vegetables[69].

In 1994, we were the first in Europe to have introduced the sanitisation treatment of raw materials, protecting the food safety of our herbs and spices[70].

Lastly, the final topic describes the core values of the brand. The words used with this cluster emerge as the values characterising the brand essence. They are the guiding principles for which the brand stands for. Passion, excellence, territory, and respect are the nodes that emerged from the analysis. The bigrams used to promote the core values are: "passione, storia" (passion, history) (weight = 24), "passione, rispetto" (passion, respect) (weight = 5), "nostra, passione" (our, passion) (weight = 5), "eccellenza, territorio" (excellence, terri-

[67] Cantarelli 1876 srl – text available on the website – <https://www.cantarelli.com/about-us/our-story/?lang=en>, in the "About us – Our story" section, 5.09.2024.

[68] Crik Crok – text available on the website – <https://crikcrok.it/en/chi-siamo/>, in the "About us" section, 5.09.2024.

[69] Cirio – text available on the website <https://www.cirio.it/storia-cirio>, in the "Cirio and tomato – the story of Cirio" section, 5.09.2024.

[70] Cannamela – text available on the website <https://www.cannamela.it/en/our-story/>, in the "About us – Our story" section, 5.09.2024.

tory) (weight = 4). The following excerpts illustrate how the analysed agrifood brands communicate their core values to the market:

> Always attentive to the environmental impact of its production, A. Barbagallo Di Mauro says goodbye forever to plastic pasta by adopting 100% recyclable paper packaging for its entire line of organic Sicilian semolina. So, after introducing the compostable and biodegradable plastic-free packaging for pasta from Sicilian organic ancient grains in 2019, the company confirms its sustainable commitment and desire to reduce its ecological footprint[71].

> Since then, even today, Leprotto has brought superior quality saffron into Italian homes, born from an authentic corporate culture dominated by two values: perfection in the name of tradition and the drive towards innovation[72].

5. *Discussion and implications*

In the past ten years, considerable attention has been given to the concept of brand heritage. Surprisingly, the marketing literature has not fully recognised the importance of heritage in shaping a company's identity. There has been limited focus on operationalising the conceptual dimensions of heritage and analysing their impact. This condition undermined the interpretative value of the empirical evidence. The concept of heritage has a multidimensional nature. It refers to two perspectives: that of the company, the source of legacy, and that of the public, whose perceptions legitimise and value the brand's past. However, the correct interpretation of the phenomenon cannot but start from a mapping of the possible pillars that connote the brand's heritage essence.

To address the research question and fill the gaps identified in past studies, this work adopted an inductive research approach to provide a seminal contribution to understanding the constitutive dimensions of the brand heritage domain.

The outcomes of a content analysis conducted on the discursive categories utilised in the online communications of long running Italian agrifood companies, which are featured in the Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest" (set up at the Italian Patent and Trademark Office), encompass a diverse array of elements contributing to the heritage treasure. We have pinpointed six themes: Longevity, Roots, Product Offering, Business Performance, Pioneerism, and Core Values. While brand heritage components pro-

[71] A. Barbagallo di Mauro s.r.l. – text available on the website <https://barbagallo1911.it/en/history/>, in the "History" section, 5.09.2024.

[72] Leprotto – text available on the website <https://www.zafferano-leprotto.it/chi-siamo/il-marchio>, in the "About us" section, 5.09.2024.

vided in the previous literature are characterised by overlapping dimensions[73] that do not discriminate between heritage identity and brand image, our analysis shows that it is possible to trace a process underlying the emersion of the brand heritage on the part of a food brand (Fig. 2). The evaluation of the results emerged from the analysis led to the proposal of an interpretative model – the brand heritage chain – that highlights the links between the six dimensions to intercept the mechanism underlying the shaping of the consumer's brand knowledge. By identifying these six thematic pillars, the study offers a framework for understanding how brand heritage manifests within the agrifood sector. Consequently, this interpretative model constitutes the answer to the research question posed by the study, namely, the need to operationalise the brand heritage constructs in the agrifood sector.

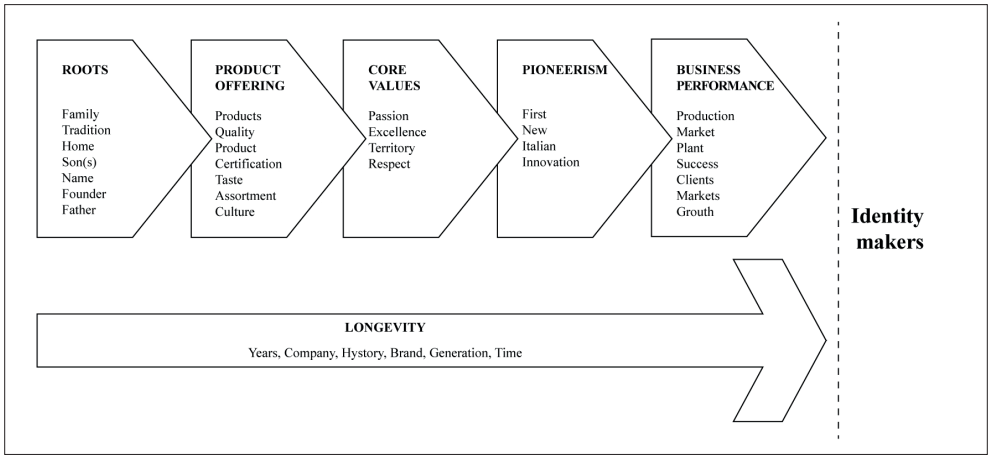

Fig. 2. The brand heritage chain for agrifood companies (Source: authors' own elaboration)

Specifically, the first theme, Roots, constitutes the basis that connects the entire process of heritage exploitation. It pertains to the essence of the brand, specifically emphasising the role of the founder and the family, which serve as the inspiration behind the brand. The second pillar, Product Offering, highlights the relevance of attributes such as quality, taste, certification, and culture in shaping the distinctive structure of the products. The third theme, Core Values, may be interpreted as the guiding principles for which the brand stands for. Those elements are the most crucial because they can carry the brand into an omnitemporal dimension where the legacy can use communication imagery and the functional features of the brand to project it towards a dreamlike space that fascinates the consumer. The fourth theme, Pioneerism, is the most original and meaningful dimension. Italian agrifood brands point out the im-

[73] Mainolfi 2018; Hakala *et al.* 2011.

portance of "being the first". Tradition and quality are no longer sufficient to mark the competitive advantage of long-running companies. The skills of being forerunners should always be recalled. The roots bring the brand to the world and associate it with distinctive characteristics (Product Offering) and precious core values that enable it to become a precursor (Pioneerism). The brand can grow from here, fostering relationships with existing and new audiences. This is the fifth dimension, Business Performance. Finally, the Longevity dimension represents a transversal dimension encompassing the passing of time, the succession of events (history), and the continuous proof that the company has maintained its core values and promises through the generations.

This business performance dimension fuels the brand's growth, fostering relationships with both existing and new audiences. Finally, longevity serves as a cross-cutting dimension, encompassing the passage of time, historical events, and the company's enduring commitment to its core values and promises across generations.

5.1. *Theoretical implications*

From a theoretical standpoint, this paper aims to contribute to the advancement of existing literature. It seeks to enhance understanding of the concept of heritage as applied to brands and endeavours to lay the groundwork for developing a model enabling firms to assess the value of their heritage. The six dimensions – characterising the framework – holistically and developmentally revealed the multidimensional nature of the construct. For example, unlike Urde *et al.*'s model[74], the framework does not consist only of traits that attempt to capture the essence of longevity or omnitemporality of heritage. Longevity confirms its relevance; however, it is the foundation on which the brand can build its legacy identity that encompasses its origins, products, values, pioneering vision and market performance. The value of the brand heritage chain stems from its ability to provide a deeper understanding of those elements which, drawing from the brand's legacy, shape brand knowledge and guide consumer perceptions and behaviours. Additionally, through the methodological approach employed in the study, the brand heritage chain addresses the issue of overlapping elements, a challenge that had affected earlier theoretical studies focused on defining the construct's nature[75].

These aspects underscore the theoretical contributions of the study, whose significance also lies in offering a better understanding of the limitations encountered in subsequent quantitative designs following the initial conceptual

[74] Urde *et al.* 2007.
[75] Urde *et al.* 2007; Banerjee 2008.

studies. The lack of adequate operationalisation of the construct has compromised the interpretive value of recent attempts to measure it. This is evident looking at the typologies of elements proposed by previous quantitative studies, which still reflect – as initial studies – a predominant focus on the temporal dimension of heritage (i.e., longevity, outdatedness, adaptability)[76] and do not discriminate between founding pillars of the brand and consumers' perceptions, thus compromising the depiction of the brand heritage construct[77].

Furthermore, the analysis confirmed the need to adopt a "sectoral" approach by studying the communicative codes of a specific sector. This choice derives from the awareness that before proceeding with the quantitative definition of a measurement scale for the construct of brand heritage image, it is necessary to gain a complete understanding of the communicative specificities of sectors that are fundamental to the industrial and productive system of a country (e.g., food, fashion, automotive, furniture, tourism).

Moreover, outside of a few examples in the context of fashion and luxury[78], the few studies[79] that have attempted to stigmatise dimensions have underestimated the impact of sector-specificity on the construction of brand value. Therefore, this study contributes to understanding the dimensions of brand heritage concerning a sector that is characterised by enduring businesses with significant legacies. Furthermore, the country of investigation also contributes to delimiting a considerable space for analysis, considering the high number of historical enterprises.

5.2. *Managerial implications*

Theoretical arguments suggest that by adopting a suitable model, which reveals the constitutive dimensions of brand heritage, firms can gauge value through the perceptions of identity makers. By the term identity makers, we refer to the set of stakeholders who have a keen interest in the brand and whose perceptions legitimise and support the value of the brand identity and consequently also the brand heritage, e.g., consumers, business partners, employees, opinion leaders, influencers, local communities, etc.

From this perspective, the concept of brand heritage offers advantages in terms of market perspective and end-consumer demand and fosters consensus within the community. In terms of managerial implications, the use of heritage as a marketing tool is gaining importance, especially among food brands. Firstly, businesses must understand how to build and strengthen relationships

[76] Pecot *et al*. 2023.
[77] Wuestefeld *et al*. 2012; Merchant, Rose 2013; Pecot *et al*. 2019.
[78] Mainolfi 2018; Mainolfi 2019.
[79] Pecot *et al*. 2022; Pecot *et al*. 2023.

with their identity makers. The goal is to foster consensus about a profitable past marked by significant events while projecting this success story into the future. From an operational and marketing perspective, companies need to identify the tools to reinforce the value of their brand. It is worth emphasising once again that longevity is an element to be valued through storytelling. Still, the underlying reasons for such lasting success and the way it is communicated allow a company to differentiate itself and achieve a unique and successful competitive positioning. It is not just about rooting oneself in a distant past but about preserving and enhancing an intangible heritage, which, passed down from generation to generation, can bestow an aura of authenticity, contributing significantly to the competitive success of businesses.

In detail, the exaltation of the company's origin, often involving the celebration of family events, is a significant theme in the narrative of business stories, especially from a marketing perspective. The storytelling of family events can be a critically relevant element for achieving a successful competitive positioning as it can engage stakeholders in a particular way; the family theme leverages emotional values, bonds, and emotions in which consumers can quickly become involved and identify themselves. Similarly, communicating the principles, values, and elements that have long characterised one's offering system, such as product and production process quality, local roots, and obtained certifications, allows the company to instil confidence in consumers. Reassured by a company that has always been a bearer of specific values and offers them a proposition that aligns as closely as possible with their expectations, consumers perceive these elements as added values of the company. Consequently, mastering the modulation and balance of a potential "heritage mix" becomes particularly critical. Once areas capable of creating value are identified, businesses must adeptly manage available tools, such as museums, archives, the creation of monographs, and artistic events, among others. The management of this mix should be done by adopting a strategy based on coherence and authenticity that identifies (and enhances) the links between the different value premises of the brand as it emerges from the heritage chain. As part of the heritage management strategy, the role of the product should also be remembered and emphasised. The central role of the product offering suggests that the product can be a relevant field of intervention for the preservation and, at the same time, the valorisation of heritage. This is also evidenced by several recent examples of retro marketing where products are associated with the past, thus offering consumers the opportunity to relive a "past updated to the present" by rediscovering the value and reputation of the brand. However, companies should not experience legacy as a celebration of the past, which results in nostalgic marketing that creates ephemeral results. The objective must also enhance the past through the product, maintaining the link with the past but projecting it into the future. It is an operation that is certainly not simple but can benefit from the interpretative proposal provided in this study in which the

necessary connection between the various pillars is exalted. In general, within a broader strategic management of the company, communicating and promoting one's brand heritage allows the company to achieve a competitive advantage, demonstrating how longevity, when adequately valued, can be an advantageous factor for the company both in the present and the future. However, it is essential to understand the relevance of a conscious and emotional appreciation of one's heritage, especially in a contemporary business context with increasing consumer engagement in purchasing processes. Companies must communicate and enhance their brand heritage by leveraging more emotional and engaging content. As already highlighted, websites may be useful tools for achieving an effective storytelling strategy aimed at visually representing the brand's legacy and inspiring the audience's rational and emotional sphere. For example, the recent immersive technologies may provide additional tools favouring a "contemporary" historicised brand representation. In this sort of paradox relies one of the most valuable assets of the brand heritage that of pioneerism.

Therefore, the identification of the six themes may guide brand managers in defining a heritage marketing strategy that combines the most traditional tools, such as company monographs, museums, archives, retro branding (meaning the revisiting of iconic products linked to the company's identity and competitive positioning), to the most innovative ones, such as virtual tours, augmented reality, podcasts, social media, and the metaverse. These tools, adequately integrated into a heritage marketing strategy, allow for the rediscovery and managerial handling of the narrative of the company's history and its products and brands. A brand with a valuable heritage should continuously pursue visionary leadership and be able to tell its own story by projecting it into the future in terms of values, processes, and people.

Following this reasoning, it should be underlined that the results revealed some critical issues. The sub-themes have focused on functional elements rather than emotional and symbolic aspects. This outcome may result from a need for more proficiency in advanced storytelling strategies for most companies. This finding calls for thoughtful reflection by Italian food companies. Considering that the sector is characterised by businesses that, in many cases, have established long-lasting relationships with their audiences, and thanks to the presence of culture-intensive products, difficulties in valorisation can potentially dissipate an immense value.

6. *Limitations and future research*

This study examined agrifood companies, explicitly focusing on analysing the website sections used by long-running Italian agrifood companies to communicate information about their heritage. The research objective was to

operationalise the brand heritage in the agrifood sector. The research identified key focus areas for these companies, including Longevity, Roots, Product Offering, Core Values, Pioneerism and Business Performance.

The findings indicate that 82% of long-running Italian agrifood companies listed in the Special Register of "Historical Brands of National Interest" use their websites to disseminate brand heritage information. However, 28 companies do not take advantage of this opportunity, missing the chance to engage consumers who value brand heritage awareness.

It is essential to note some limitations of this study. Firstly, by concentrating solely on websites, some of the 28 companies might communicate brand heritage information through other channels, such as social media or TV advertising campaigns. Additionally, the data collected for this study come from a text corpus gathered in October 2022, and web page content is subject to changes over time. The analysis focused only on textual material, excluding consideration of images, videos, and external links found in the brand heritage section.

Future research could delve deeper by exploring multimodal communication, incorporating elements like visual imagery and written language. An international analysis with an expanded sample size could also be valuable. This broader scope could reveal cultural nuances in how agrifood companies communicate their sustainability efforts.

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