Exploring corporate heritage through digital narrative. A cross-cultural thematic analysis of Henokiens' websites[1][2]

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: This study explores the communication of corporate heritage of long-lived firms. It inductively determines the key elements that bicentennial companies typically use to convey corporate heritage through their websites. It also investigates whether and how the culture of the country influences the communication of corporate heritage.

Methodology: The study analyzes the websites of 46 bicentennial family firms that are members of the Henokiens association. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software. A cross-cultural comparison based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions was applied to examine narrative differences across firms from Italy, France, Germany, and Japan.

Findings: The study identifies three core dimensions of corporate heritage narratives (entrepreneurial mindset, historicity, and inner values) that reflect the values and identity of long-lived firms. These dimensions help companies communicate continuity, authenticity, and heritage. Cultural differences shape how these values are prioritized: for example, Japanese firms emphasize innovation and international projection, while French and German firms stress responsibility and prestige; Italian firms focus on adaptability over time. Finally, innovation emerges as a strategic driver in sustaining heritage relevance in dynamic markets.

Research limitations: This study focuses on a specific group of long-lived, bicentennial family-owned firms that actively communicate their corporate heritage. While this limits the generalizability of the findings, the identified narrative dimensions and practices can serve as valuable references for other firms that possess a heritage but have not yet integrated it into their communication strategy. Our results offer guidance on how such firms can strategically leverage their historical and cultural assets to build brand identity and stakeholder engagement.

Practical implications: Understanding how heritage dimensions embody corporate values enables managers to align communication with stakeholder

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185

expectations. The results highlight how heritage storytelling can support brand authenticity and emotional engagement, particularly when tailored to cultural contexts. Furthermore, the emphasis on innovation within heritage narratives suggests that firms can integrate future-oriented strategies without compromising identity. This can guide companies, regardless of age, in using their history as a resource for strategic differentiation.

Originality of the paper: *This paper contributes to the corporate heritage literature by bringing new elements that describe the identity of long-lived companies through the heritage narrative. It identifies the key elements of digital narratives and provides an opportunity to investigate how well the designed identity reflects their culture identity.*

Key words: *corporate heritage; corporate brand identity; long-lived firms; communication; cross-cultural analysis.*

1. Introduction

As companies increasingly recognize the value of leveraging their history and heritage to establish a strong brand identity, corporate heritage has emerged as a prominent area of interest both in academic research and managerial practice (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015; Mir Bernal *et al.*, 2023; Urde *et al.*, 2007). Long-lived firms are uniquely positioned to draw upon their extensive history and heritage to differentiate themselves in a competitive market (Pfannes *et al.*, 2021) and can use the narrative development process to rediscover and communicate their organizational history and cultural heritage (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021).

"Narrativization" becomes a key element of effective corporate communication (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014; Garofano *et al.*, 2020; Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2015) and an effective method for historic brands to convey their history and values, establishing an emotional connection with customers and strengthening the relationship with stakeholders (Garofano *et al.*, 2020).

As Urde *et al.* (2007) observed, corporate heritage is inextricably linked to a company's identity, which is formed by its history, values, and cultural context. A strong corporate heritage can provide a sense of continuity and stability, thus facilitating the guidance of company decisions and actions (Balmer, 2013). However, it also presents challenges, such as balancing heritage preservation and integrating innovative elements into corporate communication (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2015). Long-lived firms must navigate the tension between maintaining their legacy and adapting to changing market conditions, as failure could make the company appear outdated or irrelevant (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2023). This requires a deep understanding of the company's history, values, and cultural context and a willingness to innovate and evolve. Consequently, corporate communications are critical to articulating the company's heritage narrative and values and positioning the brand in the market.

Riviezzo *et al.* (2015) noted that long-lived organizations must balance honoring their heritage and embracing change to maintain relevance and

competitiveness. In addition to these challenges, these firms must consider the role of stakeholders in shaping their corporate heritage narrative. Morsing and Schultz (2006) observed that stakeholders are central to shaping a company's reputation and identity. It is therefore incumbent on companies to engage with them in a meaningful way to foster trust and loyalty. Corporate identity encompasses an organization's purpose, vision, activities, ethics, and values, giving it uniqueness, "specificity, stability, and unity" (Larçon and Reitter 1994, cited in Balmer and Podnar 2021, p.733). Corporate identity and corporate reputation are firmly linked: "corporate identity provides the central platform upon which corporate communications policies are developed, corporate reputations are built and corporate images and stakeholder identifications/associations with the corporation are formed" (Balmer, 2008, p. 881). According to Balmer and Burghausen (2015), corporate heritage identities refer to corporate competencies, cultures, philosophies, activities, visual identities, architecture, and service offerings and are seen as part of the past, present, and future. By consolidating the identification of identity-related factors, the company's view of its history prepares the company to open to the market and monitor perceptions of that identity through a brand orientation (Balmer and Podnar, 2021). Within this debate, the discursive practices used by companies to communicate corporate heritage are exciting and still unexplored (Pfannes *et al.*, 2021). To address this gap, the present study investigates how long-lived companies use digital narratives to convey their historical and cultural heritage, aiming to uncover the recurring elements that define their corporate heritage communication. Moreover, it explores how these narratives are shaped by national cultural values. To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main narrative elements through which long-lived companies communicate their corporate heritage via digital platforms?

RQ2: To what extent and in what ways do country cultural values influence the content and structure of corporate heritage communication? These questions aim to deepen our understanding of how historical identity and cultural context interact in the construction of corporate heritage narratives, offering relevant insights both for theory development and for managerial practice in international contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Conceptualization of corporate heritage

Heritage is a concept rooted in the humanities and social sciences. Only recently has it been extended to the sphere of management (Napolitano and Marino, 2016) to identify a new way of communicating the uniqueness of the company and its products (Urde *et al.*, 2007). The concept of corporate heritage emerged from empirical research on monarchies (Balmer, 2006); according to Balmer (2011), it is a dimension of corporate identity, based on historical and cultural heritage and core values. It is a significant vector

Chiara Cannavale
Annarita Sorrentino
Luca Venturini
Maria Rosaria Napolitano
Exploring corporate
heritage through digital
narrative. A cross-cultural
thematic analysis of
Henokiens' websites

of the past that combines and transcends past, present and prospective future (Balmer, 2011). Through it, the past becomes a key component of the company's identity, positioning, and future directions (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021). Corporate heritage provides existential anchors that are valuable during uncertain times, offering a sense of the world.

From a marketing perspective, heritage is seen through an evolutionary lens, with a forward-looking approach that aims to inspire and engage both internal and external stakeholders in the corporate's vision. It offers opportunities for successful differentiation and develops long-term engagement with all stakeholders (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021). Riviezzo *et al.* (2021) explored the heritage marketing opportunities for long-lived Italian companies and identified the multiple opportunities these companies to enhance and communicate their heritage narrative. Heritage marketing refers to the set of decisions aimed at enhancing organizational heritage, generating a sense of belonging to the company, and to the set of tools aimed at using its legacy of brands and products to create lasting emotional bonds with consumers (Misiura, 2006) and other stakeholders (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021).

The sedimentation of values associated with corporate heritage delineates the corporate heritage identity. This refers to the institutional characteristics that have remained significant and consistent over time, making a corporate heritage identity relevant to the past, present, and future. While the meanings associated with specific aspects of an organization's identity may evolve, heritage identity traits can encompass corporate competencies, cultures, philosophies, activities, markets, and groups, and may also be reflected in unique visual identities, architecture, and service offerings (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015). Furthermore, a strategic and engaging narration of corporate heritage can inspire new choices for the future and enhance the firm's competency base (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, corporate heritage helps clarify the past, crafting a narrative that is meaningful for brand management and resonates with contemporary stakeholders (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009; Urde *et al.*, 2007). It can also provide lasting value for corporate brands (Greyser *et al.*, 2006), establishing a basis for strong, long-lasting relationships with stakeholder groups (Balmer, 2011; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011). In this contest, corporate heritage serves as a credible foundation for ritualizing brand consumption and reinforcing a brand's cultural relevance, making it invaluable for developing brand identity. Heritage brand could be defined as "a set of symbols and values that reinforce the identity of the brand and express its anchoring in the past and the continuity between past, present, and future" (Pecot and De Barnier, 2017, p.77

2.2 From corporate heritage to brand heritage identity

A specific feature of the corporate heritage marketing domain is related to the notion of corporate heritage brand. According to Balmer (2006), corporate heritage brand represents a "track record for delivering value to

customers" through the brand promise and supported by the consistency of its core values (Urde *et al.*, 2007, p. 9; Hudson , 2011, p. 1538) and strategically employ symbols to represent their historical roots (Urde *et al.*, 2007).

Corporate heritage brands are a distinct category of institutional brand characterized by a degree of continuity in terms of the brand promise expressed through the organization's identity, behavior, and symbolism. The corporate identity frames and guides corporate communication and interactions with stakeholders (Foroudi and Foroudi, 2021). Corporate heritage identities and corporate heritage brands also confer temporal, territorial, social, and cultural identities to groups of customers and other stakeholders (Balmer, 2013).

Balmer (2013) outlines four unique identity traits of corporate heritage brands. Omnitemporality allows brands to be relevant across multiple periods, meaningfully connecting the past, present, and future. Heritage constancy highlights a brand's ability to consistently uphold its values over time, underlining its authenticity. Provenance, meanwhile, refers to the strong connection these brands maintain with specific places, which enhances their distinctive heritage character and the capability to evoke positive emotions.

Burghausen (2023) adds other two key elements of corporate heritage brand: intergenerational continuity, achieved through substantive and/or symbolic exchanges between generations of stakeholders, and constancy, where a brand's characteristics remain recognizable over time despite undergoing symbolic or substantial changes.

Especially for family firms, corporate heritage serves as a stabilizing influence, providing a sense of continuity in a dynamic world, a symbol of coherence and transparency (Lowenthal, 1998). Family firms often build brand heritage identities (BHIs) by integrating historical references into their brand, creating a unique value proposition. Family heritage may be included in BHIs, as seen in multigenerational employment or the use of family names such as sons/daughters, which symbolize the past, present and future of the brand (Spielmann *et al.*, 2022).

A corporate brand embodies an organization's interpretation of identity elements that persist from the past, remain present, and extend into the future. However, with the emergence of the concept of brand heritage identity, the focus shifts to integrating historical roots and organizational values into the brand identity, making it not only a corporate actor but also a custodian of shared culture and values. This shift implies an authentic narrative and an emotional connection with consumers, who tend to perceive the brand as an element of continuity and stability. Heritage brand identity consequently becomes a strategic differentiation asset.

In this context, this study is the first attempt to investigate the elements that long-lived companies use to build their corporate brand heritage identity. In particular, the paper contributes to the literature on corporate heritage brands and explores corporate heritage communication of historical companies, advancing knowledge of the practices that contribute to the longevity of heritage brands.

2.3 Communicating corporate heritage through digital content across cultures

Cultural heritage has started to play a significant role in corporate marketing and specifically in corporate communication (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2023). Corporate heritage communication represents a pivotal aspect for companies that want to enhance their historical and cultural heritage, strengthen their organizational identity and, at the same time, promote dialogue with a heterogeneous audience (Balmer, 2013; Hudson and Balmer, 2013; Micelotta and Raynard, 2011; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011).

Companies communicate their heritage through strategic and operational marketing tools (Napolitano *et al.*, 2018; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2023), and the advent of digital tools, including social media (Giaccardi, 2012), websites, and immersive technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality (Escandon-Barbosa *et al.*, 2024), has allowed companies to narrate their heritage in a dynamic, engaging, and accessible way to a global audience (Economou, 2015). Corporate websites play a crucial role in corporate heritage storytelling (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), providing a reliable and highly adaptable digital platform through which companies can present their narrative and identity in a structured and comprehensive way (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2016).

Butcher and Pecot (2022) provide an in-depth exploration of how luxury heritage brands use Instagram to visually construct their brand heritage through aesthetic cues such as symbolism, rituals, and historical continuity. Their findings suggest that visual heritage narratives serve both persuasive and performative functions in engaging stakeholders and maintaining exclusivity.

Mähnert *et al.* (2024) focus on brand heritage communication via Twitter, applying stereotype content theory and text mining to demonstrate how audiences perceive heritage brands in terms of warmth and competence. The study reveals that brand messages vary across industry sectors and that digital narratives are often tailored to elicit distinct emotional and reputational responses, reflecting an active shaping of heritage through micro-messaging.

However, the heritage communication strategy must consider the impact of cultural factors, both in terms of the company's origins and its target audience (Hakala *et al.*, 2011). Cultural variables have a significant consequence in determining how corporate heritage is transmitted and received (Pecot *et al.*, 2023), exerting influence on both the content and styles of corporate communication (Lin and Lou, 2024; Vollero *et al.*, 2020). The different conceptions embraced by different cultures have a profound impact on the way heritage is communicated and received by the public (Baack and Singh, 2007). For example, the concept of time can be perceived as linear or cyclical (McHale, 1978), monochromatic or polychronic (Bergadaà, 2007; Brislin and Kim, 2003), or even as a long- or short-term oriented phenomenon (Hofstede, 1980).

Communicating corporate heritage requires a nuanced approach that aligns with both the corporate identity and the cultural expectations of its audiences (Singh *et al.*, 2005). By recognizing and adapting to different

cultural perceptions, companies can effectively bridge the gap between their heritage and the diverse interpretations of a global audience. This alignment promotes authenticity and relevance, enhancing the resonance of the corporate narrative in different cultural contexts (Urde *et al.*, 2007).

Culture affects how consumers perceive brands and what they value about them (Pecot *et al.*, 2018). It shapes consumers' perception of a brand and its heritage because it directly influences the emotional connection between the company and its customers (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2011): while in some cultures, history and tradition can be elements of great importance, creating a deeper connection with consumers who appreciate the longevity and consistency of a brand over time; in others, the capability to innovate and propose novelties may play a more decisive role (Calver and Page, 2013). Therefore, it is important to consider cultural contexts as they offer a new lens through which to analyze corporate communication and understand the extent to which it should be adapted.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The study analyzed the corporate heritage narratives featured on the websites of 46 bicentennial family businesses from the Henokiens Association. The initial population comprised 56 firms, but 10 companies were excluded because their websites were either not available in English or lacked sections explicitly addressing corporate heritage. Henokiens firms were chosen as the focus of this study due to their unique historical continuity, with more than two centuries of family ownership and brand identity, making them exemplary cases for exploring digital heritage narratives. For each company, the corporate name coincides with the brand name, ensuring consistency in brand-related references. All relevant web pages and subpages dedicated to corporate history, heritage, and legacy storytelling were systematically collected and converted into a textual dataset. A second analysis was conducted to understand how country culture influences the narrative of corporate heritage. The analysis was limited to the country with more than two companies, and data were obtained from the Hofstede's Country Comparison Tool (HCCT).

3.2 Data Analysis

Textual data were imported into NVivo 14 to conduct a summative content analysis aimed at identifying recurring themes and uncovering the underlying meanings of words and phrases associated with corporate heritage (Babbie, 2020; Catanzaro, 1988). An initial frequency query generated the 100 most common lemma words, deliberately excluding prepositions, adverbs, and other non-substantive terms to focus on semantically relevant content.

To gain further insights, an inductive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed with NVivo. Thematic analysis provides

a focal point for the interpretative analysis, offering insights and arguments about the phenomena under investigation (Boyatzis, 1998). In the first round of analysis, open coding was applied to sentences and paragraphs, labeling them with concise descriptors to form first-order codes (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). These codes were then consolidated into conceptually broader second-order themes, and subsequently aggregated into overarching dimensions (Sasaki and Ravasi, 2024; Locke, 2000). To strengthen analytical rigor, coding decisions were revisited through iterative discussions and cross-validation among researchers. This procedure ensured consistent classification of textual units and minimized potential bias during themes generation. Codes and themes were iteratively reviewed and refined in line with Patton's (1980) criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, ensuring that each theme was internally coherent and externally distinct. To illustrate the transparency of the coding process, examples of empirical evidence are provided in the Appendix.

In parallel, text network analysis was performed using InfraNodus software (Paranyushkin, 2019) to complement the thematic analysis. This tool visualized the co-occurrence patterns of recurrent terms and themes, highlighting key nodes and revealing the overall structure of the narrative network.

Finally, Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980, 2011), considered as proxies for values (Minkov and Kaasa, 2021; Taras *et al.*, 2010), were used to compare the four primary cultures among the companies in the sample - Italy, France, Japan, Germany - and explore the effects of cultural values on the corporate heritage brand narrative.
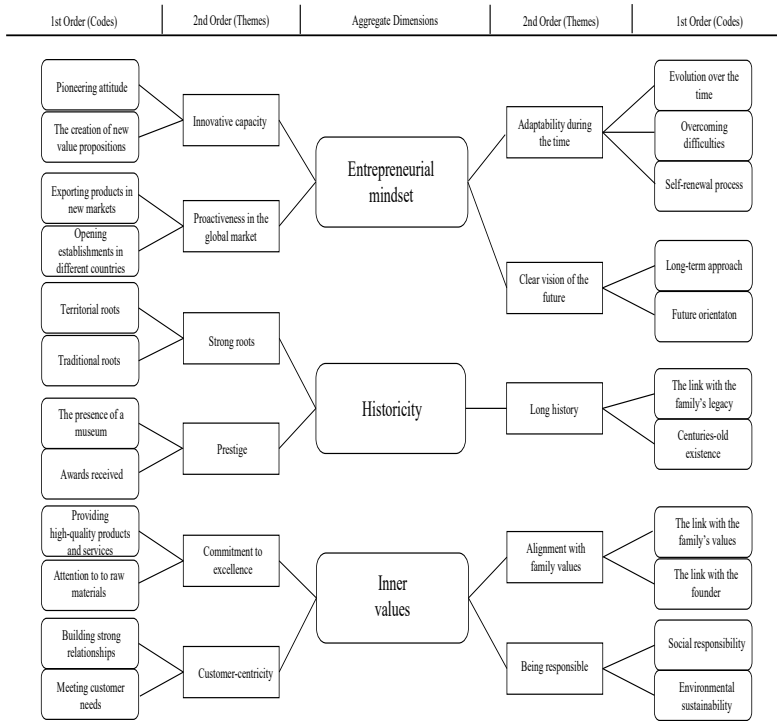
4. Findings

The findings of the thematic analysis of heritage discursive practices on the websites of bicentennial Henokiens revealed the presence of three aggregate narrative dimensions: entrepreneurial mindset, historicity, and inner values (Figure 1), which provide a nuanced understanding of the underlying values and principles that have guided these long-lived companies over the centuries.

4.1 Entrepreneurial mindset

The entrepreneurial mindset reflects the core principles and strategies that have enabled historic companies investigated to face and overcome the challenges of time, while maintaining a clear vision of the future, an innovative approach, and a global projection. This narrative dimension is divided into four main themes: *adaptability during the time, clear vision of the future, innovative capacity, and proactiveness in the global market.*

Chiara Cannavale
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Luca Venturini
Maria Rosaria Napolitano
Exploring corporate
heritage through digital
narrative. A cross-cultural
thematic analysis of
Henokiens' websites

Fig. 1: Results of thematic analysis

Source: our elaboration

Adaptability during the time indicates the capability to evolve and innovate to compete successfully in an environment of constant change. This theme is articulated into the following codes: *evolution over the time, overcoming difficulties*, and *self-renewal process*. Historic companies utilize their websites to illustrate how they have adapted their identity in response to emerging market opportunities while maintaining strong connections to their historic foundations. The narrative of successfully overcoming difficulties, such as economic crises or logistical challenges, reinforces the image of the corporate and brand's resilience, thus demonstrating how these experiences have contributed to strengthening its character. Ultimately, corporate renewal is evidenced by the implementation of new business models or the introduction of innovative products, which demonstrate the capability to keep up with the times and respond to the demands of an ever-changing market.

Clear vision of the future demonstrates the capability to integrate a long-term approach with an innovation-oriented perspective. This theme includes two codes: *long-term approach* and *future orientation*. Long-lived companies communicate a strategy that embraces a generational perspective, emphasizing how each decision is made with the aim of ensuring the continuity of the company and its brand and pursuing sustainable goals over time. At the same time, future orientation emerges through

the introduction of new technologies, attention to sustainability, and anticipation of market trends. This dual perspective allows long-standing companies to position themselves as innovative leaders, demonstrating the capability to effectively integrate traditional and modern approaches.

Innovative capacity is further articulated into two codes: *the creation of new value propositions* and *pioneering attitude*. The capability to innovate is conveyed through the creation of products or services that respond to emerging needs, while maintaining established standards of quality and values associated with the company and brand. Meanwhile, the role of a pioneer emphasizes the capability to introduce substantial innovations within industries. This is demonstrated by the capability to anticipate emerging trends and establish standards that have subsequently become market benchmarks.

Proactiveness in the global market refers to the international expansion and the capability of historic companies to adapt and compete in different cultural and geographical contexts. This theme includes two codes: *exporting products in new markets* and *opening factories in different countries*. The interviewed companies communicate their export strategy, and the establishment of new facilities abroad, demonstrating the ability to integrate historical roots and international adaptation.

For a detailed overview of the evidences supporting this theme, see table 1 in Appendix.

4.2 Historicity

Historicity reflects the capability of bicentennial companies to communicate their historical roots, cultural relevance, and temporal continuity. This narrative dimension is divided into three main themes: *strong roots, prestige*, and *long history*.

Strong roots concerns how companies convey their deep affiliation to the geographical area and cultural heritage that favored their birth and growth. This theme is articulated into two codes: *territorial roots* and *traditional roots*. The first emphasizes the distinctive link between a company and its place of origin, and it is often conveyed through geographical or historical allusions that serve to reinforce the authenticity of the brand. The websites of the long-standing companies place considerable emphasis on the connection with the territory, which is presented as an integral part of their corporate identity. This approach serves to enhance the recognizability and distinctiveness of the brand. The second theme, "traditional roots", underlines the adherence of the company and its brands to practices and values handed down over time, thus communicating a sense of coherence and authenticity that serves to reinforce the reputation with the public.

Prestige indicates the capability to communicate the excellence and recognition achieved over time. This theme is composed of two codes: *awards received* and *the presence of a museum, archive, or similar institution*. The awards often displayed on company websites, serve as tangible evidence of the excellence and importance of the company and its brands in the industrial and cultural landscape. The establishment of museums or archives, on the other hand, exemplifies the commitment of

the companies to preserving and celebrating the history, offering visitors immersive experiences that reinforce a sense of prestige and authenticity. These elements not only enhance the perceived value of the company and its brands, but also position them as a custodian of tradition and culture.

Long history indicates the narrative of temporal continuity. This theme includes two codes: *the link with the family's legacy* and *centuries-old existence*. The family link shows how many companies communicate the continuity of family management. This is perceived as an element of stability and authenticity, which serves to strengthen the emotional connection with the stakeholders. Conversely, the centuries-long existence of these companies is considered evidence of their capability to survive and thrive over the centuries. This is frequently emphasized to highlight the resilience and strength of the company and its brands. Empirical support for the theme is presented in appendix table 2.

4.3 Inner values

Inner values represent the set of core principles that guide historic companies in their strategic and communicative choices. These principles underscore the companies' commitment to excellence, customer-centricity, family values, and social and environmental responsibility. This aggregate dimension is in fact divided into four narrative themes: *commitment to excellence, customer-centricity, alignment with family values,* and *being responsible.*

Commitment to excellence highlights the companies' emphasis on quality and the use of carefully selected materials. This theme is composed of two codes: *providing high-quality products and services* and *attention to raw materials*. The communication strategy emphasized the companies' dedication to ensuring high standards, with a focus on their craftsmanship and innovative production processes. The emphasis on raw materials, frequently observed on company websites, reflects a dedication to the meticulous selection of resources that respect tradition, authenticity, and sustainability. These elements contribute to the company and brand reputation for reliability and prestige.

Customer-centricity illustrates how long-lived companies prioritize building strong relationships with their stakeholders and meeting customer needs as the cornerstone of their strategic approach. The two codes - *building strong relationship* and *meeting customer needs* - illustrate the capability of these companies to maintain an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders. Digital platforms are used to spread the value of active listening and customization, underlining the commitment to developing experiences in line with consumer expectations and strengthening brand loyalty.

Alignment with family values highlights the importance of the founding principles and interests of the founder as distinctive elements of the company and its members. This theme includes two codes: *the link with its family's values* and *the link with the founder*. The continuity of values handed down over time is a key aspect of corporate communication, as it reinforces the perception of authenticity and consistency with the history of a company. At the same time, the centrality of the founder and his values

serves to reaffirm the sense of mission and vision that has inspired the company and its brand since its inception, thus establishing itself as a benchmark in the industry.

Being responsible emphasizes the commitment of historic companies towards social and environmental sustainability, which have emerged as key elements in corporate communication. This theme is composed of two codes: *social responsibility* and *environmental sustainability*. Social responsibility is manifested through initiatives that demonstrate the contribution of companies to the well-being of the community, such as support for educational or cultural projects. Environmental sustainability, on the other hand, highlights the attention to reducing environmental impact, communicated using eco-friendly materials, innovative production processes, and strategies aimed at preserving natural resources. For further evidence and exemplary quotations, see appendix table 3.
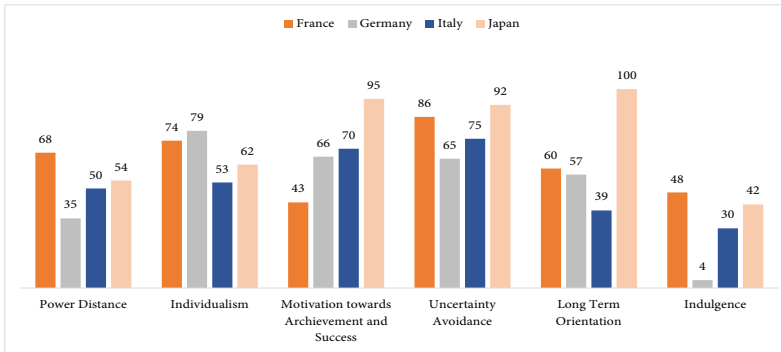
4.4 A cross-cultural analysis

Focusing on the French, Italian, Japanese and German companies in our sample, we observe that corporate heritage communication highlights some important common traits due to the homogeneous characteristics they have in terms of longevity and inclination to enhance their corporate heritage image. However, looking at the importance of the aggregate dimensions and narrative themes, we observe some interesting differences. The importance of these dimensions and themes is assessed based on the place and recurrence they have in the companies' narrative.

To investigate how country culture influences the communication of corporate heritage, we referred to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Figure 2).

- *Power distance* (PD) refers to individuals' acceptance of an unequal distribution of power, and consequently to the importance of hierarchy and status in relationship and communication.
- *Uncertainty avoidance* (UA) refers to individuals' preference for clearness and safety, and consequently to risk avoidance.
- *Motivation towards achievement and success* (MTA) refers to individuals' focus on goals and performances. It is connected to competitiveness and orientation to control.
- *Individualism* (IDV) refers to individuals' tendency to autonomy and self-reliance. When individualism is low, cultures tend to *collectivism* and focus on collective interests.
- *Long-term orientation* (LTO) refers to individuals' tendency to be pragmatic and catch future opportunities. When long-term orientation is low, people tend to be normative and place more value on traditions and past experiences.
- *Indulgence* (IND) refers to individuals' belief in the free gratification of their personal needs. When indulgence is low, cultures tend to restraint and the respect of social rules is more important than self-gratification.

Fig 2: Hofstede's cultural dimensions for France, Italy, Germany and Japan

Source: Hofstede's Country Comparison Tool

Comparing the narratives the selected companies use in the four countries, we can get some interesting insights into the way they communicate the three main themes - entrepreneurial mindset, historicity and inner values, as well as on the relative different important they recognize to them as elements on which their brand heritage communication relies (Table 4 in Appendix).

In their narrative, Japanese companies give more importance to the aggregate dimension entrepreneurial mindset than to the other two narrative dimensions, while in the websites of French, German and Italian companies' the most important aggregate dimension is inner values, followed by historicity and entrepreneurial mindset.

Analyzing in depth the declination of the three main dimensions is also very interesting, because it shows the different ways companies interpret and emphasize them in their communication. Within the dimension entrepreneurial mindset, for Japanese companies the most relevant theme is *proactiveness in the global market*, while for German and French companies the most relevant theme is *clear vision of the future*. For Italian companies the most relevant theme is *adaptability during the time*.

These differences seem to be strongly connected to cultural values of the countries. Japan is the country with the highest level of MTA, in line with an inclination to competition and success; this value emerges from the heritage narrative of Japanese companies as well as the attention they place on the entrepreneurial mindset, specifically on the theme *proactiveness in the global market*. In countries where the MTA decreases, other narrative dimensions seem to be strongly associated with corporate heritage, and these are inner values and historicity.

The connection between country cultural values and corporate brand heritage is reinforced by the evidence that Japan is also characterized by a high level of LTO, which leads to pragmatism and exploration of opportunities. On the contrary, Italy, characterized by the lowest score of LTO, is the only country where *adaptability during the time* seems to be the most important theme emerging in the narrative dimension entrepreneurial mindset. Adaptability is typical of a focus on the present, on a short-term decision making, but at the same time the tendency to

emphasize the evolution of the brand is in line with the quite high level of MTA, which requires companies to keep competitive over time. The brand vision of French and German Companies is instead in line with their level of LTO, high but lower than Japan and with the combination of LTO and IDV, which stresses the inclination to fill different form others, to pursue uniqueness as a value.

In countries where the MTA decreases, other narrative dimensions seem to be strongly associated with corporate heritage, and these are inner values and historicity. The aggregate narrative dimension historicity is consistent with the UA value, which refers to risk avoidance, and is high in all countries. The themes corresponding to this aggregate dimension related to *long history* and *strong roots* are relevant for all the companies investigated, but in Germany *prestige* is the second theme. In Germany, prestige is consistent with the high level of IDV and the fact that it is mostly connected with the awards is coherent with the quite high level of MTA and the middle-low level of IND.

Finally, within the aggregate dimension inner values, it is very relevant in France, Italy and Germany, and the theme *being responsible* is the most important for French companies, while for Italian, and Japanese companies the most important theme is *commitment to excellence*, and for German ones it is the *alignment to family values*. These differences can be explained by IDV and MTA values: while Japan and Italy have lower IDV scores and higher MTA scores, France shows the opposite. German situation is still different: It is characterized by high level of IDV and quite high level of MTA but differently form the other countries it is also characterized by lower level of PD, which imposes the necessity of a higher involvement and a higher feeling of belonging to people to continue following the project over time. Consequently, in Italian and Japanese culture individuals and organizations pay attention on performances and results but without exalting individual action and interest, while in Germany and France, individuals and organizations focus on individual responsibility and action, and results are measured more in terms of quality of life and harmony, when a low level of MTA prevails - such as in France - or on the alignment with family and founder's values when a low level of PD prevails - such as in Germany.

This cross-countries comparison confirms that heritage is perceived as an important corporate resource in all the four countries, but it also highlights some interesting differences in the way companies interpret the main elements of corporate heritage, and in the way they communicate them. With specifically regard to Entrepreneurial Mindset, while for Italian companies this theme is strongly related to adaptive creativity and historicity, with the continuous research of a balance between legacy and reinvention; in France companies pay more attention to clear vision and innovation. The adaptive attitude of the former is typical of collectivistic, short-term and low indulgent cultures, while the future orientation of the latter is typical of high IDV and LTO countries. On the same hand, in Japan entrepreneurial mindset is strongly connected to proactiveness, which is coherent with the high levels of MTA and LTO. The country is characterized by a deep pragmatism, which finds evidence also in the

interpretation of the dimension inner values, where commitment to excellence is the most important theme, and historicity where the theme long history is the most important and connected more to the century-old existence than to the family legacy. Some examples to what discussed can be found in Table 5 in the Appendix.

5. Conclusions

Our findings provide a nuanced understanding of key elements of corporate heritage narratives on Henokiens companies websites. Our analysis highlighted three aggregate narrative dimensions: entrepreneurial mindset, historicity, and inner values. *Entrepreneurial mindset* highlights the capability of the investigated long-lived companies to adapt, innovate, and expand globally. While for Japanese and French companies, its theme is mainly associated with companies' proactivity in global markets, for Italian and German companies, it is mostly associated with the capability to adapt over time. *Historicity* refers to companies' capability to showcase their rich history and prestige, which serve as a competitive advantage in the global market. This narrative dimension is connected to longevity and embeddedness across countries, but for French companies historicity is also strongly associated with prestige. *Inner values* instead emphasize the long-lived companies' commitment to excellence, long-term relationships with stakeholders, social responsibility, and strong family values in corporate decision-making. With reference to this dimension - which promotes continuity and tradition, both vital for long-term stability and growth - while in Italian and Japanese companies it emerges that the commitment to excellence is the important theme, for French and German companies responsibility takes on an undisputed centrality.

6. Implications

Our findings have significant implications for scholars, entrepreneurs, and managers seeking to understand and leverage the key elements of corporate heritage narratives. The study contributes to literature by conceptualizing corporate heritage as a multidimensional construct that encompasses entrepreneurial mindset, historicity, and inner values. This perspective extends current theoretical understandings by emphasizing the strategic function of heritage as both a resource for innovation and a vehicle for stability across time.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers guidance for heritage management by identifying actionable levers that long-lived companies employ to preserve and communicate their legacy. Cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset enables firms to foster innovation and resilience, while emphasizing historicity reinforces brand authenticity and corporate reputation. Prioritizing inner values, such as excellence, responsibility, and commitment, supports long-term cohesion and stakeholder trust.

These firms, recognized as among the most successful bicentennial family businesses globally, serve as benchmarks for other organizations aiming to develop effective heritage branding strategies. Importantly, the insights from this study are relevant not only for companies that already communicate their heritage, but also for those that possess historical and cultural assets yet remain silent about them. For these firms, adopting a structured heritage narrative can represent a strategic opportunity for differentiation and long-term positioning.

Furthermore, understanding how cultural dimensions shape heritage communication allows companies to tailor their narratives in a way that resonates with local audiences, avoiding ethnocentric biases and enhancing international appeal. The dual relationship between culture and corporate heritage, whereby culture shapes narrative, and narrative reinforces cultural anchoring, demands careful consideration in transnational communication strategies. In this light, the study provides both conceptual and practical tools for firms that aim to align their heritage narratives with diverse cultural expectations while sustaining authenticity.

7. Limitations and future research opportunities

Although this study provides valuable insights into the corporate heritage narratives of long-lived firms, it presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on the digital narratives published on the corporate websites of Henokiens member companies. This digital-only scope, limited to institutional website pages, does not capture the full breadth of a firm's heritage communication across other platforms (e.g., social media, physical spaces, or internal communication), potentially omitting important narrative nuances or informal practices. Future studies could broaden the methodological lens by incorporating additional media, such as social platforms or immersive environments, and by conducting in-depth interviews with managers to explore internal perceptions and strategic intent.

Second, while the Henokiens offer a unique and relevant empirical context, their status as highly successful bicentennial family firms may limit the generalizability of the findings to younger or less heritage-oriented organizations. The relatively small sample and its confinement to specific countries further constrain the comparative scope of the study. Expanding the number of companies and including additional national or cultural contexts may reveal further patterns or exceptions in heritage communication strategies.

Third, our analytical framework is grounded in Hofstede's cultural dimensions, which provide a valuable but partial lens on cultural variance. Future research could integrate alternative models of culture (e.g., Schwartz's cultural values, Hall's high-/low-context theory) to enrich the interpretive depth of cross-cultural comparisons.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing literature on corporate heritage and opens several avenues for future research. Future studies could extend the investigation to different sectors and

organizational types, assess how corporate heritage narratives evolve over time, or explore how consumers perceive and interpret heritage messaging, thus evaluating the alignment between managerial intent and stakeholder reception (Pfannes *et al.*, 2021).

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APPENDIX

Chiara Cannavale
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Table 1: Entrepreneurial mindset - Exemplary evidences

2nd order themes	1st Order codes and exemplary evidence
Adaptability during the time	**Evolution during the time** *A new business model is born and today, Lombard Odier provides banking technology to 12 external banks. (Banque Lombard Odier & Cie SA)* *In 1813, the company turned towards the joinery trade. Catherineau outfits schooners and lighters that provide the transportation across the Garonne river. In 1872, the company specializes in wooden patterns for foundries …… In 1961, Catherineau makes its first cabin interior furniture for the Falcon. Alain, the actual president, grows the business by expanding this completion activity for the French aircraft manufacturer and its European completion center. He focuses the aeronautics business on lightweight, high quality furniture. (Catherineau)* **Overcoming difficulties** *After many years of losses, Johannes and Cornelis Petrus decide to divide the business. The distilleries in Delfshaven go to Cornelis Petrus, whilst Johannes stays on at the Rotterdam distilleries. The business owned by Johannes (and his son Cornelis) forms the basis for the company today. (De Kupyer Royal Distiller)* *The rest of the surviving family managed to escape to Italy, leaving behind all their belongings which were soon confiscated by the partisans; the company was nationalized. It appeared then that after more than a century of activity the Luxardo company was destined to disappear. In 1947, however, the last surviving brother GIORGIO LUXARDO together with the young fifth generation NICOLÒ III had the courage and the vision to rebuild the distillery in Torreglia, a village beneath the Euganean Hills in the North-Eastern part of Italy (Luxardo)* **Self-renewal process** *The new factory in Via Campomorone is born, in the vanguard and highly technological, but which maintains unaltered the original processes. (Grondona)* *He began a rigorous restructuring plan: he invested in new machinery and trained the employees. (Revol)*
Clear vision of the future	**Long-term approach** *Our sustainable performance is based on strong values that serve shared objectives and a long-term vision. (Groupe Bollorè)* *As a family-owned business with 200 years of history, we maintain a long-term perspective in all our activities; as entrepreneurs, we think in terms of years, not quarters. (Groupe Mirabaud)* **Future orientation** *Our mission is to nourish quality of life with experience and knowledge for generations to come. (Van Eeghen Group)* *we continue to meet today's challenges and shape the future with innovative ideas (Mollergroup)*
Proactiveness in the global market	**Exporting products in new markets** *Thanks to the high quality of the fabrics it was producing, the company began to export successfully the world over, not only in Europe, but also in the Americas, the British Raj, and even China (Vitale Barberis Canonico)* *The London company Matthew Clark & Sons becomes a very important customer. Clark does not only purchase De Kuyper's products for the UK, but also develop a strong taste for Dutch gin. Around 1870, 85% of exports are destined for the UK and Canada. (De Kuyper Royal Distiller)* **Opening establishments in different countries** *The Mellerio brothers were looking for a new market and decided to try their luck abroad by setting up in Madrid, Spain, where they opened the "Mellerio-Hermanos" sign in 1850. (Mellerio)* *The Pinto Basto Group, which has always pioneered the business activities it got engaged in, started its internationalization in 2002 by establishing itself in Angola. (Pinto Basto)*
Innovative capacity	**Pioneering attitude** *In 1731 Amarelli's established a "concio" one of the first pre-industrial organization in order to extract the juice of this beneficial plant. (Amarelli)* *Richard Hoare did not invent the cheque, but he was certainly one of English banking's earliest adopters. (C. Hoare & Co.)* **The creation of new value propositions** *Intelligent, intuitive and charismatic, Pietro introduced the most modern machining systems and created innovative products, such as the first semi-automatic pistol, the 9 mm Glisenti Model 1915 adopted by the Royal Army, one of the very first machine guns, the Model 1918 dubbed the "Automatic Musket" and later the famous Model 1938 "MAB" (Beretta Automatic Musket), adopted by the Italian Army (Fabbrica d'armi Pietro Beretta)* *In 1952, J.D. Neuhaus made the work of our colleagues in the mines so much easier with its innovation of using a compressed air motor instead of the, at the time, conventional practice of operating hoists by hand (J.D. Neuhaus)*

Table 2: Historicity - Exemplary evidences

2nd order themes	1st Order codes and exemplary evidences
Prestige	**The presence of a museum** *It was at the Manoir d'Odet, in Ergué-Gabéric, that the Bolloré family decided to create a museum dedicated to the Breton history of the Bolloré Group. (Groupe Bollorè)* *The revival of this unique history can be found in "Giorgio Amarelli's Museum" in the historical family residence. (Amarelli)* **Awards received** *Named 'European Car of the Year' in 1969, the PEUGEOT 504 was (and still is) PEUGEOT's longest-produced commercialised model (Establissement Peugeot Freres)* *In 2014 the Amarone Calcarole became the first wine from the region ever to be awarded Red Wine of the Year by Gambero Rosso. (Guerrieri Rizzardi)*
Strong roots	**Territorial roots** *The history of the Pictet family deserved to be written because it is an integral part of the history of Geneva, even to the point of sometimes merging with it. (Banque Pictet & Cie SA)* *But true stories, too, such as that of the Naviglio, an artificial canal, ditched in 1458, obtained from the derivation of the waters of the Mincio river. Since then it never missed to ensure the water supply to the people settled on its banks, who had immediately learned to use its current: via Naviglio, the Mantuans were able to move the rammers "magli" that beat iron and copper and other manufacturing utilities, as the fullings "folli" used in paper production. (Cartiera Mantovana)* **Traditional roots** *The Lobmeyr company focuses on a contemporary interpretation of glass and light, and never stops cultivating its heritage. The old inspires the new, and traditional knowledge facilitates innovation. (J&L Lobmeyr)* *Several years ago, Billecart-Salmon decided to return to ancestral champagne-making methods in the Clos Saint-Hilaire by using work horses and sheep (Champagne Billecart-Salmon)*
Long history	**The link with the family's legacy** *Banque Hottinguer is an independent bank controlled by the Hottinguer Family for 7 generations (Banque Hottinguer)* *The philosophy was passed on from one generation to the next, thanks to Grandpa Orlando and his notes, which became the top reference and inspiration for the brand (Grondona)* **Centuries-old existence** *Akafuku was established about 300 years ago in 1707 as a tea house in Ise to welcome those visiting the Ise Grand Shrine. (Akafuku)* *We have been developing our operations for almost three centuries (Pollet)*

Chiara Cannavale
Annarita Sorrentino
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Exploring corporate heritage through digital narrative. A cross-cultural thematic analysis of Henokiens' websites

2nd order themes	1st Order codes and exemplary evidences
Commitment to excellence	**Providing high-quality product-service** *Quality is at the centre of our preoccupations. Our two-centuries-old skills, our technical heritage, the accuracy of each gesture and our standards in quality are the very foundations of our company. Excellence, more than an end in itself, is our history and our daily life. (Revol)* *The family vineyard is made up of exceptional appellations, and every year offers wines, known for their formidable quality. (Louis Latour)* **Attention to raw materials** *These collections are created from carefully selected, traceable, and natural raw materials (Fratelli Piacenza 1773)* *The Hugel estates are planted with only the noble Alsace grape varieties, with vines averaging 35 years of age. (Hugel & Fils)*
Being responsible	**Social Responsibility** *We pledge to actively promote the development of the local communities where we operate. We are aware of the intricate interconnection between businesses and their territories, firmly believing in the mutual benefits of a flourishing and growing ecosystem. (Acetaia Giusti)* *We pledge to actively promote the development of the local communities where we operate. We are aware of the intricate interconnection between businesses and their territories, firmly believing in the mutual benefits of a flourishing and growing ecosystem. (Banque Lombard Odier & Cie SA)* **Environmental sustainability** *In its constant quest for excellence, Billecart-Salmon favours cultivation methods that aim to protect the environment and promote biodiversity. Committed to preserving the cycle between winemaker and nature, the House has long been convinced that such a course of action is essential in the pursuit of environmental sustainability. The House's philosophy is simple: respect the terroir in order to produce great wines. Long before being certified High Environmental Value and Sustainable Viticulture in Champagne in 2017, Maison BillecartSalmon was already focused on managing its vineyards with the utmost respect for the environment. (Champagne Billecart-Salmon)* *In addition, in Monastier the by-products created during distillation are processed and transformed into new resources to be used in different fields. This ecological process is an emblemof the Nardini family's respect for the environment and for its territory. (Ditta Bortolo Nardini)*
Customer-centricity	**Building strong relationship** *We do this by building responsible partnerships with our clients and the companies in which we invest (Banque Pictet & Cie SA)* *Our preferred customers are cleaning companies, communities, major retail outlets and industry, with whom we cultivate close relationships to constantly strengthen our expertise and meet the real needs of users. (Pollet)* **Meeting customer needs** *All of the bank's services are tailored to the specific needs of the individual client (Les Fils Dreyfurs & Cie SA)* *… responding to the needs of the markets and placing their capacities at the service of the needs and expectations of their Customers, with a view to their total satisfaction (Pinto Basto)*
Alignment with family values	**The link with its family's values** *The family's values are today shared by a young, passionate team which makes Giusti's heritage, attention to detail and constant progress the cornerstones of their work. (Acetaia Giusti)* *Underpinned by Hoare family values of honesty, empathy, excellence and social responsibility, personal relationships are the heart of our business. (C. Hoare & Co.)* **The link with the founder** *The Pictet of today retains the pioneering drive of its founders, combining unconventional thinking with hard-won experience (Banque Pictet & Cie SA)* *The notebook also includes Grandpa Orlando's own notes and observations about the techniques used for kneading and conserving the natural mother sourdough called Madre Bianca, which is still used to this day. (Grondona)*

Table 4: A cross-countries comparison of themes' distribution

Themes	Japan N. F.	Japan Cit	Italy N. F.	Italy Cit	Germany N. F.	Germany Cit	France N. F.	France Cit
Entrepreneurial mindset	**4**	**26**	**13**	**64**	**3**	**16**	**14**	**75**
Adaptability during the time	*2*	*3*	*9*	*29*	*1*	*2*	*9*	*20*
Evolution over time	0	0	7	13	1	2	6	9
Overcoming difficulties	2	3	6	9	0	0	3	4
Self-renewal process	0	0	6	7	0	0	5	7
Clear vision of the future	*1*	*2*	*5*	*8*	*2*	*6*	*10*	*22*
Long-term approach	0	0	2	2	1	1	4	7
Future orientation	1	2	4	6	2	5	8	15
Proactiveness in the global market	*3*	*20*	*7*	*12*	*3*	*4*	*4*	*12*
Exporting products in new markets	1	1	6	8	2	3	3	3
Opening factories in different countries	3	19	2	4	1	1	2	9
Innovative capacity	*1*	*1*	*7*	*15*	*2*	*4*	*10*	*21*
The creation of new value proposition	1	1	6	12	1	1	8	19
Pioneering attitude	0	0	2	3	2	3	2	2
Historicity	**5**	**17**	**13**	**68**	**3**	**17**	**16**	**97**
Prestige	*2*	*2*	*9*	*12*	*3*	*8*	*7*	*21*
Presence of museum, archive, or similar institutions	1	1	3	4	1	2	1	1
Awards received	1	1	7	8	3	6	6	20
Strong roots	*3*	*7*	*11*	*27*	*1*	*1*	*9*	*26*
Territorial roots	3	4	9	15	0	0	8	14
Traditional roots	2	3	6	12	1	1	7	12
Long history	*5*	*8*	*13*	*29*	*3*	*8*	*16*	*50*
Link with the family legacy	3	3	10	16	1	2	14	32
Centuries-old existence	5	5	11	13	3	6	16	18
Inner Values	**4**	**14**	**11**	**78**	**3**	**48**	**16**	**101**
Committment to excellence	*3*	*8*	*11*	*34*	*2*	*10*	*12*	*31*
High quality product-service	3	4	10	20	2	8	12	21
Attention to raw materials	3	4	7	14	1	2	6	10
Being Responsible	*2*	*4*	*7*	*25*	*3*	*8*	*8*	*32*
Social responsibility	1	2	4	10	2	4	5	15
Environmental sustainability	2	2	7	15	2	4	6	17
Customer centricity	*1*	*1*	*3*	*6*	*3*	*7*	*9*	*20*
Building strong relationship	1	1	1	3	3	4	4	6
Meeting customer needs	0	0	2	3	2	3	8	14
Alignment with family values	*1*	*1*	*9*	*13*	*3*	*23*	*8*	*18*
Link with its family values	0	0	4	5	3	9	7	14
Link with the founder	1	1	6	8	3	14	3	4

N.F = number of firms included in Henokiens website and considered for the analysis

Cit = number of coded sentences referred to the different themes and aggregate narrative dimensions.

Table 5: Cultural Variation in the Narrative Dimensions

Chiara Cannavale
Annarita Sorrentino
Luca Venturini
Maria Rosaria Napolitano
Exploring corporate
heritage through digital
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Henokiens' websites

Country	Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede)	Most Emphasized Theme(s)	Example Quotes
Italy	High Uncertainty Avoidance and Motivation towards Achievement, Moderate Individualism and Power Distance, Short-Term Orientation, and low Indulgence	Inner Values & Historicity	*"The production is still carried out through a natural process constantly immersed in the sweet liquorice scent that, in the same way of the museum, fascinates everyone, adults and children."* *"Founded in 1526, XXX is still run by the same family and proudly rooted in …..."*
France	High Power Distance, Individualism and Uncertainty Avoidance, Moderate Long-Term orientation and Indulgence, Low Motivation towards achievement	Inner Values & Historicity	*"XXX favours cultivation methods that aim to protect the environment and promote biodiversity."* *"Since 1613, the XXX… 15 generations… values of work, honesty and discretion."*
Germany	High Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance and Motivation Long-Term Orientation, Low Power Distance and Indulgence	Inner Values & Historicity	*"Our success is based on long-term partnerships and mutual trust with our employees, customers and suppliers."* *"Today, in the 17th generation, we continue to combine craftsmanship and technological leadership."*
Japan	High Long-Term Orientation, Uncertainty Avoidance and Motivation towards achievement, Moderate Power Distance and Individualism, Low Indulgence	Entrepreneurial Mindset & Historicity	*"We are now in a position to play the role of a 'best global sourcing partner' that contributes to manufacturing."* *"Toraya was founded in the early 16th century… current proprietor is the 18th generation."*