

# The power of the past: assessing the impact of brand heritage for suppliers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Brand heritage has gained traction in the B2C literature. However, its effects on the relationship with buyers in a B2B context, as well as the mechanisms for and conditions under which such effects are observed, remain underexplored. This study aims to examine and provide empirical evidence for perceived quality and identification – two critical determinants of close B2B relationships – as mechanisms that explain the effects of suppliers' brand heritage on buyer loyalty. Further, this research identifies past time orientation and supplier size as boundary variables for the positive effects of suppliers' brand heritage.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Three empirical studies were conducted to test the conceptual model. In Study 1, 211 professional buyers participated in a cross-sectional study by completing an online questionnaire. The data were analyzed through Partial least squares structural equation modeling. In Studies 2 and 3, 235 and 465 individuals, respectively, with professional experience in negotiation participated in experimental studies, providing support for causality across the hypotheses. Moderated mediation and floodlight analysis were performed.

**Findings** – This research provides consistent evidence for the hypotheses. First, the findings show that suppliers' heritage positively affects buyer-supplier identification and quality perceptions in B2B markets, these variables mediating the effect of supplier brand heritage on trust. Second, the authors found support for past-time orientation and supplier size as boundary conditions. Specifically, past-oriented buyers tend to be more loyal toward suppliers boasting a heritage, and such heritage prompts stronger buyer-supplier identification for larger (versus smaller) suppliers.

**Research limitations/implications** – Caution is needed when generalizing the results observed in this research to broader populations. Because the data were collected only in France and the USA and not in a broader set of countries, generalizability to other cultural settings may be limited. In addition, other effects of supplier heritage on buyer perceptions or behavior could be explored in the B2B branding context. For instance, future studies could explore the relationship between B2B brand heritage and legitimacy, a variable of strong interest for company performance.

**Practical implications** – Supplier – especially those of larger firms – managers should select the facets and episodes from their company's heritage most likely to elicit identification. In this regard, companies can extol their brands in different ways to enhance buyers' perception of heritage and, subsequently, identification. Building on the notion that distinctiveness, warmth and memorable experiences are strong drivers of identification, B2B brands would gain in communicating about themselves as having a unique and distinctive heritage through the success or personality of current or past leaders (e.g. CEOs, founders) or the successes of brand products or services over time.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is the first to explore the influence of supplier brand heritage on buyer-supplier relationship and loyalty in the B2B context. Beyond mere quality, this research finds buyer-supplier identification as a mechanism explaining why suppliers' brand heritage



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boosts buyers' loyalty. This research also determines the conditions (i.e. past-time orientation and supplier size) in which the effects of brand heritage are seen in supplier-buyer relationships.

**Keywords** Supplier brand heritage, Buyer-supplier identification, Quality perceptions, Buyer trust, Time orientation, Firm size

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Many business-to-business (B2B) brands use their history to influence buyer perceptions. For instance, adopting the slogan “More than 100 years of innovation,” the UPS shipping service narrates its history and the milestones of its long life, including how it started and its geographical and business expansion. Indeed, communicating company histories (e.g. on the website) may effectively help stakeholders understand important facets of the brand (Esrock and Leichty, 2000). Organizations can also promote their heritage by celebrating their anniversary (Smith and Simeone, 2017), as IBM did in 2013 when they celebrated their 60th anniversary in Singapore on the website called “The Singapore 60/60 Exhibit.” Such examples of B2B brands communicating and promoting their heritage lead to the question of i/whether and ii/how this strategy can help suppliers create and maintain strong relations with their customers in a B2B context. Thus, this study aims to assess the impact of heritage on business-to-business relationships and its implications for building and sustaining robust supplier-customer partnerships.

From a theoretical perspective, extant research in B2B marketing suggests that expressing brand heritage may affect brand extension attractiveness (Sarvasuo *et al.*, 2023), influence technical credibility (Owen Raddats and Burton, 2014), impact the change mechanism of a corporate brand positioning (Koch and Gyrd-Jones, 2019), represent a source of legitimacy (Guercini and Milanesi, 2019) and contribute to higher financial performance (Simoes *et al.*, 2015). Although insightful, these studies have left unexamined key issues for B2B companies. Specifically, given the importance of loyalty for B2B companies (Hutt and Speh, 2004), it is surprising to observe a lack of examination of the effects of heritage on loyalty in a B2B context. Furthermore, acknowledging the importance of interactions and relationship building in B2B contexts, another element of surprise derives from the lack of investigation of how brand heritage can shape relationship building between suppliers and their customers (see Table 1). This gap in the literature is particularly notable, as heritage can increase identification (Hudson and Balmer, 2013), or the perception of affiliation with a group (Mael and Ashforth, 2001), and create a “imagined community” that cultivate a sense of belongingness (Wadhwani *et al.*, 2018). Because this feeling of belongingness enables B2B organizations to develop long-lasting ties with buyers (He *et al.*, 2018; Mohan *et al.*, 2021), the lack of research on identification as a consequence of brand heritage is problematic. The B2B literature thus needs to consider – in addition to quality perceptions – such identification as a potential mechanism to explain i/if and ii/how heritage can help build long-lasting, trusting relationships between companies and their customers.

Another important gap in the B2B literature relates to the conditions under which brand heritage can enhance such loyalty. The effects of brand heritage can vary depending on conditions such as culture (Merchant *et al.*, 2015), promotion focus (Rose *et al.*, 2016), brand familiarity (Pecot *et al.*, 2018) and perceived ethicality (Iglesias *et al.*, 2019). However, these moderating effects have been identified in the B2C literature, leaving unknown the exact conditions under which B2B brand heritage has stronger (or weaker) effects on brand loyalty.

First, building upon the time perspective theory (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999), we incorporate the idea that time plays a role in shaping B2B relationships (Medlin, 2004) and that heritage is rooted in the past (Rindell, 2013). In this article, we introduce past-time

**Table 1.** Brand heritage/oldness in the marketing literature

Source	Antecedents	Mediators/moderators	Outcomes	Data	Key effects of heritage	Theory(ies)/method
<a href="#">Wiedmann <i>et al.</i> (2011a)</a>	None	Brand image, satisfaction, brand trust/none	Brand loyalty, Price premium, Buying intention	German consumers ( <i>n</i> = 458) evaluating Automobile manufacturers (B2C setting)	Positive impact on brand image, satisfaction, brand trust, brand loyalty, price premium and buying intention	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey, PLS-SEM
<a href="#">Wiedmann <i>et al.</i> (2011b)</a>	None	None/none	Brand strength: cognitive, affective, intentional	German consumers ( <i>n</i> = 458) evaluating Automobile manufacturers (B2C setting)	Positive impact on cognitive, affective and intentional brand strength	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey, PLS-SEM
<a href="#">Blombäck and Scandellus (2013)</a>	None	None/CSR communication	Responsible brand image	Swedish consumers ( <i>n</i> = 8,015) evaluating brands (B2C setting)	Positive impact on the interplay between corporate heritage identity and CSR communication on responsible image	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey, content analysis, regression
<a href="#">Merchant and Rose (2013)</a>	Nostalgia proneness, fantasies about past eras, emotions	None/none	Brand attachment	American consumers ( <i>n</i> = 256) evaluating Wells Fargo and Jack Daniel's (B2C setting)	Positive impact of nostalgia proneness on brand heritage. Positive link between emotions and brand heritage. Positive impact of brand heritage on brand attachment	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey, CB-SEM
<a href="#">Wiedmann <i>et al.</i> (2013)</a>	None	Corporate reputation, perceived value, brand image/none	Buying intention	German cyclists ( <i>n</i> = 303) evaluating High-premium two-wheel tire (B2C setting)	Positive impact on corporate reputation, customer perceived value, brand image and buying intention	Customer value framework ( <a href="#">Smith and Coigate, 2007</a> ) Cross-Sectional, online survey, PLS-SEM
<a href="#">Merchant <i>et al.</i> (2015)</a>	None	Reputation, attitudes/nationality	Intentions to recommend and to pay premium	American students ( <i>n</i> = 208) evaluating universities (B2C setting)	Positive impact on reputation, attitude and stronger for Asian students	Not mentioned/ experimental, online survey, CB-SEM

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Antecedents	Mediators/moderators	Outcomes	Data	Key effects of heritage	Theory(ies)/method
Balmer and Chen (2016)	None	Corporate and product role identity/none	Attractiveness	Domestic Chinese tourists (n = 115) evaluating cities (B2C setting)	Positive impact of national, familial, multi-temporal and imperial role identity on corporate and product role identity (dimensions of corporate heritage), which in turn positively impacts attractiveness	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, face-to-face survey, PLS-SEM
Rose et al. (2016)	None	Positive emotions, trust, brand attachment, commitment/promotion focus	Purchase intention	S1–American consumers (n <sub>1</sub> = 326) evaluating cutting tools; S2–German consumers (n <sub>2a</sub> =268) and American respondents (n <sub>2b</sub> = 161) (both B2C setting)	Positive impact on purchase intention (especially for consumers with a low promotion focus), emotions, trust, brand attachment and commitment	Not mentioned/S1–Experimental, Online survey, Hierarchical regression, S2–Cross-sectional, Online Survey, CB-SEM
Ford et al. (2018)	None	Positive and negative brand nostalgia, brand oldness/none	Brand attachment and trust, self-congruence, purchase intentions	American (n <sub>1a</sub> = 415) and Belgium (n <sub>1b</sub> = 245) consumers evaluating cookies, cars, apparel, beer (B2C setting)	Positive impact on brand nostalgia and brand oldness	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey, CB-SEM
Pecot et al. (2018)	None	Brand consistency, brand clarity, brand credibility/firm familiarity	Brand quality, WTP a premium	S1–French participants (n <sub>1</sub> = 314) evaluating automobiles; S2–French participants (n <sub>2</sub> = 205) evaluating chocolates (B2C setting)	Positive impact on brand consistency, brand credibility, brand clarity, perceived brand quality and WTP. The effect of brand heritage on brand consistency is stronger for familiar firms	Signaling theory (Erdem and Swait, 1998)/S1–Quasi-experimental, Online survey, PLS-SEM, S2–Experimental, Online survey, PLS-SEM

(continued)

**Table 1.** Continued

Source	Antecedents	Mediators/moderators	Outcomes	Data	Key effects of heritage	Theory(ies)/method
<a href="#">Iglesias <i>et al.</i> (2019)</a>	None	Brand image, recognition benefits/customer perceived ethicality	Brand equity	Spanish consumers ( $n = 2,179$ ) evaluating hotel chains, utility companies, gas stations, hypermarket, internet and telephone service providers (B2C setting)	Negative impact of the interplay between customer perceived ethicality and brand heritage on brand image	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, online survey; PLS-SEM
<a href="#">Orth <i>et al.</i> (2019)</a>	Design continuity, confusion, controls, brand usage, brand attachment	None/none	Behavioral response, purchase intention, brand attitude	S1-German consumers evaluating Palmin vegetable shortening ( $n_{1a} = 170$ ; $n_{1b} = 238$ ; $n_{1c} = 242$ ); S2-German consumers ( $n_2 = 307$ ) (B2C setting)	Lower continuity designs create confusion, which in turn damages a brand's heritage identity. Positive impact of brand heritage on purchase intention	Not mentioned/S1a,b,c-Experimental, Online survey, ANOVA S2-Quasi experiment, Online survey, ANOVA
<a href="#">Pecot <i>et al.</i> (2019)</a>	None	None/none	Brand credibility, personal nostalgia	French consumers ( $n = 989$ ) evaluating FMCG brands (Neslé, Lindt, Heinz, Hunts) (B2C setting)	Positive impact on both brand credibility and personal nostalgia	Signaling theory ( <a href="#">Erdem and Swait, 2004</a> )/Cross-sectional, Online survey, CB-SEM
<a href="#">Pizzi and Scarpi (2019)</a>	Year of establishment	None/brand familiarity	Brand attitude	S1-Italian consumers ( $n_1 = 250$ ) evaluating universities, S2-Italian consumers ( $n_2 = 200$ ) evaluating beer brands (B2C setting)	Reporting the year of establishment on the brand logo invokes heritage that in turn increases attitudes	Not mentioned/experimental, face-to-face survey, ANOVA, regression
<a href="#">Foroudi <i>et al.</i> (2020)</a>	None	Place image/none	Reputation, brand competitiveness, retailer competitiveness	English tourists ( $n = 294$ ) evaluating retail stores (B2C setting)	Positive impact of place heritage on place image	Social Identity Theory ( <a href="#">Ashforth and Mael, 1989</a> )/Cross-sectional, Face-to-face survey, CB-SEM

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Source	Antecedents	Mediators/moderators	Outcomes	Data	Key effects of heritage	Theory(ies)/method
<a href="#">Huaman-Ramirez et al. (2021)</a>	None	None	Brand attachment, brand equity	French consumers and experts (n <sub>1</sub> = 11, n <sub>2</sub> = 8, n <sub>3</sub> = 189, n <sub>4</sub> = 218, n <sub>5</sub> = 610, n <sub>6</sub> = 534, n <sub>7</sub> = 250, n <sub>8</sub> =241) evaluating multiple brands (B2C setting)	Positive impact of brand oldness (decline, expertise, maintenance, reminiscence, timelessness, tradition) on brand attachment and brand equity	Automatic information processing ( <a href="#">Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977</a> ), br
<a href="#">Magnoni et al. (2021)</a>	None	Place brand equity, place brand attachment/none	Behavioral intentions (WOM, ambassador behavior, leaving intention) Firm value	French students (n = 571) evaluating Aix-en-Provence (B2C setting)	Positive impact of place brand heritage on attachment and place brand equity	Social Identity Theory ( <a href="#">Tajfel, 1974</a> )/Cross-sectional, Online survey, CB-SEM
<a href="#">Paek et al. (2021)</a>	Longevity, continuity, authenticity	None/firm age	Firm value	American participants (n = 434) evaluating brands (B2C setting)	Positive impact of longevity on heritage-based value, particularly for brands with higher continuity	Resource-based theory ( <a href="#">Barney, 1991</a> )/Cross-sectional, Online survey, Regression
<a href="#">Rose et al. (2021)</a>	None	None/none	Attitude	Sports fans (n = 104) evaluating hall of fame coaches and athletes, symbols and rituals (B2C setting) No focus on B2B settings	Positive impact of sport team heritage on attitudes toward the team, the sponsorship and the sponsoring brand Our research provides insight into: - The mediating role of identification as a mechanism through which heritage impacts loyalty - The moderating role of time perspective - The moderating role of supplier size	Not mentioned/cross-sectional, face-to-face survey, CB-SEM
Need, purpose or basis for our research	Effects of supplier heritage in a B2B context remain to be been assessed	No understanding of the role of identification/No understanding of moderating effects of time perspective and supplier size	-			Social Identity Theory ( <a href="#">Tajfel, 1974</a> ); Signaling Theory ( <a href="#">Spence, 1974</a> )/Cross-sectional, Experimental design, PLS-SEM, ANOVA, OLS regressions

Source: Authors' own work

orientation as a boundary variable to examine the positive impact of suppliers' brand heritage on buyer loyalty. Brand heritage is thought to enhance loyalty among consumers who have favorable views toward the past (Pecot *et al.*, 2018), since those who value tradition and history are more likely to be receptive to it. The mere heritage of a B2B brand is likely to have significant impacts on suppliers who have varying temporal orientations and are rooted in the past. Second, although customers often have unfavorable preconceptions about larger companies compared to smaller ones (Freund *et al.*, 2024) and relationships with suppliers are stronger for smaller firms (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019), we predict and show that brand heritage is advantageous for these larger companies by fostering a greater sense of identity between buyers and suppliers.

This research contributes to the literature in four distinct ways. First, in line of the burgeoning B2B literature on branding (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011; Zablah *et al.*, 2010), we contribute to this research stream by evaluating the significance of brand heritage, specifically in terms of product quality perceptions and buyer-supplier identification, and indirectly in terms of their loyalty toward suppliers. Second, we contribute to the literature on B2B brand heritage (Guercini and Milanesi, 2019; Koch and Gyrð-Jones, 2019; Odlin and Benson-Rea, 2021; Simoes *et al.*, 2015) by investigating the social dimension of heritage effects on customer behavior. Third, we contribute to the organization studies research regarding the utilization of the past or history to establish a competitive advantage that positively impacts stakeholders (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Wadhvani *et al.*, 2018; Weatherbee and Sears, 2022). Fourth, we enhance the comprehension of the boundary conditions pertaining to the implications of supplier brand heritage. Specifically, we show that the positive effect of heritage on loyalty varies across buyers based on their time perspective, with those oriented toward the past more likely to exhibit greater loyalty toward suppliers with a robust brand heritage. In addition, we examine the extent to which this size influences the relationship between brand heritage and buyer-supplier identification, with a stronger effect seen for larger suppliers.

This article first conceptualizes how brand heritage represents a valuable resource for B2B companies by leveraging trust, a critical component in B2B relationships. Specifically, we predict that brand heritage helps in the development of such trust through the mediating effects of quality perceptions and buyer-seller identification. We then move to our argumentation for the effects of buyers' past-time orientation and supplier size as boundary conditions for the effects of brand heritage. Then, we present three quantitative studies (a cross-sectional study and two experiments) that test these predictions. We then explain how this research deepens our understanding of the reasons and conditions for such an effect of brand heritage to be observed in supplier-buyer relationships.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 B2B branding and supplier brand heritage: a resource-based view

Although branding has emerged from the consumer goods domain, it has been gaining more traction in the B2B discipline (Zablah *et al.*, 2010). Prior research shows that brands influence B2B decision-making, with, for instance, brand preference and sensitivity affecting brand importance in the buying process (Zablah *et al.*, 2010), brand reputation affecting its strength (Persson, 2010), B2B brand image shaping brand loyalty (Kittur and Chatterjee, 2021) and B2B brand personality influencing buyer satisfaction (e.g. Roper and Davies, 2010). Therefore, although the buyers' decision-making process is still imbued with rationality, the branding provided by their suppliers' brands – precisely, heritage – is expected to play a role in buyers' perceptions and subsequent outcomes.

In the B2B environment, brand heritage refers to the historical background of a firm from the time it was founded (Simoes *et al.*, 2015). Its fundamental justification is that the historical development of the organization can reveal a relevant corporate association (Persson, 2010). According to Simoes *et al.* (2015), the incorporation of the firm's history and beginnings, as well as the backdrop with stories about their founders and origins has the potential to boost financial performance metrics such as market capitalization, net revenue or total assets. Heritage refers to the possession of a lengthy history, spanning a significant number of years. According to Koch and Gyrd-Jones (2019), a supplier that has a lengthy brand history and track record may provide buyers with the opportunity to explore the work that the firm has done, both in retrospect and in real time respectively.

Such history, according to the resource-based approach, could thus represent a competitive advantage for firms. This approach argues that a competitive advantage emerges and can be sustained when a firm possesses unique and valuable resources that are challenging for competitors to imitate or substitute (Barney, 1991). For example, intangible unique resources such as intellectual property rights can represent such a resource that positively impacts business performance (Nath *et al.*, 2010). One may thus argue that brand heritage could represent such a resource. Research consistently acknowledges the substantial significance of heritage, specifically history, as a rich reservoir of competitive advantage for a firm. According to Stinchcombe (2013), the first conditions under which a company is formed may develop essential principles or cultural traits that form the foundation of a robust organizational culture. Furthermore, unique historical experiences might expose companies to certain events or situations that impact, limit or otherwise determine their potential for future opportunities (Arthur, 1989). Firms can get exclusive access to both explicit and implicit resources due to their unique historical trajectory (Barney, 1991), these resources being either tangible inputs, or intangible and symbolic when they are integrated into exceptional leaders, innovative staff and distinctive company cultures. Therefore, heritage can serve as a competitive advantage whereby the "power of the past" offers long-established firms a distinct and unique asset (Erdogan *et al.*, 2020), which has the potential to trigger the growth of firm revenues (Simoes *et al.*, 2015).

In what follows, we address the significance of trust in B2B relationships and explore how heritage might represent a competitive advantage by contributing to establishing trust.

## 2.2 The need for trust in B2B relationships

Customer loyalty is the central thrust of marketing efforts for B2B companies (Watson *et al.*, 2015), helping companies gain important market advantages, such as increased revenues, lower costs and increased profitability (Lam *et al.*, 2004). However, for B2B suppliers, such loyalty may not always be an asset. Indeed, in several industries, the customers who exhibit the highest level of loyalty may not necessarily generate the highest profits. This is because, among other reasons, they anticipate receiving discounted pricing as a result of their longstanding patronage (Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2017). Therefore, for loyalty to remain an asset – rather than a risk – in B2B relationships, trust between B2B agents appears to be a critical component.

The B2B marketing literature has yielded a massive body of work acknowledging the major role of trust in relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trusting interactions with suppliers are a prerequisite for buyer loyalty in industrial markets because buyers invest in the relationship if they believe that their suppliers will perform as expected (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019). Among the main factors of trust in B2B settings is quality, an important determinant in industrial markets for shaping buyer evaluations of brands (Michell *et al.*, 2001). Due to the increased complexity and the resulting greater



degree of uncertainty in B2B markets (Wang *et al.*, 2017), buyers need to evaluate in advance the quality of the product or service they consider purchasing, and suppliers may thus gain in signaling to their buyers the quality of their products and the subsequent trust they can have in their company.

This effect of quality on trust can be explained by signaling theory, which describes the interactional relations between agents (Spence, 1974). In a B2B context, information asymmetry between suppliers and buyers often occurs: suppliers have more information than buyers, placing the latter in a position of uncertainty and potentially making them reluctant to complete a purchase (Heide, 2003). Such an asymmetrical information gap can be reduced when suppliers provide additional information, which may prompt buyers to make inferences about the suppliers and the validity of their statements (Kirmani and Rao, 2000). Quality thus plays the role of a signal – some additional information that buyers can use to make inferences about the product and its supplier and eventually make a buying decision. Although interesting, this explanation based on signaling theory fails to account for the potential impact of affective or social effects on the B2B buying decision process. Traditionally considered rational agents (Webster and Wind, 1972), B2B buyers also have been described as exhibiting behavior that could be influenced by individual factors (Samli *et al.*, 1988) and emotions (Steward *et al.*, 2019). Hence, buyers can make buying decisions that are not solely based on rationality. In this regard, one factor of potential importance for building trust between suppliers and buyers may be identification. Theoretically supporting this notion is that of Kramer *et al.* (1996) identification-based trust, which emerges when professional buyers are more likely to count on an agent with whom they perceive a feeling of belongingness, or when they identify with the seller's company (He *et al.*, 2018; Huemer, 2014).

### 2.3 *Heritage inspires trust*

An advantage arising from heritage may be trust, which is critical for successful buyer-supplier relations (Kalafatis *et al.*, 2012; Seyedghorban *et al.*, 2021). To emphasize their heritage, firms use effective storytelling and traditions derived from past events to influence external stakeholders (Foster *et al.*, 2011). For instance, companies frequently disclose their establishment date as a means of truthfulness. The fact that they were founded a long time ago and are still in operation today suggests a significant level of stability, continuity and resilience (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010) which may help to establish trustworthiness. We believe that since B2B interactions often involve relationship building and networking (Jap and Ganesan, 2000; Mullins *et al.*, 2014), a company with strong heritage may shape stakeholders' perceptions that the company will continue to fulfill its promises. Buyers may prefer to associate with companies that have a positive legacy, as it reflects positively on their reliability. Consequently, the following hypothesis is posited:

#### *H1. Supplier brand heritage has a positive influence on trust.*

Moreover, building upon the previous discussion and adhering to the principle that trust is a crucial component of a successful exchange of relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), it may be suggested that supplier heritage has a favorable impact on buyer loyalty by means of trust. Previous research also showed that a strong sense of trust activates specific mechanisms that enhance the social aspect for individuals involved in exchanges between partnering firms, which is a prerequisite for the development of loyal customers (Paparoidamis *et al.*, 2019). Considering that brand heritage can generate an emotional bond between the company and the stakeholders in B2B relationships (Simoes *et al.*, 2015), we predict an analogous influence on brand heritage in the context of B2B. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

- H2. (a) Buyer trust has a positive influence on loyalty and (b) mediates the relationship between supplier brand heritage and buyer loyalty.

#### *2.4 Quality perception and buyer-supplier identification as mediating mechanisms of heritage effects*

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We propose that the heritage of suppliers may be a factor that influences quality perceptions of the offer. In fact, the majority of buyers are not directly exposed to a company's corporate identity (visual expression and identity) and frequently have little understanding of the brand's heritage (Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2023), only recognizing externally transmitted elements, which dampen building long-term strategic partnerships. Therefore, highlighting a supplier's historical background may help balance the uneven distribution of information, and the reputation of the supplier's heritage can be a valuable indicator for sellers. Corroborating this perspective, it has been discovered that the legacy of a brand can serve as an indicator of quality due to its association with competence and legitimacy (Guercini and Milanese, 2019; Hudson and Balmer, 2013). Therefore, we contend that the notion of a supplier's brand heritage creates an impression of high quality, which in turn enhances buyers' trust. We thus offer the next hypothesis:

- H3. (a) Supplier brand heritage exerts a positive impact on perceived quality, (b) the latter having a positive influence on trust. Supplier quality thus plays a mediating role in the relationship between heritage and trust.

Companies use their historical background or past as a symbolic asset that enables them to establish a connection with the social and cultural values of external stakeholders (Foster *et al.*, 2017). Through the act of talking about their heritage, firms establish an organizational identity (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010) that conveys their enduring presence over a period of time (Weatherbee and Sears, 2022). Brands play a vital role in shaping the image of suppliers by carrying symbolic meanings and possessing common features or characteristics that may encourage buyers to identify with the brand (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). Buyers thus experience identification with their suppliers when the former perceive common attributes with the latter (Mohan *et al.*, 2021). In fact, companies choose suppliers whose personality squares with their own because it enhances reciprocal understanding and the quality of relations (Campbell *et al.*, 2010). Thus, buyer-supplier identification reflects a buyer's sense of belongingness and connection with the supplier (Lam *et al.*, 2010).

According to Mead's theory of the past (Maines *et al.*, 1983), the aforementioned self-identity construction process needed for social identification is essentially based on time. Using people and events in the past as points of comparison, individuals seek to define their identity through their commitment to the past (Hudson and Balmer, 2013). Based on this line of thinking, we argue that suppliers with a history or a past can assist buyers in cultivating a sense of identity. For instance, by exposing buyers to a company's heritage through its museum, the heritage may become a collective identity marker that buyers can use as a self-concept resource (Pulh *et al.*, 2019). This phenomenon is also observed in the context of organizational behavior, where an organization's internal stakeholders incorporate the company's history into their personal life and identity (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010). Historical narratives may establish symbolic connections and foster organizational identification among external stakeholders (Ravasi *et al.*, 2019). Given the preceding, a strong brand heritage may help suppliers to construct buyers' identity and develop a strong feeling of identification. Put differently, suppliers' brand heritage may exert a positive and direct influence on buyer-supplier identification.

Because heritage can produce a sense of belongingness (Wadhvani *et al.*, 2018), one that enables B2B organizations to develop long-lasting ties with their stakeholders (He *et al.*, 2018), we predict that buyers are more likely to trust suppliers with whom they identify. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

- H4. (a) Supplier brand heritage exerts a positive effect on buyer-supplier identification, (b) the latter having a positive influence on trust. Buyer-supplier identification thus plays a mediating role in the relationship between heritage and trust.

#### 2.5 The boundary conditions for the effects of supplier brand heritage: past-time orientation and supplier size

According to the time perspective theory (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999), individuals unconsciously divide the flow of personal and social experiences into three temporal categories – the past, present and future – that organize, make coherent and give meaning to events. The theory postulates that temporally based cognitive processes filter the view of ourselves, our relationships and our world. In overemphasizing one of these temporal frames, individuals' decision-making may be influenced by how time is perceived (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999), be it past-, present-, or future-oriented.

Consistent with this idea of time orientation – or “the totality of the individual's views of his psychological future and psychological past existing at a given point of time” (Lewin, 1951, p. 75) – as an individual process, prior research provides evidence that individuals have different conceptions of distinct temporal frames. More specifically, future-oriented people connect their present decisions to long-term aspirations, with potential gains and losses of their future goals driving their decision-making (Harber *et al.*, 2003). They can be viewed as achievement-oriented, lowly impulsive and lowly risk averse (Lennings and Burns, 1998). Present-oriented people, however, live in the present, undistracted by past worries or future anxieties (Keough *et al.*, 1999). They are geared toward short-term goals (Murrell and Mingrone, 1994), considered impulsive, and are inclined to take risks (Lennings and Burns, 1998). Past-oriented individuals are interested in traditions and history (Pecot *et al.*, 2018), seek to maintain relationships over time with partners, avoid change and are cautious and conservative (Keough *et al.*, 1999; Usunier and Valette-Florence, 2007; Zimbardo and Boniwell, 2004).

Among these three types of orientation, we believe that past-time orientation should shape the influence of supplier heritage on buyer loyalty. This prediction is made for two reasons. First, by putting a strong emphasis on the notion that individuals who are oriented toward the past tend to focus extensively on previous events when making a decision (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999) and exhibit a strong interest in history and customs (Pecot *et al.*, 2018), the theory suggests that such individuals value relevant aspects of heritage. Second, prior research shows that such individuals oriented toward the past develop consistent behavioral patterns that are close to loyalty, like – as aforementioned – maintaining relationships over time with partners, avoiding change and being conservative (Keough *et al.*, 1999; Usunier and Valette-Florence, 2007). By showing such consistency in their behaviors, these individuals who value the past and thus heritage may also exhibit stronger loyalty to agents that exhibit a sense of tradition, like B2B suppliers with a strong brand heritage.

Given what precedes, we propose that the impact of supplier heritage on buyer loyalty is more pronounced for buyers with a focus on the past, as they may be more inclined to value the historical origins of their suppliers and be open to their customs and heritage. In addition, in a context where B2B marketing is characterized by long-term goals of building customer relations and developing buyer loyalty (Hutt and Speh, 2004), we expect that such past-time

orientation strengthens the loyalty of buyers toward suppliers with a strong brand heritage. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H5.* Past-time orientation moderates the influence of supplier heritage on buyer loyalty such that, when supplier heritage is strong, loyalty is stronger among past-oriented individuals.

Research has shown that the size of a firm may greatly affect consumers' impression of its goods and thus influence their decision-making process. Consumers exhibit a preference for small firms when it comes to low-tech items, whereas they tend to favor large firms for high-tech ones (Woolley *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, people have a preference for food goods offered by small firms over large ones due to the perception that these products are healthier (Uzdavinyte *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the size of a firm may be used as a criterion to assess its ethicality. Large firms are often connected with profit-maximizing motivations, which might be regarded as immoral (Freund *et al.*, 2024).

While large firms are often seen in a negative light (Freund *et al.*, 2024; Uzdavinyte *et al.*, 2023), we argue that in B2B contexts, their heritage may be leveraged and, more significantly, influence brand perception. Indeed, large firms are often linked to a sense of legacy since their size signifies a history of accomplishment and prosperity. Thus, the impact of brand heritage is likely to be more pronounced for large firms due to the more advanced development of their identity markers. Indeed, larger firms are correlated with a greater presence in the market. Hence, brand heritage may be more important for larger firms and may contribute more to buyer-supplier identification than for smaller suppliers. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

- H6.* Firm size moderates the influence of supplier heritage on buyer-supplier identification, such that the influence of supplier heritage on buyer-supplier identification is stronger for larger (versus smaller) suppliers.

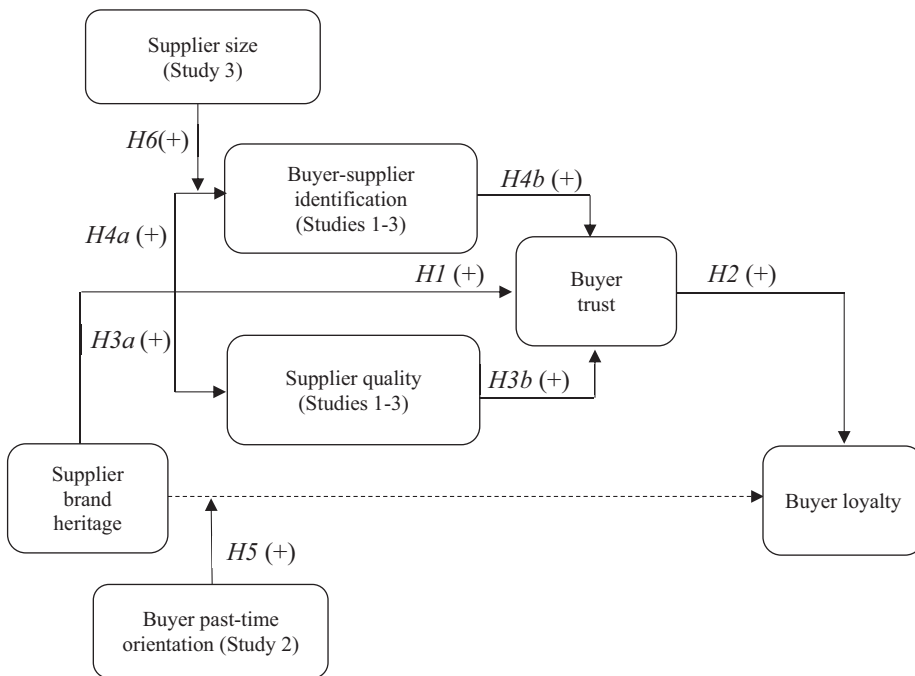
Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of this research.

This conceptual model is examined through three empirical studies. The first (cross-sectional) study examines the mediating roles of buyer-a supplier identification and quality perceptions in the relationship between supplier brand heritage and buyer trust (*H1–H4*). To provide evidence for causation across our hypotheses, the second study adopts an experimental design to replicate the previous findings. Study 2 also explores temporal orientation as a boundary condition for the effects of supplier brand heritage on buyer loyalty (*H5*). Study 3 tests the moderating role of supplier size in the effect of supplier heritage on buyer-supplier identification (*H6*).

### 3. Study 1: Mediating role of perceived quality and buyer-supplier identification in the relationship between heritage and brand trust

#### 3.1 Sample and company

Two hundred and eleven French professional buyers (95.7% male) at a European company in France participated in an online study. The respondents were recruited by email, and data collection was carried out by the company's marketing department. A 10€ voucher was offered to respondents to boost their motivation. Their individual characteristics are presented in Appendix 1. This company is a subsidiary of a global leader in professional fastening and assembly materials for crafts and industry. The company was established in 1945 in Germany and has since expanded its operations internationally. In France, its subsidiary is a market leader and specialist in fastening



**Notes:** Plain lines refer to stated hypotheses; dash lines represent non-stated hypotheses (i.e. the direct effect of supplier heritage on buyer loyalty)

**Source:** Authors' own work

**Figure 1.** The conceptual model of the effects of supplier brand heritage on buyer loyalty

solutions, serving various sectors such as construction, woodworking, installation, maintenance, metalworking, heavy vehicles and automotive. The company exclusively caters to B2B professionals across all industries, offering a catalog of over 30,000 high-quality products. Moreover, it has a relatively long heritage, justifying its place in this research context.

### 3.2 Study design and measurements

The questions were aimed so that participants would evaluate the company, the focal supplier. Supplier heritage was measured with the [Fritz et al. \(2017\)](#) scale. The [Sweeney and Soutar \(2001\)](#) and [Stokburger-Sauer et al. \(2012\)](#) scales were adapted to measure perceived quality and buyer-supplier identification, respectively. [Lau and Lee's \(1999\)](#) scale was adapted to measure trust, and loyalty was measured using [Chaudhuri and Holbrook's \(2001\)](#) scale. Finally, because knowledge of a supplier's products is a key driver between buyers and suppliers in B2B contexts ([Gong, 2018](#)), potentially affecting trust and loyalty, it was measured and included as a covariate using [Gong's \(2018\)](#) scale. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Of note, because direct relationships were established between the latent variables and the items, the

measurement scales used in this study are all considered reflective, and they are seen as “error-prone” representations of the constructs they are measuring (Bollen, 1989).

Harman’s one-factor criterion was first used to test for potential common method variance (CMV) bias. The variance of the unrotated solution was less than 50%, confirming that the data were not affected by such bias. In addition, and specific to Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), we relied on two other criteria. The first criterion involves doing a comprehensive evaluation of collinearity by performing a regression analysis of all variables against a shared variable and using variance inflation factors (VIFs) (Kock, 2015). If the VIF values are less than or equal to 3.3, no bias is considered present in the single-source data. All VIF values for all constructs varied between 1.000 and 1.851, suggesting no issues of CMV. The alternative method for evaluating CMV relies on the correlation matrix, with correlation values across constructs being expected to be below 0.9. to establish a lack of CMV. As our correlations between constructs were below 0.9, providing more evidence that CMV was not a concern.

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM; SmartPLS 3) was employed to estimate the measurement and the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2019) for two reasons: first, it focuses on a prediction-oriented approach (Shmueli *et al.*, 2016), enabling researchers to build and test a predictive, theoretical framework, and eventually giving rise to meaningful managerial implications. Second, PLS-SEM is suitable for analyzing small sample sizes (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

All the items loaded on their corresponding constructs and the CR and AVE of all the constructs exceeded the acceptable thresholds (Table 2), indicating reliability and convergent validity, respectively. In addition, the SRMR value (0.068) reveals a satisfying fit. Discriminant validity is established, with all the HTMT criteria being below 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015), except for the trust and loyalty relationship where a less conservative but

**Table 2.** Measurement properties (study 1, *n* = 211)

Constructs	Items	Means ( <i>SD</i> )	Standardized loading	Reliability and convergent validity
Supplier brand heritage	SH1	3.67 (0.786)	0.951	CR = 0.939
	SH2	3.74 (0.755)	0.872	AVE = 0.838
	SH3	3.61 (0.832)	0.922	
Supplier quality ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = 26.7%)	SQ1	3.95 (0.798)	0.919	CR = 0.930
	SQ2	3.99 (0.788)	0.908	AVE = 0.816
	SQ3	3.77 (0.912)	0.882	
Buyer-supplier identification ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = 32.4%)	BSI1	2.80 (1.049)	0.964	CR = 0.974
	BSI2	2.74 (1.031)	0.972	AVE = 0.925
	BSI3	2.53 (1.068)	0.949	
Buyer trust ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = 63.7%)	BT1	3.80 (0.908)	0.908	CR = 0.944
	BT3	3.63 (0.904)	0.940	AVE = 0.849
	BT4	3.70 (0.815)	0.917	
Buyer loyalty ( <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = 69.6%)	BL1	2.42 (1.074)	0.721	CR = 0.939
	BL2	3.86 (0.879)	0.926	AVE = 0.838
	BL3	3.84 (0.862)	0.911	
Familiarity with the supplier	FS1	3.85 (0.718)	0.851	CR = 0.860
	FS2	3.84 (0.723)	0.758	AVE = 0.672
	FS3	3.68 (0.784)	0.846	

**Notes:** SH = supplier brand Heritage; SQ = supplier quality; BS = buyer-supplier identification; BT = buyer trust; BL = buyer loyalty; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

**Source:** Authors’ own work

nevertheless accepted criterion was used (i.e. 0.90) (Table 3). In addition, all the latent variables shared more variance with their own indicators than with the other latent variables ( $\rho_{vc} > r^2$ ), thereby establishing discriminant validity according to Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion (Table 4). The measurement model thus possesses evidence of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. However, the high correlation between buyer trust and loyalty should be taken with caution.

### 3.3 Results

The hypotheses were tested using 10,000 bootstrap samples. The results revealed a positive effect of supplier heritage on buyer trust ( $\gamma = 0.230$ ,  $t = 2.377$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), providing initial support for *H1*. The findings also show that supplier heritage has a positive and significant effect on perceived quality ( $\gamma = 0.520$ ,  $t = 9.881$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), further supporting *H3a*. Perceived quality in turn positively affects trust ( $\gamma = 0.557$ ,  $t = 9.438$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), offering yet more support for *H3b*. A mediating analysis showed that suppliers' perceived quality mediates the relationship between heritage and trust ( $\gamma = 0.291$ ,  $t = 5.985$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CI [0.196; 0.385]).

Further, and as expected, the results show that supplier heritage has a positive and significant effect on buyer-supplier identification ( $\gamma = 0.570$ ,  $t = 12.609$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in support of *H4a*. In line with *H4b*, this identification in turn has a positive and significant effect on trust ( $\gamma = 0.203$ ,  $t = 3.732$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The findings also show that buyer-supplier identification plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between heritage and trust. The product of the coefficients indicates a significant mediating role of buyer-supplier identification ( $\gamma = 0.116$ ,  $t = 3.328$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , CI [0.054; 0.191]). Finally, the results yield a positive and significant effect of trust on loyalty ( $\gamma = 0.587$ ,  $t = 10.144$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in support of *H2*. Regarding the effect of familiarity as a covariate, it appears that familiarity with the supplier positively affects trust ( $\gamma = 0.230$ ,  $t = 2.377$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and loyalty ( $\gamma = 0.182$ ,  $t = 3.112$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , Table 5).

### 3.4 Discussion

Study 1 highlights that in addition to perceived quality (*H3*), buyer-supplier identification also explains the effect of supplier heritage on trust (*H4*). Interestingly, we observed a mediating role of both buyer-supplier identification and the quality of the heritage-trust relationship, despite familiarity with the supplier being included as a control variable, indicating the robustness of our results. Nevertheless, as this study was correlational and thus could not show evidence of causation (Viglia *et al.*, 2021), Study 2 was conducted to replicate the findings. Importantly, supplier brand heritage was manipulated in Study 2 to provide causal evidence for its positive effects.

**Table 3.** Study 1: Discriminant validity results (HTMT < 0.90)

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Supplier brand heritage						
2. Supplier quality	0.564					
3. Buyer-supplier identification	0.610	0.473				
4. Buyer trust	0.728	0.815	0.805			
5. Buyer loyalty	0.675	0.801	0.598	0.887		
6. Familiarity/supplier	0.611	0.440	0.573	0.723	0.607	

**Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 4.** Studies 1/2/3: Discriminant validity results from correlation tests (Fornell and Larcker's criterion)

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Supplier brand heritage	0.915/0.959/ 0.943							
2. Supplier quality	0.517/0.725/ 0.605	0.903/0.974/ 0.971						
3. BSI	0.570/0.517/ 0.394	0.438/0.548/ 0.505	0.962/0.934/ 0.939					
4. Buyer trust	0.623/0.701/ 0.647	0.733/0.883/ 0.819	0.555/0.595/ 0.546	0.922/0.963/ 0.932				
5. Buyer loyalty	0.646/0.569/ 0.526	0.716/0.702/ 0.726	0.629/0.591/ 0.569	0.809/0.705/ 0.942	0.856/0.944/ 0.942			
6. Familiarity with supplier	0.524/0.027/ 0.024	0.387/0.054/ 0.026	0.504/0.146/ 0.302	0.532/0.063/ 0.025	0.602/-0.022/ 0.074	0.820/0.948/ 0.949		
7. Past-time orientation	-0.237/-	-0.199/-	-0.373/-	-0.233/-	-0.160/-	-0.136/-	-0.796/-	
8. Firm size	-/-/0.015	-/-/-0.039	-/-/-0.008	-/-/-0.065	-/-/-0.138	-/-/0.027	-/-/-	-/-/1.000

**Notes:** BSI = buyer-supplier identification; (a) The square roots of the extracted variances (Rho<sub>vc</sub>) are on the diagonal and the correlations between the constructs are below the diagonal; (b) The matrix values of the studies are separated by “/”; (c) Italicized values indicate correlations that are not statistically significant

**Source:** Authors' own work





Furthermore, because brand heritage focuses on the company's history, the idea that its effects could depend on the extent to which buyers value the past warranted investigation. Study 2 therefore investigates whether individuals who are more sensitive to the past – and thus display high past temporal orientation – react more positively to supplier brand heritage.

#### 4. Study 2: Experimental design and the moderating role of past-time orientation

##### 4.1 Sample, procedure and measures

Study 2 employed a between-subjects experimental design that manipulates supplier heritage. The study participants were recruited online through Prolific and were compensated for their participation with a small sum of money (0.90\$). They were prescreened so that only individuals with current or past professional experience in negotiation were included. After removing six participants for failing the attention check (i.e. "If you read this question correctly, answer 'Strongly Disagree'"), the data set was composed of observations from 235 US individuals (54% female, 53.8% over 35 years of age).

##### 4.2 Study design and measurement

Participants were randomly exposed to a professionally designed mock front page of a fictitious floor market company, Valor (see stimuli in [Appendix 2](#)). To accurately manipulate supplier brand heritage, we followed the procedure adopted by prior research. Thus, in the supplier brand heritage (versus control) condition, the brand was depicted as very old ([Rose et al., 2016](#)), founded in 1805 (versus 2005). Further, the words used to describe the company in the supplier brand heritage condition were carefully selected to evoke a sense of tradition (*ancient* versus *recent*, *history* versus *story*, *five generations* versus *a group of entrepreneurs* [...]). The company headquarters were pictured as a red brick building in the supplier heritage condition as opposed to a more contemporary building in the control condition. Finally, following [Pecot et al. \(2018\)](#), the font for the company logo in the heritage condition was selected to evoke a sense of tradition. The text on the web page across the two conditions was virtually the same length and used the same syntactic and narrative structure.

Before exposure to the web page, respondents were told to complete a three-item scale measuring past time orientation ([Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999](#)). Items were "*Thinking about my past gives me pleasure*," "*I like traditions and customs that are repeated regularly*" and "*I like stories about how things were in the good old days*" ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ). After viewing the web page, respondents were asked to complete the measures of loyalty ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), trust ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), quality ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) and buyer-supplier identification ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ), as in Study 1. As a manipulation check, participants indicated their perceived supplier brand heritage ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ) for Originalidad/valor company. Finally, participants rated their familiarity with the brand ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Measurement scales identical to Study 1 were used ([Table 2](#)). Here again, overall, the [Fornell and Larcker's \(1981\)](#) test suggested no discriminant validity issues among the constructs ([Table 4](#)), except for the relationship between buyer trust and supplier quality where the square root of the extracted variance is superior to the correlation, there is a high correlation between them.

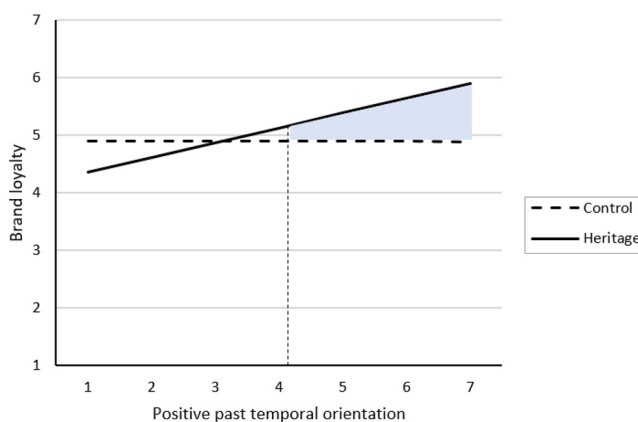
##### 4.3 Results

As expected and revealed by a *t*-test for independent samples, the supplier brand heritage condition prompted a significantly stronger perception of supplier brand heritage ( $M = 5.98$ ) than the control condition ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $t = 8.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), providing support for our manipulation. Further, reported unfamiliarity with the brand ( $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) was significantly less than the mid-point 4 on the 1–7 scale ( $t = -43.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that respondents were unfamiliar with the brand, as expected.

Regarding the hypotheses testing, our first analyses examined whether our previous results could be replicated. Instead of using PLS-SEM as in our prior studies, the data were analyzed using the PROCESS macro, designed to analyze experimental data (Hayes, 2017). Hence, two serial mediations (Model 6) were performed as in Study 1 using 5,000 bootstrap samples. The first mediation involved the supplier brand heritage conditions as the independent variable, buyer loyalty as the dependent variable and quality and trust as the serial mediating variables, in that order. A similar pattern was observed in Study 1. Specifically, the results again revealed a significant and positive serial mediation effect (Index = 0.216, SE = 0.078, 95% CI = 0.079; 0.392). Supporting *H1–H3*, supplier brand heritage increases perceived supplier quality ( $B = 0.54, p < 0.001$ ), which then increases trust ( $B = 0.91, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, trust is positively related to brand loyalty ( $B = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ), leading to a positive, indirect and serially mediated effect of supplier brand heritage on loyalty.

The second serial mediation aimed to test *H4* and the mediating role of buyer-supplier identification. The analysis was thus similar but involved buyer-supplier identification (rather than perceived supplier quality) as the first mediating variable. Here again, the results revealed a significant and positive serial mediation effect (Index = 0.093, SE = 0.045, 95% CI = 0.010; 0.185), supporting *H4*. Specifically, supplier brand heritage increases buyer-supplier identification ( $B = 0.28, p < 0.05$ ), which in turn increases trust ( $B = 0.59, p < 0.001$ ). Trust subsequently boosts loyalty ( $B = 0.55, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that supplier brand heritage exerts a positive indirect and serially mediated effect on loyalty.

The last analysis tested *H5* and the hypothesis that past-time orientation moderates the effect of supplier heritage on buyer loyalty. This was tested using the supplier brand heritage condition as the independent variable, loyalty as the dependent variable and past-time orientation in a moderation analysis (PROCESS Model 1; 5,000 bootstraps). To this end, the variables were mean-centered. The results revealed significant main effects of supplier heritage and past-time orientation on loyalty ( $B = 0.37, p < 0.01, \beta = 0.13, p < 0.05$ , respectively) and, as predicted, significant interaction ( $B = 0.26, p = 0.015$ ). We plotted the interaction using the Johnson-Neyman point technique (Figure 2), which identifies regions in the range of the moderator variable (past-time orientation) in which the effect of the independent variable (supplier brand heritage) on the dependent variable (loyalty) is and is



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. Buyer loyalty as a function of supplier heritage and past-time orientation (study 2)

not significant (Hayes and Matthes, 2009). The Johnson-Neyman point for the past-time orientation moderator shows that supplier heritage (versus control) leads to significantly greater levels of loyalty when past-time orientation values are above 4.13. Supporting *H5*, this indicates that when buyers are strongly oriented toward the past (above 4.13 on a 1–7 scale), they exhibit greater loyalty when they perceive their supplier brand has a strong heritage.

#### 4.4 Discussion

Study 2 sheds light on the moderating role of temporal orientation. Specifically, it shows that past-oriented buyers react more positively to supplier brand heritage, displaying greater loyalty than those who are less past-oriented. Importantly, Study 2 also replicates the previous findings by revealing the serial mediating roles of supplier quality and buyer-supplier identification in the supplier brand heritage–loyalty relationship. By doing so, Study 2 emphasizes the major role of perceived supplier quality and – most importantly – that of buyer-supplier identification as underlying mechanisms that explain why buyer loyalty increases in response to supplier heritage. However, one may argue that the company Valor used in the study appeared to be rather large, such size potentially explaining why a positive effect of supplier brand heritage on buyer-supplier identification was observed. Therefore, in Study 3, we test the moderating role of supplier size.

### 5. Study 3: buyer-supplier identification and the moderating role of supplier size

#### 5.1 Procedure

To examine the role that supplier size plays in the effects of brand heritage, Study 3 employed a 2 (Brand heritage vs Control)  $\times$  2 (Supplier size: Smaller vs Larger) scenario-based between-subjects design. Participants ( $n = 490$ ) were recruited online through Prolific under the same conditions as in Study 2. To ensure data quality, observations were removed from participants who failed the same attention check as in Study 2 ( $n = 9$ ), and 16 participants were identified as “slow-pokes” (i.e. spending too much time on the study, or more than two standard deviations [224 s] from the mean completion time [282 s]; Arndt et al., 2022), leading to their removal from the data set. The final sample was thus composed of 465 US individuals (51% male, 40.2% over 35 years of age).

Participants were asked to read a scenario asking them to imagine themselves as buyers and having to purchase cork-based products (e.g. wine cork stoppers, cork rolls, cork wood, [...]). They were then randomly exposed to a professionally designed mock front page of a fictitious company, Nestinobel, operating in the cork market (see stimuli in Appendix 3). To avoid any confound, supplier brand heritage was manipulated such that in the supplier heritage (versus low), the supplier company was depicted as being founded in 1803 (vs 2003). Further, the words used to describe the company (e.g. *old* versus *recent*) as well as the font of the logo and the cork in the supplier brand heritage condition were carefully selected to evoke a sense of tradition. Supplier size was manipulated in the scenario such that the number of employees differed across the two conditions, with the smaller supplier being depicted as having 60 employees (vs 1,060 in the larger supplier condition). All other components of the scenario were equal across conditions.

After exposure to the web page, respondents completed the same set of measures as in Studies 1 to 2 ( $\alpha_{\text{Loyalty}} = 0.87$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Trust}} = 0.92$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Quality}} = 0.94$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Identification}} = 0.93$ ; and  $\alpha_{\text{Familiarity}} = 0.94$ ), except that of past-time orientation. The order of appearance of the items was randomized to avoid common method bias. As a manipulation check, participants here again rated their perceived supplier brand heritage ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) for Nestinobel company, and its size (from 1: “Very small company” to 7: “Very large company”). Here again, all the square roots

of the extracted variances are superior to the correlations among constructs, suggesting no issue of discriminant validity (Table 4), although – quite expectedly – some high correlation between buyer trust and supplier quality was observed.

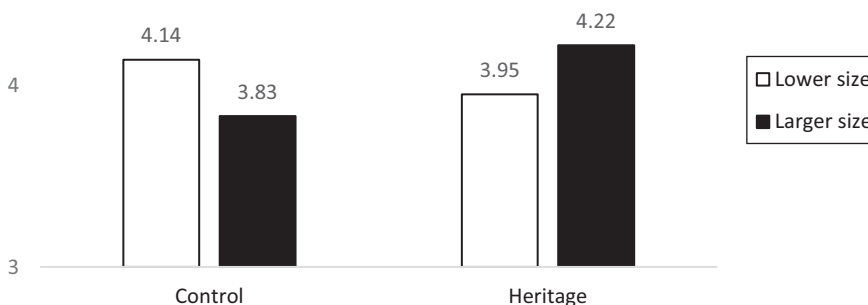
Manipulation checks from an independent samples *t*-test brought support to our manipulation of supplier brand heritage ( $M_{\text{Heritage}} = 6.03$ ,  $M_{\text{Control}} = 4.62$ ,  $t = 13.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, respondents in the larger supplier condition viewed the size of the firm as significantly larger ( $M = 4.74$ ) than those in the smaller supplier condition ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $t = -16.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, respondents were not highly familiar with the supplier brand as the mean ( $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) was significantly less than the mid-point 4 on the 1–7 scale ( $t = -48.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 5.2 Results

To see if results from Studies 1 to 2 replicate, two similar serial mediations (Process, Model 6, 5,000 bootstraps) as in Study 2 were performed. A similar pattern was observed with a significant and positive serial mediation effect through quality and trust (Index = 0.159, SE = 0.046, 95% CI = 0.071; 0.254). Bringing further support to *H1–H3*, the supplier brand heritage condition here again increases perceived supplier quality ( $B = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which then increases trust ( $B = 0.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and this variable increases supplier loyalty ( $B = 0.56$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Then, to test our model that involves not only the serial mediating effects of perceived supplier quality, buyer-supplier identification and trust but also the moderating role of supplier size –, a customized PROCESS [1] model was performed (for details on customized models, see Hayes, 2017). As expected and supporting *H6*, although no direct effect of supplier heritage on identification was observed ( $B = 0.12$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), a significant interaction effect of supplier brand heritage and size on buyer-supplier identification was observed ( $B = 0.58$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ), such that supplier brand heritage leads to greater buyer-supplier identification for larger firms (see Figure 3). Then, buyer-supplier identification exerts a positive effect on trust ( $B = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), which subsequently increases loyalty ( $B = 0.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, given the significant interaction between supplier brand heritage and size, a significant index of moderated serial mediation was observed (Index = 0.038, SE = 0.019,

5



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3. Buyer-supplier identification as a function of supplier brand heritage and size (study 3)

95% CI = 0.004; 0.079), indicating that supplier brand heritage indirectly increases loyalty because of the identification and subsequent trust that it prompts amongst buyers, and this more strongly for suppliers of larger (vs smaller) size ([Table 5](#)).

### 5.3 Discussion

Beyond replicating the results of Studies 1 to 2, Study 3 provides deeper insights into the effect of supplier brand heritage on buyer-supplier identification. Specifically, Study 3 shows that such an effect is observed only for larger firms. By doing so, Study 3 highlights the pivotal role that supplier size plays in the effects of brand heritage.

## 6. Conclusion

Although evidenced as an important branding feature in the B2C literature, brand heritage has thus far been less examined in the B2B context. Aiming to examine its influence on B2B buyer loyalty, our primary hypothesis was that buyers might develop – beyond mere quality perceptions – a sense of connection when interacting with suppliers from heritage brands, which may thus represent an asset for such suppliers. Our three studies provide consistent evidence for this hypothesis. First, both the cross-sectional and the experimental studies show that suppliers' heritage positively affects quality perceptions in B2B markets, mediating the effect of supplier brand heritage and trust. Buyer-supplier identification is also evidenced as mediating this effect, although this mediating effect was moderated in Study 3. Second, and in line with this result, we found support for past-time orientation and supplier size as boundary conditions, such that past-oriented buyers tend more to repurchase branded products from suppliers boasting a heritage (Study 2), and such heritage prompting stronger buyer-supplier identification for larger (vs smaller) suppliers (Study 3).

### 6.1 Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the emerging B2B literature on branding ([Leek and Christodoulides, 2011](#); [Zablah et al., 2010](#)) and brand heritage ([Guercini and Milanesi, 2019](#); [Koch and Gyrd-Jones, 2019](#); [Odlin and Benson-Rea, 2021](#); [Simoes et al., 2015](#)) by being the first to empirically investigate the influence of supplier brand heritage on trust and loyalty, two relational outcomes of critical interest for B2B relationships ([Palmatier et al., 2006](#)). In line with [Simoes et al. \(2015\)](#) who brought initial evidence for an effect of heritage on firm performance, our results support this notion by showing how buyer perceptions of suppliers' heritage affect B2B buyers' trust and loyalty. Our results specifically identify two mechanisms through which supplier brand heritage affects trust and subsequent loyalty, namely, buyer-supplier identification and perceived quality. While the heritage-trust relationship has been examined by researchers in B2C settings, our studies replicate and extend these findings in a B2B setting.

Regarding identification specifically, our research extends knowledge on brand heritage effects in marketing theory by examining the social aspects of heritage effects on customer behavior. Our results bring consistent support to the mediating role of buyer-supplier identification in the supplier heritage-trust relationship but – as revealed by Study 3 – only when the supplier is a larger (versus smaller) firm. In line with [He et al. \(2018\)](#) who found that identification was a positive determinant of the development of relationship quality between B2B companies, this result indicates that a supplier's history or traditions can generate an imagined community that instills a sense of belongingness, creating long-lasting ties with buyers. Further, our results extend the literature on firm stereotypes (e.g. [Freund et al., 2024](#)) by showing that larger firms benefit more from brand heritage than smaller firms.

Nevertheless, even though buyer-supplier identification was consistently identified as an explanation for the effects of supplier brand heritage on trust in both Studies 1 and 2, the mediating effect of perceived quality was stronger than that of identification in these studies. This difference in the mediating effects suggests that perceived quality plays a greater role than identification in shaping trust for brands that make their heritage salient. This greater role of perceived quality is in line with prior industrial and B2B marketing research emphasizing the rationality of buyers (Swani *et al.*, 2017) and their focus on quality rather than relational considerations (Doney *et al.*, 2007). It also echoes that of Palmatier *et al.* (2006), who found that a high-quality service delivered by a supplier seen as an expert is more effective in building long-term relationships than similarity (i.e. a proxy for identification) between such a supplier and his/her buyers.

Third, our results shed light on the organization studies research stream regarding the use of the past or history to create a competitive edge that favorably affects internal or external stakeholders (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Wadhvani *et al.*, 2018; Weatherbee and Sears, 2022). Indeed, the past or history is unique to each company and, in this sense, cannot be taken over by other companies (Foster *et al.*, 2011); also, it is naturally “manipulable” through narratives (Foster *et al.*, 2017). Unlike previous studies that suggest using a rhetorical history to develop an organization’s identity and thus influence internal stakeholders, we demonstrate that an organization’s heritage (past, history and traditions) can also affect external stakeholders and, more specifically, buyers.

The fourth contribution lies in how supplier brand heritage affects buyers’ perceptions under specific boundary conditions. Our findings identify one buyer-related boundary condition (i.e. past-time orientation) and one that is supplier-related (i.e. size). Our results indicate that past-time orientation moderates the effect of supplier brand heritage on loyalty and that, although supplier brand heritage is beneficial to supplier brands, the ties between suppliers with a strong heritage and buyers are strengthened when buyers exhibit a strong orientation toward the past. Importantly, apart from Iglesias *et al.* (2019), this research is the first to identify the interplay with brand heritage in influencing behavioral intentions. This identification indicates that the positive effects of brand heritage are not universal and, under certain conditions, may not be as strong as expected, a result that nuances the strong and non-moderated effects of brand heritage observed in the B2C literature (e.g. Balmer and Chen, 2017; Merchant and Rose, 2013). Further, our identification of supplier size as a moderating variable of the effects of supplier brand heritage emphasizes that not all companies benefit from brand heritage to the same extent and that such heritage reveals a stronger asset for larger (versus smaller) suppliers.

## 6.2 Managerial implications

Our research features novel findings that may help B2B actors. Specifically, for suppliers, our study shows that when buyers perceive the history and heritage of B2B partners, they tend to be more willing to trust them and be more loyal. Thus, providing information about the long history of the company could benefit B2B suppliers. Nevertheless, it should be noted that for the supplier’s heritage to affect buyer responses, it must be perceived by B2B partners and, therefore, be made salient by suppliers. In other words, suppliers should promote perceptions of their company’s heritage by actively emphasizing the relevant characteristics of their history. Therefore, B2B brand suppliers could emphasize heritage symbols, their past, history or age to underscore their expertise, reputation, performance or progress over time. By doing so, suppliers may trigger the perception of quality and eventually trust among buyers.



Also, the mediating role of perceived supplier quality in the effects of supplier heritage on trust indicates that brand heritage can prove interesting for B2B suppliers who want to elicit strong quality perceptions among their buyers and build trusty relationships with them. Being perceived as a supplier of quality products has long been evidenced as a prerequisite for long-term, successful B2B relationships (Čater and Čater, 2010), and suppliers may thus consider brand heritage as a tool they could use to develop relationships with buyers who highly value quality in their purchasing decision-making. An interesting aspect of quality is that, when unanticipated, positive changes in brand quality are positively related to stock returns (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2011), suggesting that brand heritage could prove to be even more important for suppliers who are doubtful about their ability to be perceived as able to provide products or services of high quality.

Turning to buyer-supplier identification as the alternative mediator, our results highlight how a supplier's heritage also encourages buyer-supplier identification, which in turn generates greater trust and ultimately increases buyer loyalty. Relying on these results and the moderating role of supplier size – as well as on the major role of identification in generating buyer trust in B2B markets –, we recommend that managers of large supplier firms select the facets and episodes from their company's heritage most likely to elicit identification. In this regard, companies can extol their brands in different ways to enhance buyers' perception of heritage and, subsequently, identification. Building on the notion that distinctiveness, warmth and memorable experiences are strong drivers of identification (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012), B2B brands would gain in communicating about themselves as having a unique and distinctive heritage through the success or personality of current or past leaders (e.g. CEOs, founders) or the successes of brand products or services over time. They could also highlight memorable experiences enjoyed with partners, such as conferences, shows and other events related to their heritage.

Finally, buyer-supplier identification was consistently identified as an alternative explanation for the effects of brand heritage on trust in Studies 1 to 2. However, the mediating effect of perceived quality was larger than that of identification. This difference suggests that perceived quality plays a greater role than identification in shaping trust for brands that make their heritage salient. The implication of this prevalence of quality is that heritage may prove especially interesting for those B2B managers and suppliers whose goal is mainly to signal quality. For instance, brands that struggle with signaling quality – due to relatively poor product or service quality – or that need to legitimize a premium price for their offer may find some interest in using its heritage because of the perceived quality that it triggers. Due to the weaker mediating role observed for identification, heritage for those who aim to develop trust through social bonds with their buyers may also prove fruitful – as revealed by the significant mediating effect of identification – but to a lesser extent.

### 6.3 Limitations and avenues for future research

First, caution is needed when generalizing the results observed in this research to broader populations. Because the data were collected only in France and the US and not in a broader set of countries, generalizability to other cultural settings may be limited. Specifically, supplier brand heritage might exert divergent effects than those reported in this research in countries where cultural heritage and traditional values differ. For instance, some Asian countries – such as Japan and South Korea ([www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/france,south-korea,the-usa/](http://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/france,south-korea,the-usa/)) – exhibit greater long-term orientation as a value, and research may be needed that explores the effects of brand heritage in B2B contexts in such countries.

Also, other effects of supplier heritage on buyer perceptions or behavior could be explored in the B2B branding context. For instance, future studies could explore the relationship between



B2B brand heritage and legitimacy, a variable of strong interest for company performance (Yang *et al.*, 2012). In fact, past studies suggest that B2B brand legitimization depends on the rhetorical and narrative strategies used by companies in industrial markets (Gustafson and Pomirleanu, 2021). Stories are crucial to give individuals a strong sense of the surrounding environment. In this way, a supplier's rhetorical history could represent a strong asset if its actions are perceived as more desirable or appropriate within the social systems of norms, values or beliefs.

B2B buying in organizations is primarily overseen by B2B purchasing managers, identified as pivotal frontline figures (Yu *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, the decision-making unit for B2B purchases, along with other stakeholders like industrial product users, engineers or company owners, might play significant roles. Consequently, the process of B2B buying often involves reaching a consensus among these decision-makers and involved members. Hence, future research could investigate the heritage effects by examining the influence of other personnel engaged in the B2B buying process.

Future research could also investigate other moderating variables than buyers' personality traits, such as product oldness. Previous research indicated that not only a company can exhibit heritage but also the product itself (Balmer and Chen, 2016). For instance, products can have heritage identity traits because they represent a culture and civilization characteristic when sold and used for a long time. Because products with heritage engender a strong sense of identification (Balmer and Chen, 2016), buyers may more likely identify with suppliers relying on their heritage when they sell old products.

## Note

1. The code for the PROCESS model was: (bmatrix=1,1,0,1,1,1,1,1,1,1/wmatrix=1,1,0,0,0,0,0,0,0).

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Participant’s characteristics (study 1)

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Buyer age	18–25 yo	1	0.5
	26–35 yo	22	10.4
	36–45 yo	64	30.3
	46–55 yo	77	36.5
	56 yo or more	47	22.3
Buyer lifetime	Less than 1 year	20	9.5
	Between 1 and 2 years	34	16.1
	Between 2 and 4 years	23	10.9
	More than 4 years	129	61.1
	No longer client	5	2.4
Business line	Automobile	17	8.1
	Farming, heavy goods vehicles	21	10
	Installers	44	20.9
	Wood	22	10.4
	Buildings	86	40.8
	Metal	10	4.3
	Maintenance	11	5.2

Source: Authors’ own work



Control  
condition

United States

Find a distributor

Contact us

COMMERCIAL

RESIDENTIAL

VALOR

Product

Technical

Segments

Design & Inspiration

Sustainability

About us

QuickShip

Services

Log in

Samples

**Manufacturer of floor coverings since 2005**


Since 2005, we have been producing flexible PVC, linoleum and textile floors for the professional market in France and selling them worldwide.

**VALOR : A recent history**

Our story began nearly 20 years ago. A group of entrepreneurs joined forces to develop a multi-person company based on their own know-how.

**A commitment to customer satisfaction**

Our brand is our promise; this promise commits us to guarantee the best quality to our customers. The quality of our products is the result of the acquisition of new know-how.



**VALOR**  
16, cours de la République  
69627 Villeurbanne Cedex – France  
Tel : 04 89 27 00 19

Supplier brand  
heritage  
condition

United States

Find a distributor

Contact us

COMMERCIAL

RESIDENTIAL

VALOR

Product

Technical

Segments

Design & Inspiration

Sustainability

About us

QuickShip

Services

Log in

Samples

**Manufacturer of floor coverings since 1805**


Since 1805, we have been producing flexible PVC, linoleum and textile floors for the professional market in France and selling them worldwide.

**VALOR : An ancient history**

Our history began over 200 years ago. Five generations have succeeded one another to develop the family business by relying on traditional know-how.

**A commitment to customer satisfaction**

Our brand is our promise; this promise commits us to guarantee the best quality to our customers. The quality of our products is the result of the heritage of traditional know-how.

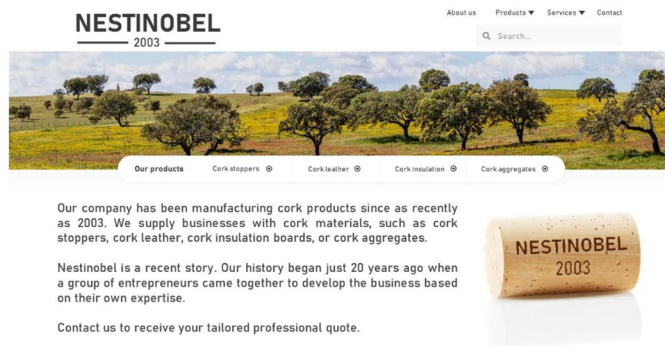


**VALOR**  
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69627 Villeurbanne Cedex – France  
Tel : 04 89 27 00 19

Source: Authors' own work

Figure A1. Stimuli used in study 2

Control condition

Supplier brand  
heritage condition

Source: Authors' own work

Figure A2. Stimuli used in study 3

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European Journal  
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