

# Taking a deliberate approach: the enactment of brand orientation in an SME context

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**Abstract** Brand orientation is a strategic approach observed in business that positions the brand at the centre of organisational processes and has been shown to improve marketing and financial performance. Two fundamental issues in the brand orientation literature are identified and explored in the context of SME's. Namely (1) the assumption of the 'presence or absence' of brand orientation in some conceptualisations and (2) the circular relationship between being brand orientated and the characteristics of extant frameworks of brand orientation. A case study approach followed by abductive analysis was employed to investigate what characterises SME brand orientation enactment in ten small-sized wineries. The key finding of the research is the importance of a deliberate approach when orientating an organisation and its practices around the brand. This approach has been made explicit from the fundamental assumptions of brand orientation theory and is illustrated through three brand practices observed in SMEs: resource investment, communication and brand planning. It is argued that viewing brand orientation through a lens of deliberateness is critical to properly understand how a brand oriented strategy is enacted in organisations. It is also evident that despite the constraints discussed in the literature, SMEs can and do deliberately enact brand orientation.

**Keywords** Brand orientation · Small- to medium-sized enterprises · Branding · Case studies · Abductive · Wineries

## Introduction

Brand orientation is an organisation-wide approach to branding, enacted by organisations to shape their processes around a single brand concept (Evans et al. 2012; Urde 1999). Brand orientation as a concept was defined when Urde (1999) observed organisations shifting their strategic focus beyond satisfying their customer's immediate needs to instead orienting themselves around a strong, consistent and value-driven brand concept for long-term benefits (Evans et al. 2012; Urde et al. 2013). Researchers have observed the use of a brand oriented approach in a variety of contexts (e.g. Gromark and Melin 2011; Hankinson 2001; Hirvonen and Laukkanen 2014; Wong and Merrilees 2007) often by looking for the presence of indicators of brand orientation such as those used in Gromark and Melin's (2011) brand orientation index, or Baumgarth's (2010) values, norms, artefacts and behaviours. Within the range of conceptualisations in the brand orientation literature, we find two fundamental issues: first in the assumption of the presence of brand orientation in some conceptualisations, and second in the nature of the relationship observed between brand orientated and the characteristics of brand orientation constructed. Moreover, it is important to recognise that observing the presence of aspects of brand orientation in an organisation does not necessarily mean that the organisation has deliberately chosen to be brand oriented, nor that they have fully committed to this approach or succeeded in implementing it.

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Urde et al. (2013) acknowledges that a brand orientation approach may not be suitable for every organisation, despite its proven benefits (e.g. Gromark and Melin 2011; Hankinson 2011; Hirvonen and Laukkanen 2014; Urde 1999; Wong and Merrilees 2008). Indeed, the usefulness of a brand oriented approach in the context of small to medium enterprises (SME) (see Note for definition of SME groupings<sup>1</sup>) is something that researchers are still working to determine (Muhonen et al. 2017). There is evidence that a strategy like brand orientation may assist SME's to achieve their long-term goals. For instance, research in branding has highlighted the value and feasibility of employing brand management strategies in small organisations (e.g. Berthon et al. 2008; Centeno et al. 2013; Hirvonen and Laukkanen 2014; Hirvonen et al. 2013; Krake 2005). Wong and Merrilees (2005) and Hirvonen et al. (2013) notably contribute to this view, demonstrating how brand orientation can be characterised at various levels in a small business environment and is a viable strategic option for SMEs. SMEs are a significant competitive force in the modern marketplace (Ahonen 2008; DIISR 2011; Mowle and Merrilees 2005). However, our understanding of the application and usefulness of brand orientation is still under-examined in this context.

There is also still work to be done on understanding exactly how to best implement a brand orientation strategy (Baumgarth et al. 2013), and further the benefits to be attained by exploring this in an SME context. This research seeks to build on the understanding of SME brand orientation enactment via an abductive research approach. At its core, abduction is underpinned by a desire to puzzle out new or unexpected explanations in a systematic way. "Abductive analysis specifically aims at generating novel theoretical insights that reframe empirical finding in contrast to existing theories" (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, p. 174). Rich accounts of everyday branding practice, the starting point for our abductive analysis, provided an opportunity for us to more readily identify and explore patterns in enactment and seek an overarching method for how to approach a brand orientation strategy. Through our investigation of small regional wineries, we identified the role of intent in enacting brand orientation in an SME context, and in doing so, made the role of deliberateness explicit, illustrating how it distinguishes organisations with a higher observed degree of brand orientation.

<sup>1</sup> SMEs are defined by the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) according to number of employees: micro-sized being 1–4, small sized being 5–19 and medium sized as 20–199 employees (DIISR 2011). In the U.K. SME groupings are: micro sized have 1–10 employees (though 1–5 is sometimes used), small sized have less than 50 employees, and medium sized have less than 250 employees (OECD 2005).

In the following sections, we look further at the extant knowledge of brand orientation, and then we look at it in an SME context. This is followed by a more in-depth outline of the research design for this study. The findings are then discussed, providing insight into the role of deliberateness in brand orientation enactment. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings, the limitations and possible future directions for research are described.

## Literature review

An organisation adopting a 'brand orientation' strategy positions the brand as a key organisational asset and places it at the centre of business decisions and processes (Evans et al. 2012; Gromark and Melin 2011; Urde 1999). Urde (1999) defines brand orientation as:

An approach in which the processes of an organisation revolve around the creation, development and protection of brand identity ... with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantage in the form of brands (Urde 1999, p. 117).

The required organisation-wide focus inherent in brand orientation, encompassing processes, practices and culture, makes this a diverse and complex concept to investigate. While some researchers are grappling with the development of a cohesive theory of brand orientation (e.g. Evans et al. 2012), others have begun to revisit the fundamentals of the theory as evidenced in the collaboration of seminal authors in the area; Urde et al. (2013) and Baumgarth et al. (2013). In keeping with a return to the fundamentals of brand orientation theory, in this paper we discuss the inherent assumption in the literature that brand orientation is either present or absent, and identify the presence of a circular argument within the literature. The identification of these issues within the literature leads us to explore the enactment of brand orientation in the context of SME's with a view to disentangling these complexities.

## The presence or absence of brand orientation

A number of studies including Urde (1999), Hankinson (2011), Gromark and Melin (2011) and Hirvonen and Laukkanen (2014) have applied brand orientation theory to a context and then found that a brand oriented phenomena was observable. Underlying the brand orientation frameworks developed in this way is the inherent assumption that brand orientation is either present and observable or absent (Hankinson 2001; Urde 1999). However, as raised in the introduction, this leads us to ask the question: does the presence of aspects of brand orientation theory in an organisation's culture and behaviour equip us to say that



brand orientation is being pursued with strategic intent by that organisation?

Brand orientation is a complex and dynamic approach that evolves through employing a variety of organisational practices (Baumgarth et al. 2013; Hankinson 2001). Arguably we cannot say that brand orientation is simply implemented or not implemented. Rather brand orientation may be characterised in terms of degrees as observed by Wong and Merrilees (2007), or may be used in conjunction with other strategies, such as a market oriented approach as proposed by Urde et al. (2013). Or the aspects of brand orientation observed may be reflective of what Gromark and Melin (2011, p. 395) call an “ad hoc approach to branding”. What needs to be made explicit is the intent behind the presence of these aspects of brand orientation.

The nature of brand orientation as a dynamic approach is further demonstrated by Hankinson (2001), Evans et al. (2012) and Wong and Merrilees (2005) in their explorations of the degrees of brand orientation observed in charity, museum and SME contexts respectively. The approach used by these authors can be described as a continuum-based approach. It provides the capacity to develop a more complex understanding of brand orientation beyond merely being ‘present or absent’ (Hankinson 2001). In doing so it allows the researcher to conceptualise brand orientation as being enacted to varying degrees of effect and in varying states of development (Ewing and Napoli 2005; Hankinson 2001; Wong and Merrilees 2005). Gathering more insight into the evolving processes of an organisation across a continuum allows researchers to understand the processes of brand orientation rather than its antecedents and consequences.

### A circular argument

Through their observations of brand orientation in practice, scholars have identified characteristics that demonstrate the presence of a brand oriented approach. These characteristics form the basis of discussions of how to implement a brand oriented approach or strategy. Some of the common characteristics identified include, but are not limited to (1) active involvement of top management in branding (Baumgarth 2010; Gromark and Melin 2011; Hankinson 2011; Urde 1999), (2) investment of resources into the brand (Ewing and Napoli 2005; Evans et al. 2012; Wong and Merrilees 2005), (3) consistent and meaningful representation of brand values in communication (Baumgarth 2010; Ewing and Napoli 2005; Hankinson 2011; Urde 1999), and (4) the active participation and identification of internal stakeholders (Baumgarth 2010; Ewing and Napoli 2005; Hankinson 2011; Urde 1999).

Yet, whether these accepted characteristics lead to a brand orientation or manifest from a brand orientation

strategy remains unclear. Do organisations begin the pursuit of brand orientation from a point zero and then adopt the pre-specified characteristics of a brand oriented culture (e.g. Baumgarth 2010; Evans et al. 2012) and the types of behaviours (e.g. Gromark and Melin 2011; Hankinson 2011) as espoused in the literature? Or perhaps early on some organisations develop characteristics, such as a strong brand identity, that inspire those within the organisation to have brand front of mind in their culture and behaviours, and as such more organically develop a brand oriented approach?

This leads us to highlight the presence of a potentially circular relationship in the literature, between the brand orientation strategy and its antecedents and consequences. If we were to use brand identity to illustrate this issue, which comes first- the brand identity or the brand orientation? Intuitively one might argue that the presence of a strong, distinctive brand may lead to the organic development of a brand oriented strategy, as it is a natural focus or point of orientation. Urde (1999, p.130) proposed that “in managing companies it is necessary to first formulate an internal brand identity”. Further to this, Evans et al. (2012, p. 1471) argued that “...the brand must be first established at a philosophical level, which then drives brand behaviours”. In contrast, Hirvonen and Laukkanen (2014) found that brand orientation lead to brand identity. If we consider brand orientation from the perspective of a dynamic approach that changes over time, we might propose that rather than being one or the other, both in fact may be the case. Indeed, the relationship between brand orientation and brand identity may depend on where the organisation sits at a point in time, if they start out with a strong brand identity or not. This relationship serves to illustrate our point of a circular relationship, however, further exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope and qualitative nature of this research.<sup>2</sup>

Based on our assumption of a continuum of brand orientation, we argue that it is important to recognise this potentially circular relationship and the ambiguity it creates in studying the overall enactment of a brand strategy. Therefore, we take the position that these characteristics of brand orientation are valuable for identifying and discussing brand orientation but they will not be our specific focus into looking at how brand orientation as a strategy overall is implemented.

<sup>2</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that much of the brand orientation research we refer to is cross-sectional in nature and as such does not allow researchers to capture the changes over time (a continuum), nor to disentangle this circular relationship.



## Enacting a brand oriented strategy in SMEs

Context cannot be ignored in any study of branding or strategy implementation. Brand orientation theory has been primarily developed based on large, commercial organisations (e.g. Baumgarth 2010; Gromark and Melin 2011; Urde 1999). It is well acknowledged that there are fundamental differences between small and large organisations and how each approach branding (Abimbola and Kocak 2007; Ahonen 2008; Berthon et al. 2008). SMEs differ from large organisations in: the passive or intuitive nature of their planning and decision making (Abimbola and Kocak 2007; Inskip 2004; Krake 2005); an innate reliance on the values and identity of the leader (Centeno et al. 2013; Krake 2005; Spence and Essoussi 2010); a lack of sophistication or absence of key branding or marketing activities like brand-related communication (Berthon et al. 2008; Centeno and Hart 2012); and the availability of resources for branding (Ahonen 2008; Krake 2005; Ojasalo et al. 2008). As identified earlier, many of these characteristics are considered important for brand orientation in the literature. Therefore, given the key conflicts at the intersection of these two bodies of literature, further investigation of how well brand orientation translates into an SME context is required (Muhonen et al. 2017).

Brand orientation has been examined in an SME context by Wong and Merrilees (2005), Hirvonen et al. (2013) and Muhonen et al. (2017). These studies establish a theoretical foundation for understanding brand orientation enactment in SMEs. Wong and Merrilees (2005) present a framework based on characteristics of SME branding, revealing a ‘ladder’ of SME brand orientation that suggests brand orientation exists at different levels in SMEs. Those SMEs higher up the ladder demonstrated ‘brand distinctiveness’ and lower ‘perceived brand barriers’ (Wong and Merrilees 2005, p. 159). In addition, Hirvonen et al. (2013) found that factors such as firm age, size, and branding knowledge did not appear to influence brand orientation in SMEs. This confirmed that brand orientation is a viable option for firms of different sizes, ages and levels of know-how (Hirvonen et al. 2013). All of these studies focus on the positive outcomes for SMEs in enacting a brand orientation strategy (in particular Muhonen et al. 2017), supporting the argument that being brand oriented has benefits that can be harnessed by SMEs. Despite these findings there is still much to be learned about the enactment and efficacy of brand orientation in this context.

Given the lack of theoretical alignment between brand orientation conceptualisations and definitive SME branding characteristics, it is uncertain how well current brand orientation theory can translate into practice for SMEs. What is needed is for researchers to observe the enactment of brand orientation in the SME context, to compare what we see in

the SME context to the theory and then to discuss how this type of strategy may be implemented in that context. Accordingly, the central research question for this study is:

What characterises the enactment of brand orientation in SMEs?

The following section outlines the methodology designed to address this research question.

## Methodology

A qualitative study was designed utilising a case study approach to explore the enactment of brand orientation in SMEs, employing an abductive approach to analysis. To examine the process of brand orientation, a case study framework was designed in line with Yin’s theory of capturing rich data in naturalistic settings (Yin 2012). In particular, there was a focus on depth (Goodman 2001; McGinn 2010), everyday detail (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009) and diversity (Easton Brooks 2012; Johnson 2002) in the accounts of SME participants. Consistent with a qualitative approach, rigour was established in this research through systematic collection and analysis of data (Flick 2008; Silverman 1993; Yin 2012) and creating a clear chain of evidence (Eisenhardt 1989). An abductive strategy also fostered cumulative validation (Sarantakos 2013). A continuous interplay between data and concepts (Van Maanen et al. 2007) underpinned the process of abduction, with analysis moving time and time again between transcripts, notes and observations, and a variety of theoretical concepts (Dubois and Gibbert 2010).

Multiple case studies were used in an attempt to explore diversity of SME branding practices, attending both to the richness of various cases (Silverman 1993; Holstein and Gubrium 2006) and enabling comparison (Campbell 2010; Chmiliar 2010) between cases. Ten cases were purposefully selected to investigate the enactment of SME brand orientation. Maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002) was used to select cases. Criteria used for selection were organisational size, age of the business and degree of branding activity as observed from the organisations’ respective websites. A profile of each of the wineries and the brand orientation observed in their respective websites is located in the “Appendix”. Ten cases were found to provide sufficient depth about the research phenomenon. This was consistent with the previous case study research by Wong and Merrilees (2005) on brand orientation, and Mowle and Merrilees (2005) on wineries.

The population of interest for this case study was small wineries in Orange, an emerging cool climate wine region in Australia. The decision to conduct this research in the wine industry was influenced by the prevalence of ‘small’



businesses and the focus on branding in this sector. Wineries were considered small sized based on a number of characteristics including production output (ANZWI 2014; AWBC 2007; WFA 2013) and being ‘owner-operator’ managed and family owned (Corkindale and Welsh 2003; Jarvis and Goodman 2005). In addition, there is a perceived need in the Australian wine industry for a high level of engagement with branding (Mowle and Merrilees 2005) based on the need to differentiate in a competitive environment (AWBC 2007; WFA 2013; Bruwer and Johnson 2010; Rasmussen and Lockshin 1999). Hence, it was likely that the SMEs targeted would be brand oriented to some degree. Additionally, the choice of Orange, an emerging geographical wine ‘cluster’ (Aylward and Glynn 2006, p. 42), minimised extraneous variation in case data (Eisenhardt 1989) that may be caused by geographical circumstances (Aylward and Glynn 2006).

### Data collection

In-depth interviews were employed to collect everyday accounts of branding from the leaders of each winery. Leaders were interviewed as they are recognised as an authority on branding matters in SMEs (Inskip 2004; Krake 2005). In-depth interviews were selected for their ability to elicit realistic perspectives and rich data (Kvale 2007; Sarantakos 2013; McGinn 2010). A semi-structured schedule was designed to ensure comparability of data for analysis (Patton 2002; Campbell 2010; Chetty 1996), while open-ended questions provided opportunities for detailed accounts of practice and diversity in accounts (Kvale 2007), critical to this research.

Questioning funnelled from a broad discussion of the role of branding in the organisation to questions about specific practices, developed from brand orientation theory. Probing was used where appropriate (Stewart and Cash 2006) to elicit further depth and detail in responses, and ensure richness of interview data. Branding terminology was used sparingly and the term ‘brand orientation’ was purposefully excluded, to minimise the influence of the researcher on responses (Alvesson 2011) and in recognition of the varied and dynamic nature of SME branding practices (e.g. Olson 2010).

### Multi-stage case analysis

Interviews were systematically analysed using an abductive strategy, depicted in Fig. 1. The analysis process outlined in Fig. 1 provided a rigorous and consistent approach necessary for interrogating case data (Boulton and Hammersley 2006) and in this study was critical to contributing new insights to theory on SME brand orientation. The multi-stage abductive framework was designed

to create a dialogue between the empirical data and extant theory, mediated by the researcher (Blaikie 2010). Abductive strategy is used in case study research (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; Dubois and Gadde 2002) to generate a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon (Blaikie 2010; Locke 2010) and ultimately strengthen interpretation of case accounts (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009).

Specifically, Fig. 1 illustrates the iterative process employed to provide a systematic analysis that accounted for the richness and complexity of individual accounts whilst moving towards more general exploration, explanations and discussions of theoretical implications resulting from the findings generated in this study.

In Stage One, initial findings were developed from within-case analysis. At this stage the data were explored (Paterson 2010) to form an understanding of how brand orientation may have been enacted or not enacted in individual SMEs. Accounts were coded and categorised into priorities and then themes (Flick 2008; Paterson 2010). Thematic analysis was used in Stage Two to find further patterns in responses (Patton 2002). Themes identified in Stage One were compared and contrasted across cases (Campbell 2010; Yin 2012) to determine commonalities and points of difference related to brand orientation.

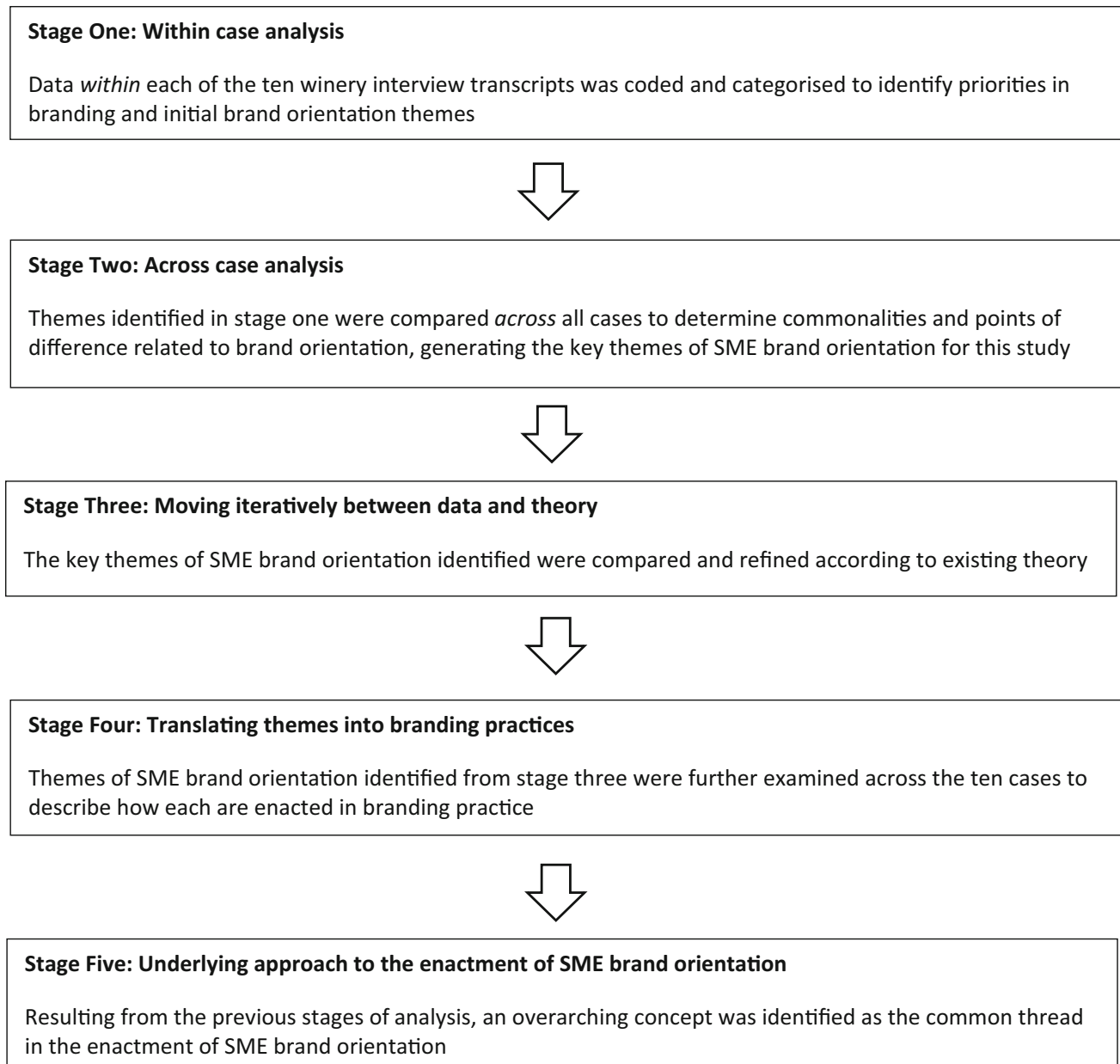
From Stage Three onwards, themes and their empirical evidence were analysed in relation to existing theory relevant to SME brand orientation. As a pre-cursor to further theoretical interrogation and development of the identified themes, the ‘lay concepts’, expressed in the participants’ own language (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; Blaikie 2010), were translated into ‘technical concepts that resonated with theory as well as SME practice. Themes developed using theoretical insights were further refined by returning to empirical data (Blaikie 2010; Dubois and Gadde 2002) in Stage Four. Following this analysis, Stage Five became the point to consider whether an underlying approach was evident in the findings. Was there an overarching concept that could be identified as a common thread in the enactment of SME brand orientation in the SMEs that had been studied?

This discussion of the multi-stage analysis provides a demonstration of the systematic procedure followed in the case analysis for this study. The findings section to follow will be focussed on findings from the later stages (Stages Three to Five) of the analysis.

## Findings

We found a number of key characteristics which were attributed to the enactment of brand orientation in the wineries observed. Most significantly, we reviewed these





**Fig. 1** Analysis process for exploring the enactment of SME brand orientation

characteristics in Stage Five of our abductive analysis approach to reveal an underlying pattern of *deliberateness*. The utility of the concept of deliberateness in understanding the enactment of brand orientation in SMEs is discussed next.

### **The underlying approach: deliberateness in branding**

The application of a lens of deliberateness across all the observed practices of the wineries surveyed has been the most valuable finding of this investigation. Deliberateness

was identified in how organisations approached branding, observed in interviews through the conscious decisions of participants to pursue brand-related activities for a strategic purpose. It was deliberateness that was the common, traceable thread to brand orientation through all cases, regardless of their firmographics or specific behaviours.

On a case level, the enactment of branding strategy had no apparent relationship with the age or size of any of the SMEs studied, consistent with the findings of Hirvonen et al. (2013). Micro-sized organisations such as Cases F and A demonstrated some of the highest and lowest priority



of brand, respectively, and no patterns between age and brand were observed.

Enactment of branding strategy on an overall case level was instead strongly underpinned by a deliberate approach. This was observed within and across case organisations. Within cases independently, there was evidence of both the deliberate choice to engage with the brand for strategic gain and the deliberate choice for other organisational functions to take priority. For Cases F and J, the brand identity was consciously integrated into their long-term strategy. Case F state “we were creating an entity, a philosophy, that would engage people... Our strategy is to fly under the radar... build a mystique around your brand by being hard to come by”. Case J in particular demonstrated strong long-term intentions to stay true to their brand concept: “it’s all long term. Branding is all long term...and [the brand] is all we have... my brand is there, set in concrete”. However, in Case A for instance, production was the key focus and purposefully prioritised over any branding or marketing activity: “I’d rather sell the grapes and let someone else – a bigger company – do all the heavy marketing work... I think, well, I’ll just do my own thing here, for people who come here”.

Across cases organisations, the concept of deliberateness was seen to offer an explanation for patterns of escalating brand oriented behaviour. Deliberateness first emerged during abductive analysis as relating to the degree of brand orientation observed in different case organisations. Not only was a high degree of brand orientation observed where there was a great deal of deliberateness was articulated in branding practice, but a mix of deliberate and ‘ad hoc’ branding mindsets and behaviours was observable for organisations that showed some sense or evidence of brand orientation. Deliberateness also proved to be a useful lens for explaining both the similarities and differences within brand practices. A pattern of deliberateness was illustrated within three branding practices identified as related to brand orientation in the SMEs studied.

### **Branding practices and the enactment of brand orientation**

Three branding practices were observed to be illustrative of the enactment of branding strategy in the SMEs during stages one to four of the analysis: brand planning, resource investment and brand communication. At a high level, each demonstrated mindsets *and* behaviours that showed similarities to the cultural and behavioural characteristics of brand orientation conceptualisations in the literature (e.g. Baumgarth 2010; Evans et al. 2012). The particular attitudes and behaviours observed centred about their brands to varying degrees. Each of these practices are discussed in

greater detail in this section, using quotes and examples from the case organisations studied, references to the literature identified in Stage Three of the analysis and overlaid with how each practice is defined by deliberateness.

#### *Brand planning*

First, the nature and degree of brand planning was found to be characteristic of the enactment of SME brand orientation. Participants described varying degrees of formality in their brand planning, such as when decisions were made about their brand’s future.

Some case organisations discussed engaging readily with formal planning, for instance Participant D: “we [participant and marketing consultant] sit down quite readily and talk about things... we have a strategy meeting every now and then, or we have a tactical meeting” and Participant F: “[we have] a written business plan that includes branding- an understanding of where we were going”.

Others, like Participants B, E and H, balanced incremental formal planning (“we sit down each year and work out a bit of a plan as to what we’re doing...”—Participant E) with informal planning, particularly in the short-term (“[planning] is not something we’re overly rigid with. It’s a bit ad hoc I guess really, but we’re feeling our way with it”—Participant E).

The brand planning reported in interviews was a combination of intuition and various degrees of formality or explicit planning. Observations of planning were consistent with the literature regarding long-term strategy enactment (Hirvonen et al. 2013), while the ad hoc nature of some brand planning is in line with SME branding literature (Abimbola and Kocak 2007; Inskip 2004; Krake 2005). However, accounts were given where planning was formalised and actively incorporated the brand concept, meaning there was deliberate consideration given to how activities like promotion and cellar door experience would reinforce the brand identity. Actions, like Cases E and F purposefully allocating time in meetings to plan for the promotion and future of their brand, constituted a deliberate and strategic approach to their branding. The deliberateness of such approaches to brand planning was in contrast to cases where the future of the brand was undetermined or thought to extend organically from the brand’s legacy (Case I) or the personality of the SME leader (Case G), without deliberate intervention. Where SMEs were deliberately, actively and formally planning for their brand, their processes and practices were seen to be shaped around their brand concept, thus characterising the enactment of brand orientation.

In comparing all case organisation’s behaviours regarding planning, it was clear that it was in instances



where participants articulated an intention to set a direction for their brand *and* followed through on that intention that the SME illustrated a more deliberate approach to shaping their own processes and practices around their brand concept.

#### *Investing resources in the brand*

Second, prioritisation of resource investment in branding was also identified as being characteristic of the enactment of brand orientation in SMEs. Participants identified a range of perceived constraints in time, money, human capital and skills when discussing the resources available for branding. This was consistent with SME branding literature (Ahonen 2008; Inskip 2004; Spence and Essoussi 2010). However, it was the underlying willingness, or at times perceived obligation, to invest in branding despite the risk involved that was found to be characteristic of the enactment of SME brand orientation.

The perception that strategic and purposeful investment in branding was beneficial and therefore should be prioritised was identified in a number of interviews. For instance, Participant C said “[I] believe it is important to spend what sometimes seems to be more money than you would like doing it [branding] properly”. Other participants that expressed a similar positive attitude went on to describe how they overcame constraints or strategically used resources within their organisation’s limitations for a brand-related purpose. For instance, Participants B, C, D and E each delegated some brand responsibilities to other employees or consultants.

In contrast, other participants did not prioritise brand investment or displayed more reluctant attitudes to spending resources on branding. For instance, Participants G and I expressed apprehension in investing money in branding due to uncertainty about the return on investment:

I could spend more time... but like everything in the marketing arena, it’s a very difficult to... work out whether the cost of doing it is justified by the return of what you’ve done... it’s very difficult... it’s amazing how many people there are out there who think they are just going to throw you an opportunity for advertising and you’ll happily spend money on it. And they don’t realise that you’ve got limited costs. I’m going to spend money on designing a new label- I’m not just going to put an advert in [print] (Participant G)

This quote demonstrates how the participant strategically prioritised aspects of branding in the distribution of limited resources (i.e. the label), but overall had an attitude that resource constraints prohibited investing time and money in branding. Analysis across the cases suggested that

willingness to invest resources and the subsequent allocation of resources for branding was indicative of how important the brand was considered to be to the overall organisational strategy.

Given these resource constraints experienced by all interviewed SMEs and the risk inherent in resource expenditure, the allocation of resources for branding activities was clearly a deliberate choice. One account that exemplifies the relationship between the deliberate investment of resources and ongoing branding strategy comes from Participant D.

Probably if we had more money and more skills at the start and sort of clear advice earlier on, we’d probably be further in than what we are now. We sort of muddled along doing what we thought was the next best thing and in a way we were a little bit reactionary. So that’s what we are trying to do now, to get ahead of the game, if you like. (Participant D)

This evolution of consciousness regarding investing in branding was indicative of their growing brand orientation strategy. The willingness to invest in broader branding strategy aligned clearly with the sense of deliberateness in which SME leaders made their choices for how they ‘spent’ on their brand, for the enactment of brand orientation on an organisational level.

#### *Brand communication*

Finally, consideration of the brand concept when making communication choices was also found to be an important characteristic of the enactment of brand orientation in SMEs. During the discussion of communication and promotion in interviews, major differences between cases were found in regards to channel selection. Some participants demonstrated strategic thinking in channel selection, utilising only channels they deemed suitable to communicate the values of their brand concept (e.g. Participant E referred to wine journalism and community sponsorship). Personalised communication including social media and word of mouth was also used at times as a legitimate strategic channel choice, selected to represent the values of the brand:

It [the website] all sort of ties in with the label and the rural country feeling and I believe it’s really important to have actual photos of where we are. So people get a feel for [the brand]. Again with Facebook, it’s very important that I can go out and just snap a photo of the vines and show people what it’s like. (Participant B)

As evidenced in this quote, Participant B reinforced the ‘lifestyle’ values of their brand concept in their





communication choices, purposefully selecting personalised channels to represent the personable aspects of their brand. In contrast, some participants were not as clear in their intent for the brand in channel selection. Illustrative examples include: (i) using channels such as a website only because participants perceived that they were required to (Participant D); (ii) being nonchalant regarding message content—“as long as there’s something going out” (Participant G); and (iii) relying on personalised channels for their convenience and cost-effectiveness rather than for strategic brand purposes. While still being functional avenues of communication for the SMEs, these behaviours reflect minimal consideration of the brand in making communication choices.

As expected from the brand orientation literature, accounts of more brand-driven communication were observed in more brand oriented SMEs (Urde 1999; Gromark and Melin 2011). Despite no clear consistency in content, frequency or channel mix in how these SMEs designed their communications, a rationale for their choices that included (or was in fact entirely based on) their brand values and strategies was apparent. Participants were seen to be deliberately pursuing specific brand outcomes in the considered choices they made in channel selection and content, in addition to more generic outcomes such as general awareness. Participant F for instance was highly deliberate in the channels they avoided, which included radio “We don’t want our brand on the local, commercial, right-wing radio station.... That’s a very cognitive thing we do”. Therefore, it was the communication choices made with clear brand-centric purpose and deliberate intent that characterised the enactment of brand orientation.

In considering the proposition of deliberateness in branding practices, a more fundamental understanding of the characteristics of SME brand orientation has been developed. Deliberateness, as an approach, was not observed to standardise how branding was integrated into organisational processes across the cases investigated. Instead, deliberateness was observed through a pattern of behaviour and choices unique to the individual winery, enacted in such a way as participants thought they may achieve success in the marketplace through their brand. Despite the diversity observed in deliberateness across cases, in the choices and activities participants described pursuing, a consistent pattern in the differentiating effect of deliberateness on brand orientation enactment was observed. The theoretical implications of this proposition are discussed in the following section.

## Discussion

The findings of this investigation have demonstrated that the degree to which SMEs are enacting brand orientation can be gauged by the deliberateness with which they pursue branding practices. The importance of being deliberate is evident in the literature, but the explicit consideration of deliberateness as a conduit between theory and strategic implementation has not been acknowledged until now. There are a number of scholars who have noted the need for a deliberate approach. For instance, in his seminal work Urde (1999, p. 123) argued “...the need for a deliberate approach to brands as strategic resources”. Based on her qualitative examination of the charity sector Hankinson (2001, p. 235) found that “managing the brand actively and deliberately was a crucial step in co-ordinating brand activity for the charity and engaging others in the process” (Hankinson 2001, p. 235). More recently Gromark and Melin (2011, p. 395) stated “we want to emphasise that brand orientation requires a deliberate approach, since many organisations have an adhoc approach to brand building”. These authors, along with the findings of this study, position deliberateness at the very foundation of brand orientation. An “ad hoc approach to branding” does not lend itself to the organisation-wide coordination around a single brand identity required in enacting brand orientation. More authors still (e.g. Baumgarth 2010; Hankinson 2011) have been observed to hold an assumption of a deliberate strategy formation process (Mintzberg and Waters 1985) within the body of literature on brand orientation, without discussing the relevance of this assumption.

Through our exploration of the enactment of brand orientation in the SME context and abductive analysis, we have brought this fundamental aspect of brand orientation to the fore. The notion of deliberateness helps us to understand the state of brand orientation in an organisation, what it is that brand orientated organisations do deliberately to orient themselves around the brand, and the considerations for SMEs in undertaking this strategy.

The pattern of deliberateness that initially emerged from a review of the extent of brand orientation observable in case organisations further supported our adoption of a continuum perspective. Indeed, a mix of deliberate and ad hoc practices were uncovered, an observation consistent with the studies of Urde et al. (2013) and Gromark and Melin (2011), among others. As previously mentioned, a number of researchers report finding degrees of brand orientation, including Wong and Merrilees (2005, 2007) in an SME context. We suggest that deliberateness may be one way to differentiate the degree of brand orientation across organisations in future studies, prior to delving into



the mindsets and behaviours demonstrated by brand oriented organisations.

The extant brand orientation literature has a number of frameworks for conceptualising brand orientation, primarily in large organisations. Each were applied to our case organisations with varying success during Stage Three of our abductive analysis, including Evans et al.'s (2012) philosophy and behaviours dimensions, Baumgarth's (2009) values, norms, artefacts and behaviours or Gromark and Melin's (2011) brand orientation index. Many of the characteristics, while conceptualised separately in their respective frameworks, were manifestations of the same phenomenon of deliberateness. We believe that these interpretations of brand orientation characteristics in practice remain relevant to the brand orientation theory, but are enhanced by explicitly acknowledging the overarching impact deliberateness has for them.

The three branding practices identified in our findings as exemplifying deliberateness in SME brand orientation are demonstrative of how current brand orientation theory can be adjusted in taking this deliberateness lens. First, the identification of resource investment and communication corresponded with existing theory (e.g. Hankinson 2011; Urde 1999; Wong and Merrilees 2005), demonstrating that some branding practices may be universal to brand orientation enactment across contexts. However, resource investment for instance exists in SME theory as a restraint to brand orientation (e.g. Wong and Merrilees's 2005 'brand barriers'), whereas through deliberateness it is acknowledged as being able to be leveraged as a strategic practice in brand orientation enactment, willing attitude permitting. Second, brand planning appears to be an assumed part of brand orientation strategy (e.g. Wong and Merrilees 2007), rather than being an activity in its own right in the process of enacting brand orientation. This further highlighted the importance of using findings to make explicit what may have previously been implicit in brand orientation theory—particularly the key finding of the role of deliberateness.

Arguably it is the context and methodology employed in this investigation of brand orientation enactment in SME's that have brought "deliberateness" to the fore. A comparison between how deliberateness is discussed in brand orientation theory and its *absence* in SME branding theory (e.g. Abimbola and Kocak 2007; Inskip 2004; Krake 2005) demonstrates a gap between these two fields beyond that of different behavioural capabilities (Ahonen 2008; Spence and Essoussi 2010). However, despite contrasting with SME branding theory, deliberateness was found to have a central role for SMEs in this study. SMEs were observed to be deliberately pursuing branding within the bounds of their recognised constraints (e.g. Centeno and Hart 2012; Berthon et al. 2008; Krake 2005), showing that SMEs are

challenging what is 'known' about SME branding and effectively enacting complex branding strategies.

The practices of brand oriented SMEs in general are further understood through this investigation. Some consistency with SME branding theory was observed, in how the priorities of leaders in SMEs shape how branding occurs and is valued (or not) (Inskip 2004; Krake 2005; Spence and Essoussi 2010) and reliance on intuition and informality continues in part (Abimbola and Kocak 2007; Centeno and Hart 2012; Krake 2005). However, as demonstrated in a variety of ways and degrees, branding was valued by SMEs as an integrative organisational asset (as per Muhonen et al. 2017) and branding practices were layered with formality and strategic purpose. This showed that while brand orientation is a complex strategy, SMEs can and do enact brand orientation through a deliberate approach to branding.

## Managerial implications

The findings of this research have implications for how SMEs can enact brand orientation to the greatest degree. It is first important to acknowledge that brand orientation is a strategy where enactment is dependent on context (Hankinson 2011) and as in SME branding theory, should be enacted in the way deemed most appropriate for the individual organisational circumstances (Berthon et al. 2008; Abimbola and Kocak 2007). The value of deliberateness as a strategic approach to branding does not lie in a standardised procedure of branding tasks. This investigation shows that the enactment of brand orientation is a matter of how deliberately SMEs shape their own processes and practices around their brand concept.

However, illustrations of deliberateness in the three branding practices discussed make the concept of deliberateness accessible on a practical level. In deliberately choosing to enact a brand oriented strategy for long-term benefit (Hirvonen et al. 2013), an SME leader may consider: (i) actively engaging in formal brand planning; (ii) strategically and purposefully investing resources in the brand within their resource limitations and; (iii) selecting channels of communication strategically for brand-centric outcomes. These findings are significant not only to how brand orientation is conceptualised as a strategic practice, but also contribute to the theory of SME branding without generalising or stereotyping this diverse population of organisations (Ojasalo et al. 2008; Berthon et al. 2008). Further, brand orientation may be enacted progressively over time, in keeping with the capabilities and resources of SMEs, and ultimately should contribute to the brand and organisational success of an SME.

Finally, even for organisations that have organically adopted a brand oriented approach, inasmuch as it has not



been the explicit choice of management (e.g. Urde et al. 2013), brand orientation theory can still be useful. According to a continuum view of brand orientation and our findings, adopting a deliberate approach to the theoretical characteristics of brand orientation can equip SMEs to achieve an even higher degree of brand orientation. We would certainly recommend adopting a deliberate approach to enacting brand orientation for an SME, in order to fully realise the long-term benefits of the strategy.

### Limitations and future research

Purposefully locating this study in an SME context using small-sized wineries has shaped the value and contribution of this study. However, the settings of this study also limit the generalisability of the results (e.g. Patton 2002; Yin 2012). Selecting a brand-driven industry like the wine industry (Bruwer and Johnson 2010) means that the enactment of brand orientation observed in this study was likely greater and more deliberately approached than in the broader population of SMEs. Further investigation across a range of SME industries would be useful in validating the role of deliberateness in the enactment of brand orientation, including observing its absence. Also, the 10 wineries sampled were all micro-sized to small sized which, while typical of the regional population was prohibitive to exploring the relationship of other contextual factors to the concept of deliberateness. In particular, the role of stakeholder involvement (Hankinson 2011; Baumgarth 2010) should be further explored through a lens of deliberateness in brand orientation enactment.

Furthermore for brand orientation in an SME context, continued investigation into the relationship between deliberateness and the performance outcomes of brand orientation could further validate why this is a topic worthy of investigation (e.g. Baumgarth 2010; Gromark and Melin 2011) and track how SMEs *most effectively* enact this branding strategy. Paired with a measure of performance (e.g. Hirvonen et al. 2013) from an organisational or customer perspective, future studies may explore how enactment strategies relate to SME brand success.

Much of the knowledge about brand orientation in the literature has been learned by observing the phenomena as it exists in organisations, but rarely do researchers sample organisations based on the choice to use brand orientation strategy. This has been a practical choice in developing this theoretical concept, a way to most effectively begin characterising what brand orientation looks like and, as in this study, observe what is done within the scope of a brand oriented strategy. However, like Baumgarth et al. (2013) in their paper reviewing the evolution of brand orientation theory, we encourage future research to return

to the foundations and assumptions of this strategic concept. In doing so we would ask not about particular values, behaviours or brand philosophies, but whether a brand orientation strategy is indeed something organisations pursue deliberately or develop naturally, and to what degree they see success based on their approach. In examining the theory of brand orientation in the context of organisations that have deliberately chosen to orient themselves around their brand, researchers may be able to gain a clearer view of what organisations do when they choose this strategy.

Further to reviewing the foundation of brand orientation theory, we suggest that the widely accepted view of branding orientation being a long-term approach has not been explored to its full potential. Despite this consistent characterisation of brand orientation as a long-term strategic approach, researchers have generally investigated it using cross-sectional research. Our qualitative exploration of SMEs has shone a light on the evolving nature of brand orientation in relation to increased deliberateness in branding. Further studies that focus on the long-term nature of this strategy enactment by embracing the concept of brand orientation as a continuum (e.g. Hankinson 2001) may add a more in-depth understanding of the dynamic nature of brand orientation in organisation, and compliment work on prediction, performance and modelling in the field.

A great number of opportunities and directions exist in how brand orientation theory may be extended or explored, within a SME context and beyond.

### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Appendix

Through observation of the websites of multiple wineries and in line with characteristics of brand orientation identified in the academic literature (discussed earlier), it was determined that evidence of brand orientation could be gauged in observation of the following:

- Prevalence of a brand name and symbols, including logos and taglines
- Articulated brand values, through ties to a leader narrative and values
- Brand-led communication, including cross-channel brand communication outlets and consistent use of brand or emotive language
- Demonstrated resource investment in the brand, including evidence of time spend investing in tangible brand



**Table 1** Profile of wineries with observation and evaluation of the degree of brand orientation demonstrated in website

Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D
<b>Size:</b> Micro <b>Age:</b> 10 to 15 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1 <b>Resource investment:</b> 0 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 1 <b>TOTAL:</b> Lower brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Small <b>Age:</b> Less than 5 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 2.5 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 2 <b>Resource investment:</b> 0.5 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 2.5 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Small <b>Age:</b> 15 to 20 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1.5 <b>Resource investment:</b> 1 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 1 <b>TOTAL:</b> Lower brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Micro <b>Age:</b> 5 to 10 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2.5 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1.5 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1.5 <b>Resource investment:</b> 2 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 2.5 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation
Case E	Case F	Case G	Case H
<b>Size:</b> Small <b>Age:</b> 5 to 10 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2.5 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 2.5 <b>Resource investment:</b> 0 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 2 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Micro <b>Age:</b> 10 to 15 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 1.5 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 2 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1.5 <b>Resource investment:</b> 2 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 2 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Micro <b>Age:</b> 5 to 10 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 2 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 0.5 <b>Resource investment:</b> 2 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 2 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Small <b>Age:</b> 5 to 10 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2.5 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 2 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 2 <b>Resource investment:</b> 2.5 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 3 <b>TOTAL:</b> Higher brand orientation
Case I	Case J		
<b>Size:</b> Micro <b>Age:</b> 5 to 10 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2.5 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1 <b>Resource investment:</b> 1 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 0.5 <b>TOTAL:</b> Lower brand orientation	<b>Size:</b> Small <b>Age:</b> 15 to 20 years <b>Brand and symbols:</b> 2 <b>Brand and leader values:</b> 1 <b>Brand-led communication:</b> 1 <b>Resource investment:</b> 0 <b>Stakeholder involvement:</b> 1 <b>TOTAL:</b> Lower brand orientation		

aspects like videos and newsletters and other references to time or money invested in brand development

- Reference to a diverse range of stakeholders, including involving staff as part of the brand history and values and demonstrating brand-centric organisational culture

Each winery was given a relative score on each of these factors relating to their brand: 0 being absent, 1 being low or sparsely observed, 2 being medium or generally present and 3 being high or strongly demonstrated. These profiles assisted first in gaining a sense of what degree of brand orientation enactment might be observed during in-depth interviews, by combining the ratings for a total relative score of brand orientation observed from winery websites. Second, these ratings assisted analysis in being a tool in calibrating the demonstrated enactment of brand orientation in light of contextual factors like age and size (Table 1).

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