

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Family firms' identity communication and consumers' product involvement impact on consumer response

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the image transfer theory and the elaboration likelihood model can provide a theoretical framework capable of assessing the influence of consumers' product involvement and family firms' identity communication through websites on consumer responses. This research conducted an experiment using an eye-tracking technique measuring attention to family and nonfamily corporate websites. The procedure involved 120 participants. Consistent with the image transfer theory, family firms' identity through websites positively impacts attitude toward the website and intention to buy. Additionally, the attitude toward the website affects the relationship between family firms' identity through websites and the intention to buy. In line with the elaboration likelihood model, consumers' product involvement negatively impacts the relationship between family firms' identity through websites and intention to buy.

KEYWORDS

elaboration likelihood model, family firm image, family firms' identity, image transfer theory, product involvement

1 | INTRODUCTION

The extant literature on family firms highlights the importance of family identity as a powerful strategic asset (e.g., Binz Astrachan, Botero, Astrachan, & Prügl, 2018; Craig, Dibrell, & Davis, 2008). Effectively communicating family firms' identity through websites (FFIWeb) is paramount due to the importance of online interactions between consumers and firms (Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Rejón Guardia, & Pérez Campos, 2016). Unfortunately, prior research on this topic has not yielded a reliable theoretical framework to understand the impact of FFIWeb on consumer response.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the image transfer theory (Gwinner, 1997) and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983) can provide a theoretical framework capable of assessing the effect of FFIWeb on consumer response. This research combines the different

perspectives which emerged from the elaboration likelihood model and the image transfer theory to develop an integrated model of attitude formation and behavior toward FFIWeb.

Consistent with the image transfer theory, FFIWeb communication can help achieving two distinct goals: (a) improving the attitude toward the websites (AttWeb) used to transfer family firms' identity and, (b) increasing the intention to buy (IntBuy) with regard to the products offered by family firms (Alcántara-Pilar, Del Barrio-García, & Rodríguez-López, 2018; Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Hervás Crespo, & Núñez Pomar, 2016). On the other hand, the elaboration likelihood model suggests that the quality cues associated with family firms can have a significant and direct impact on IntBuy mostly for consumers with low product involvement (ProInv). Consumers usually perceive the family identity of family firms as a quality cue. In this sense, since little time is required to process the information associated with family identity, consumer response is improved with regard to consumers with a low level of product involvement. The experiment conducted in this study contributes to

the broader literature on the effects of communicating family firms' identity on consumer responses by examining the effects of FFIWeb on AttWeb and IntBuy and examining how the direct effect of FFIWeb on IntBuy is moderated by ProInv.

The article is organized as follows: The next section introduces a discussion tying the extant literature on the reputation of family businesses together with the importance of communicating their family identity to marketing research on the moderating effects of image transfer and product involvement. On this basis, the research hypotheses are put forward. Further on, the methods section explains the research design as well as data collection and data analysis procedures. Finally, the last two sections of this article reveal the results obtained through this research and the main conclusions are assessed in the closing discussion.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Communicating family firms' identity

The communication of the family component of a business impacts the perception of consumers and interest groups with regard to the company (Beck, 2016). The extant literature on family firms usually highlights family identity as a significant business asset distinguishing family firms from the competition while establishing a high-quality brand image. Family identity also serves to communicate relevant information about the different businesses, products, and services of the family firm (e.g., Binz Astrachan et al., 2018; Craig et al., 2008). Empirical research approaching family identity as a communication tool reported that using the family name as the name of the family firm has a positive impact on the company's reputation (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013). This is a consequence of family firms focusing on maintaining a valuable image for their customers and interest groups (Berrone, Cruz, Gomez-Mejia, & Larraza-Kintana, 2010). In addition, empirical evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between the effective communication of the family identity of a company with sales growth (Gallucci, Santulli, & Calabrò, 2015) and improved financial indicators (Zellweger, Kellermanns, Eddleston, and Memili (2012). However, Botero, Thomas, Graves, and Fediuk (2013) reported that only 26% of family firms clearly communicate their family identity values through their websites.

Most studies in the literature approaching companies' family identity as a differentiating element and also as a communication tool aimed at their customers and interest groups were developed after examining to which degree family firms are willing to display their family identity and nature (Botero et al., 2013). Research corroborates that this type of companies set themselves apart from the competition on the basis of their unique and inimitable family history. In addition, family firms avoid generational differences in their core values and communicate their successful customer bonding strategies while building trust over time (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012; Krappe, Goutas, & von Schlippe, 2011). In this sense, research has concluded that not every family firm puts the same emphasis when conveying their family identity, the values associated with the

firm's owning family and the relationship with their business (Binz Astrachan et al., 2018).

Family identity is paramount with regard to quality brand building and its transfer process is impacted by companies' ease of access to the Internet as a massive communication tool for all types of businesses (Ageeva, Melewar, Froudi, Dennis, & Jin, 2018; Botero, Binz Astrachan, & Calabrò, 2018). Consumer perceptions of family firms are greatly impacted by the way in which family identity is communicated (Botero et al., 2013). In this sense, evidence shows that family firms' websites can affect the performance of the family firm's business units (Barroso, González-López, Sanguino, & Buena-dicha-Mateos, 2018). In this sense, the different approaches used to communicate family identity through websites can lead to disparate consumer responses.

2.2 | Effects of FFIWeb on AttWeb and IntBuy

This research approaches the image transfer theory (Gwinner, 1997) to examine the way in which family identity is communicated through the website of the family firm influencing consumer response. According to this theory, the collection of perceptions and associations that consumers hold in memory regarding a brand can take the form of attributes, benefits, attitudes, and experiences (Keller, 1993). The image transfer theory is widely accepted and used in the field of sponsorship (Novais & Arcodia, 2013) to illustrate the process in which the inherent attributes, benefits, attitudes, and experiences associated with a brand are transferred to the sponsoring brand.

With regard to prior studies, the image transfer theory has been also approached in web environments. On this subject, research demonstrated that the characteristics of corporate brands' websites affect the perceptions of the website, product reviews, attitudes, and the intention to buy (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2018; Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Hervás Crespo, et al., 2016). The present study approaches the image transfer theory to assess the impact of the AttWeb on the perception of the corporate brand and the IntBuy products offered by the company analyzed in this study. In this regard, the sense of familiarity associated with family firms is expected to be transferred to the websites of the companies and to their products in the same way that the image of an event is transferred to the sponsor and ultimately impacts the intention to buy of the sponsoring brand (Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Hervás Crespo, et al., 2016). In light of this, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1: *FFIWeb leads to higher IntBuy.*

[FFIWeb: communicating family firms' identity through websites; IntBuy: intention to buy with regard to the products offered by family firms]

H2: *FFIWeb leads to higher AttWeb.*

[FFIWeb: communicating family firms' identity through websites; AttWeb: attitude toward the websites used to transfer family firms' identity]

H3: *AttWeb mediates the FFIWeb–IntBuy relationship.*

[*AttWeb: attitude toward the websites used to transfer family firms' identity; FFIWeb: communicating family firms' identity through websites; IntBuy: intention to buy with regard to the products offered by family firms*]

2.3 | The moderating role of Prolnv

Prolnv refers to the general level of interest or concern with regard to a product class (Suh & Youjae, 2006). Prolnv can also be defined as the perceived relevance of the product based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Boisvert & Ashill, 2011). The impact of communicating FFIWeb on consumer response can be moderated by the level of consumers' product involvement. In their elaboration likelihood model, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) and Petty et al. (1983) established that the level of involvement impacts information processing by using either a central or a peripheral route. For a consumer browsing a website of a high involvement product the information related to it will be analyzed in an elaborate manner; this refers to the central route. In contrast, for a low involvement product, a potential consumer will not invest the same analytical effort required to process information about a high involvement product but rather will focus, for example, on the image of the family firm; this refers to the peripheral route.

The elaboration likelihood model suggests that consumers can identify the family identity of family firms as a quality cue. This requires low effort to process and improves consumer response with regard to low involvement products. Therefore, the quality cues associated with family firms are expected to have a significant and direct impact on IntBuy mostly for consumers with low involvement with the product. The present study posits that consumers with low involvement with the product will process the information associated with the family identity of family firms as a quality cue. In this sense, a significant impact of FFIWeb on IntBuy for consumers with low involvement with the product is observed as opposed to consumers with a high involvement with the product. In this light, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H4: *The FFIWeb–IntBuy relationship is weakened by Prolnv.*

[*FFIWeb: communicating family firms' identity through websites; IntBuy: intention to buy with regard to the products offered by family firms; Prolnv: level of product involvement*]

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 | Procedure

The experiment was conducted in a testing room prepared for scientific research following the guidelines issued by the International Telecommunication Union (2002) and located in the metropolitan area in one of the largest cities in Chile. The participant recruitment method ensured a balanced gender (53% men, 47% women) and age ($M = 28$, $SD = 12.4$) composition. Participants were randomly selected for the different experimental groups. Each participant was accompanied into the testing room where they were informed on the experiment and the research procedure. After obtaining their informed consent, the subjects were accommodated in the testing room allowing them to relax.

The experimental design of this research assessed the visual attention indicator as a manipulation check applying eye-tracking metrics. This method revealed that AttWeb and IntBuy are both mediated by FFIWeb and they are not affected by respondents' number of fixations on the different stimuli. A tracker device from Eye Tribe widely used in marketing research was used in this experiment (Dalmaijer, 2014; Ooms, Dupont, Lapon, & Popelka, 2015; Popelka, Stachoň, Šašinka, & Doležalová, 2016). The interaction time with the website was assessed beforehand through five qualitative analyses logging the required time to understand the website, analyzing the processed information, and the depth of processing. Respondents took an average of 90 s to browse the website. After completing the task, they were questioned with regard to variables such as the type of information, ease of browsing and ease of understanding. All subjects reported optimal results.

During the course of the experiment, respondents browsed three corporate websites from three different business areas allowing a rest of 15 s before switching websites. This method emulated the design implemented by Hernández-Méndez and Muñoz-Leiva (2015). Table 1 shows the experimental design in a 3×2 Latin square layout involving three industrial sectors (intrasubject factor) and two types of corporate websites (family firms' websites and nonfamily firms' websites) (intersubject factor). The different experimental groups are comprised of 20 participants with a total of 119 respondents (data are obtained from one individual was removed from the experiment after logging invalid eye tracking information). Therefore, each respondent interacted with three different corporate websites designed through an online website builder containing six stimuli

TABLE 1 Experimental design

Group	Presentation	Type of web	Name	Stimulus link	Example of stimuli
G1	H_J_B	Family Firm website (familiar)	A	http://bit.ly/2WaFb6E	https://bit.ly/2FnQdjh
G2	B_H_J			http://bit.ly/2Hubuds	http://bit.ly/2Y6IbCF
G3	J_B_H			http://bit.ly/2CuDN7e	http://bit.ly/2JkcKBs
G4	H_J_B	Nonfamily firm website (nonfamiliar)	B	http://bit.ly/2TWgnl7	http://bit.ly/2Fpztp
G5	B_H_J			http://bit.ly/2ThmbBB	http://bit.ly/2FefxXz
G6	J_B_H			http://bit.ly/2UKeeGk	http://bit.ly/2FmLL4o

Note. The nomenclature used refers to: hotel (H), jewelry (J), bank (B).

each as can be observed at the links within Table 1. The website translated into English can be seen in the Appendix 1.

3.2 | Questionnaire

Respondents submitted a self-reported questionnaire after completing the interaction with the different websites. The questionnaire included questions referring to the variables under study and sociodemographic variables. The IntBuy scale was adapted from Del Barrio-García and Luque-Martínez (2003), previously adapted from Miniard, Rose, Barone, and Manning (1993). The AttWeb scale was adapted from Carlson and O’Cass (2010), approached by Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Montoro Rios, and Alguacil Jiménez (2017) in prior research. The FFIWeb scale was adapted from Beck and Kenning (2015). With regard to ProInv, the 3-item scale was adapted from Ko, Kim, Kim, and Lee (2010).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Manipulation checks

Results from the repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) analysis show that there were no real differences in the levels of FFIWeb between the websites of the three business areas ($p > 0.05$). However, differences were found when assessing the type of website (family firms’ websites and nonfamily firms’ websites; $F_{1,116} = 36.7$, $p = 0.000$; $\eta^2 = 0.239$). The aggregated fixation time was analyzed to test whether all respondents used a similar fixation time across the different websites and business areas. This indicator reports the total time in seconds that each respondent takes looking at family firms’ information. The different stimuli associated with family firms which were used to measure attention and fixations have been highlighted in red boxes, they can be seen below in the example of stimuli column at Table 1. In addition, results show that respondents’ level of attention was similar for the three business areas ($p > 0.10$) and the two types of websites ($p > 0.10$). In this light, the study finds that the values obtained for attitude, involvement and family image are only affected by the information presented by the website. The time taken to browse the website has no real impact. Therefore, the conducted manipulations can be considered valid.

4.2 | The effect of type of website on AttWeb and IntBuy

First, this study approached a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) technique to test the impact of type of website and involvement level on AttWeb and IntBuy. The assumptions for the MANOVA analysis are effectively realized since the variance-covariance matrices (Box’s M test = 11.75; $F = 0.62$; $p = 0.886$) and the variances between the different groups is equal (Levene test yielding nonsignificant results in all cases). Wilks’s λ was significant

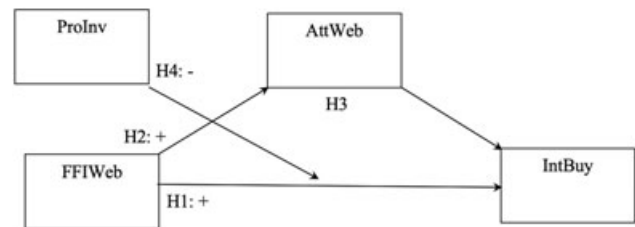


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework. AttWeb: attitude toward the websites used to transfer family firms’ identity; FFIWeb: communicating family firms’ identity through websites; IntBuy: intention to buy with regard to the products offered by family firms; ProInv: level of product involvement

($p < 0.05$) for the main effect of type of website (family firm website vs. nonfamily firm website/familiar vs. nonfamiliar). The familiar website generated a higher AttWeb ($F_{1,115} = 4.191$, $p = 0.043$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.034$) and an increased IntBuy ($F_{1,114} = 10.329$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.074$) compared with the nonfamiliar website. Results are consistent with hypotheses H1 and H2. (Figure 1)

Wilks’s λ was also significant ($p < 0.05$) for the main effect of product involvement (high vs. low). Respondents with a high level of involvement reported a higher AttWeb ($F_{1,114} = 4.694$, $p = 0.032$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.039$) and IntBuy ($F_{1,114} = 23.365$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.169$). The relationship between the type of website and level of involvement did not show any difference across the different groups under study for the dependent variables, indicating that respondents with a high level of involvement always report higher levels of AttWeb and IntBuy regardless of the type of website. In addition, respondents exposed to the stimuli associated with family firms show higher levels of AttWeb and IntBuy regardless of their level of involvement (as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2).

4.3 | The effect of FFIWeb on AttWeb and IntBuy

The mediator and moderator analyses were conducted using the PROCESS Model 5 macro for SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0., IBM Corp, Armonk, NY) (Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Model 5 is a conditional process analysis in which FFIWeb exerts its effect on IntBuy indirectly through AttWeb, independent of any other variable, but also directly, with the magnitude of the direct effect being dependent on ProInv.

TABLE 2 The effect of type of web on AttWeb and IntBuy: Multivariate analysis of variance results

Source	Wilks’s λ	F	p	η_p^2
Type of web (family firm vs. nonfamily firm)	0.731	10.249	0.000	0.269
Product involvement (low vs. high)	0.748	4.633	0.000	0.252
Type of website \times Product involvement	0.959	0.168	0.337	0.039

Note. $df = (1,114)$.

AttWeb: attitude toward the websites; IntBuy: intention to buy.

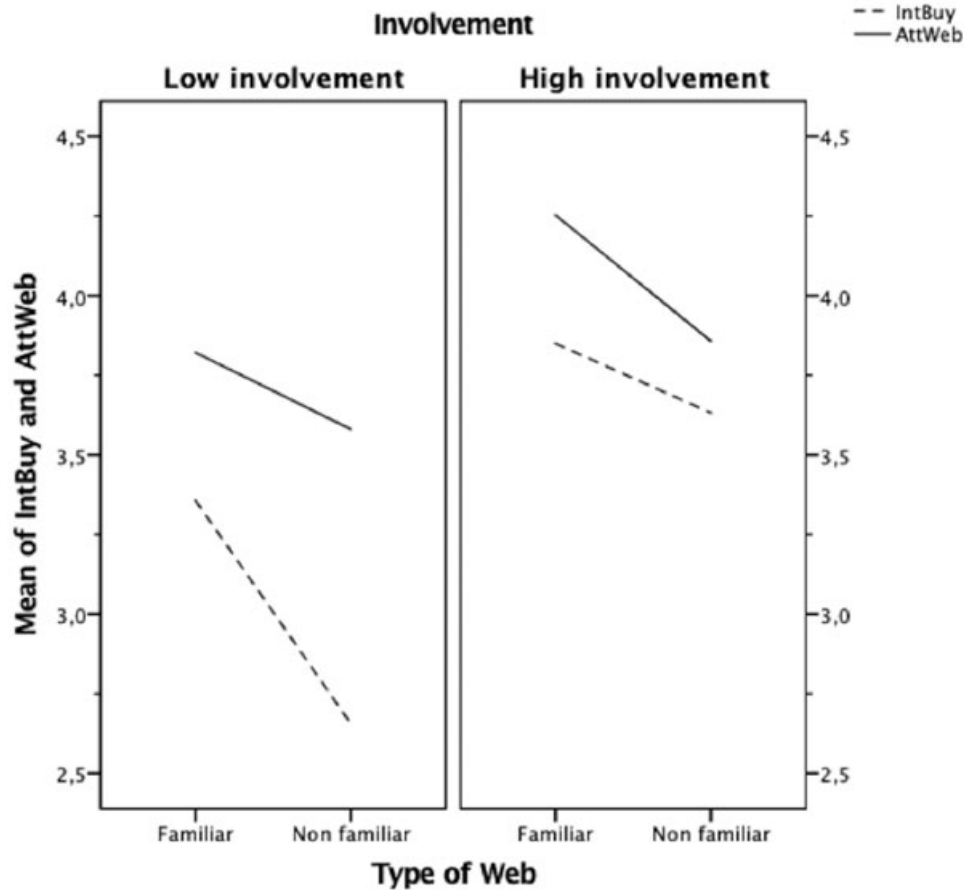


FIGURE 2 The effect of type of website on AttWeb and IntBuy. AttWeb: attitude toward the websites used to transfer family firms' identity; IntBuy: intention to buy with regard to the products offered by family firms

Table 3 shows a positive and direct effect of FFIWeb on AttWeb ($p < 0.01$) and IntBuy ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. In addition, results indicate a positive, indirect effect of FFIWeb mediated by AttWeb on IntBuy ($p < 0.05$). In this light, Hypothesis 3 is supported. These results are consistent with the image transfer theory.

Table 3 also shows the negative moderating effect of ProInv on the direct and positive effect of FFIWeb on IntBuy ($p < 0.05$). To be more precise, this direct and positive effect is higher for respondents with a low ProInv. Hence, the Hypothesis 4 is supported. This result is consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to determine whether the image transfer theory and the elaboration likelihood model can provide a reliable theoretical framework capable of explaining the impact of FFIWeb on consumer response. Based on an eye-tracking experiment combined with a questionnaire survey, this research provides a better understanding of consumers' cognitive processes, interests, and preferences

TABLE 3 Mediation and moderation statistics: PROCESS Model 5

	Coeff	T	95% CI	R ²
<i>Outcome: IntBuy</i>				
AttWeb	0.313	3.794	0.1494 0.4758	0.4275
FFIWeb	0.458	2.626	0.1124 0.8026	
ProInv	0.931	4.064	0.4772 1.3852	
FFIWeb × ProInv	-0.146	-2.289	-0.2717 -0.0196	
<i>Outcome: AttWeb</i>				
FFIWeb	0.342	5.202	0.2121 0.4728	0.1892
Level of ProInv				
<i>Conditional direct effect of FFIWeb on IntBuy at different levels of ProInv</i>				
1.6762 = mean -1 SD	0.213		0.0402 0.3865	
2.6175 = mean	0.076		-0.0619 0.2144	
3.5587 = mean + 1 SD	-0.061		-0.2516 0.1299	
<i>Indirect effect of FFIWeb on IntBuy</i>				
AttWeb	0.107		0.0377 0.2098	

Note. AttWeb: attitude toward the websites; CI: confidence interval; FFIWeb: family firms' identity through websites; IntBuy: intention to buy; LL: lower limit; ProInv: product involvement; SD: standard deviation; UL: upper limit.

when faced with family firms' communicational stimuli (Pieters & Wedel, 2004; Wedel & Pieters, 2000).

Results from the present study suggest that FFIWeb not only has a direct impact on IntBuy but also has an indirect effect through AttWeb. This corroborates research from Beck (2016) which determined that communicating the family component of a firm influences the stakeholders' perceptions of the company. It also provides further support to prior research from Deephouse and Jaskiewicz (2013) with regard to the impact of transferring the family name to the name of the company on the reputation of these enterprises. This, in turn, would explain results from Gallucci et al. (2015) who found a positive relationship between a correct communication of the family identity and sales growth, and Zellweger et al. (2012) who provide empirical evidence on the idea that the image of a family firm improves the firm's business performance.

Results from this research also support the notion that FFIWeb and AttWeb work in tandem to influence IntBuy. This means that when applying family firms' identity on websites, managers must make sure that AttWeb is properly assessed. Communicating FFIWeb affects AttWeb, leading to a higher IntBuy. Results are also in line with previous literature on consumers' buying decision process stating the importance of securing customers' attention to persuade them to purchase (e.g., Behe, Zhao, Sage, Huddleston, & Minahan, 2013; Rihn & Yue, 2016). This study is also in line with Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2018) and Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig Moreno, Rejón Guardia, et al. (2016) who provide support on the idea that the characteristics of websites play an important role in customers' evaluations about the website, the products offered by the firm as well as their attitude toward the companies, their products and the intention to buy.

Additionally, this study found that the direct effect of FFIWeb on IntBuy is stronger when ProInv is low and weaker when ProInv is higher. This corroborates previous literature on how consumers process information through central versus peripheral routes depending on their level of involvement with the products or services they are researching (Behe, Bae, Huddleston, & Sage, 2015; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Consumers with a low level of involvement with the product will invest less time to process detailed information about it. In this sense, those stimuli capable of communicating the family component of a firm will be the most effective (Lee, Cheng, & Shih, 2017). This leads to the idea that family firms' consumers with different levels of product involvement will show different patterns of response to the stimuli communicating the family identity of the firms, especially in terms of IntBuy. The finding that ProInv negatively moderates the direct relationship between FFIWeb and IntBuy indicates that managers should have a greater incentive to communicate FFIWeb regarding low involvement product categories. The family identity of a firm also has a bigger chance of becoming a major source of competitive advantage in the case of firms focusing on consumer segments with low ProInv.

Results from the present experiment with regard to the effect of FFIWeb on consumer responses suggest the viability of combining the elaboration likelihood model and the image transfer theory into an integrated model. Finding consumers' preferences depending on

their level of product involvement should lead to a better understanding of the effectiveness of communicating the family component of the firms. In this sense, the opportunity to make their family identity a source of competitive advantage as is suggested in prior research (e.g., Morris, Schindehutte, & LaForge, 2002).

In summary, this study provides the three following theoretical contributions: First, it contributes to the theory available on family firms by providing guidance to capitalize on the family component through the communication process of this type of businesses. In this sense, this research also contributes to the emerging theory of family firms' branding (Binz Astrachan et al., 2018). Second, this study contributes to the image transfer theory (Gwinner, 1997) by implementing its concept to assess whether the stimuli which communicate the family component of a firm through a website impact consumers' AttWeb and their IntBuy. Finally, the present research also contributes to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty et al., 1983) corroborating the impact of product involvement on consumers' information processing of a product or service. In this case, product involvement weakens the positive effect of communicating the stimuli associated with family firms on consumer response.

In practical terms, family businesses managers should benefit from this study by learning that communicating the family component of their firms through their corporate websites can yield advantage over their competitors. As Micelotta and Raynard (2011) posit, managers can leverage the family values, history and other attributes of the family firm which can be transferred through the website of the firm. Managers can approach this knowledge to highlight the characteristics of their products and services, emphasizing their expertise, tradition and family commitment with quality. This can also be relevant in terms of delivering an improved communication of the unique nature of their products and services as well as their focus on innovation and continuous development. The following factors are also important to effectively communicate the family component: the website layout, the use of images and pictures, logos and symbols and the company name.

This study also has some limitations. To determine the external validity of the present findings, a conceptual replication is needed where the research would be conducted in different countries and settings approaching various communication formats (e.g., public relations, sponsored content, social media) using different interfaces (e.g., desktop vs. mobile). Future research should examine additional moderators (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian products, well-known family firms vs. unknown family firms) and mediators (e.g., brand attitude and brand familiarity).

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF STIMULI USED IN THE EXPERIMENT AND TEXT OF THE WEBSITE

****TEXT OF THE WEBSITE*****

*** From top to bottom and from left to right ***

Welcome to Hotel Don Hilario—The Hotel—Characteristics—About us—Contact

A modern and innovative family hotel

Click here to make a reservation

Characteristics

The best hotel offerings

Located in the Itata Valley, in the Bío Bío region, at the feet of the coastal mountain range, you will enjoy the sight of breathtaking valleys and the unique wildlife of Chile

Restaurant. Local cooking. Local gastronomy with the best care and service

Architecture: Architecture from the past with advanced concepts for the future. The family estate, built in the colonial era, has been restored including all the amenities for the best client experience

About us

A family hotel in a privileged location surrounded by nature

Family tradition. Our family is dedicated to customer service. The origins of the building can be traced back to the 16th century and has been passed through the family since then. The family hotel itself is a tourist attraction. The romantic gardens take an essential role in the pleasant atmosphere and quaint scenery enjoyed in the family hotel

Society and business

To this date we are still striving to be a part of our customers' life and our efforts are aimed to keep alive the enthusiasm for continuing the hotel business

Contact information

Reach us through social media and e-mail
(Facebook - Instagram - Twitter)
