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Branding the family firm: A review, integrative framework proposal, and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

A family business brand allows family-owned companies to leverage a valuable idiosyncratic resource: the family nature of the firm. A steadily growing body of research evidences the growing interest among both researchers and practitioners – understandably so, given that prior contributions have identified a range of positive organizational outcomes associated with family business branding. However, the lack of a unifying definition, an encompassing framework, and an adequate measure of a family business brand present important challenges for the advancement of the field. Applying a systems approach, we propose a multi-dimensional conceptualization of the family business brand that emerges from prior research and our own observations of actual family business branding practices. With this guiding framework, we hope to systemize and inspire future research to help facilitate growth in this area of work.

1. Introduction

A family business brand allows family-owned companies to leverage a valuable idiosyncratic resource: the family nature of the firm (Craig, Dibrell & Davis, 2008; Zellweger, Eddleston, & Kellermanns, 2010). A family business brand could be considered inimitable because of the owning family's unique history, its identity, and the family members that have exemplified family and firm values over time, perpetuated in stories anchored in the minds of employees, customers, and other stakeholders (Blombäck, 2011; Krappe, Goutas, & von Schlippe, 2011). The challenge for family business owners and leaders lies in the identification of values and characteristics that add value to the brand message recipient (Blombäck & Botero, 2013), making the family business brand a potential source of sustained competitive advantage.

In today's hypercompetitive business environment, where stakeholders face endless choices and streams of information, brands are important means of differentiation (Hulberg, 2006; Keller, 2008). Brands create unique impressions about a company and its products in the minds of stakeholders (Anisimova, 2007; Balmer & Gray, 2003), and help stakeholders in capturing valuable information that guides them in their decision-making about a product, service, or an organization (La Foret, 2009; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015).

Due to the importance of brands in today's world, family business

scholars and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the phenomenon of family business branding (e.g., Binz, Hair, Pieper & Baldauf, 2013; Blombäck & Botero, 2013; Craig et al., 2008; Tasman-Jones, 2015; Zellweger, Kellermanns, Eddleston & Memili, 2012). The focus of family business brand scholarship until now has been on understanding whether family ownership can serve as a mark that helps differentiate family business products and services in the market place, how family business brands are used, what the perceptions are that different stakeholders have about the family business brand, and what the potential downsides of such using a family business brand might be. Although there has been some advancement in our understanding of family business brands, a challenge that researchers still face is the confusion and amalgamation of representations that have developed from studying family business branding from multiple points of view.

In the last decade, there has been growth in the number of publications about family business branding as evidenced by the recent publication of two important reviews. The work of Sageder, Mitter, and Feldbauer-Durstmüller (2016) presents a 'systematic literature review of the state of research' (p. 1) about family firm image and reputation. In this project, the authors review 73 publications and distinguish four types of contributions: (1) those that focus on associations (perceptions) with family firms, (2) those that investigate the family's influence on the firm's image and reputation, (3) those that look at the actions taken

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to create a distinct family firm image, and (4) those that examine the consequences of being known as a family firm. A second review by Beck (2016) analyzes 41 publications in terms of the ‘potential consequences of being a family firm on internal organizational processes, and stakeholders’ external perception’ (p. 225). The article draws on organizational identity theory, and outlines an expansive set of interesting questions for further research. These reviews synthesize the efforts of prior research, and provide a basis to further our understanding of the family business brand and the branding process in family firms. However, neither review is clear about what constitutes a family business brand or what is the combined understanding that researchers have accumulated about family business branding.

To address this gap, this article reviewed 91 publications (i.e., 50 scholarly articles, six working papers, two dissertations, one master thesis, five conference papers, one report, and 26 practitioner publications, see Appendix A for details). Our goal was to take stock of prior research in order to determine what constitutes a family business brand, what we know about the family business brand and the branding process, to highlight areas of uncertainty and perhaps confusion, and to provide a guiding framework that captures our combined knowledge about family business brands. Lastly, this article outlines avenues for future research that will help bring clarity and facilitate growth of this area of work.

2. Defining the family business brand

Scholars have inadvertently created confusion in the understanding about family business brands by employing a variety of terms – oftentimes somewhat synonymously – when investigating this phenomenon (see Table 1 below). Even though there is an underlying commonality that tries to describe how family ownership can work as a differentiator in the marketplace, an overarching definition of the focal concept has yet to emerge. The lack of a unifying definition presents an important challenge to the advancement the field, as it leads to different understandings as well as operationalization and measurement of the family business brand, that make it difficult to combine research results and develop theory in this area. An encompassing definition – based on the knowledge accumulated over the last decade – of what constitutes the

family business brand is needed in order to move beyond what can still be considered a formative stage.

Our review of the literature points to three views or conceptualizations of the family business brand. (1) The *identity view of the family business brand* focuses on what family business owners and leaders believe to be true about their organization, which includes characteristics they view as differentiating factors of their business. (2) The *image view of the family business brand* pertains to whether and how the business owners and leaders choose to portray the family nature of their business to stakeholders within and outside of the business (i.e., the image is what family business leaders and owners project to the world with the belief that their projection will create an image of the company in the minds of stakeholders that closely matches the company’s essence). And lastly, (3) the *reputation view of the family business brand* captures the unique perceptions that external stakeholders view as the differentiating factors for family firms in the marketplace and other venues. Although we present these views as three distinct conceptualizations, the literature often does not use them as distinct approaches; image, reputation, and brand are sometimes used synonymously. In the following sections, we present each of the approaches to gain a better understanding of what we know about these conceptualizations of the family business brand, to parse out each of the components, and to clearly articulate what each view contributes to our understanding of the family business brand.

2.1. Identity view of the family business brand

Organizational identity describes the “*mental associations about the organization held by organizational members*” (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006, p. 102). It answers the question “*who are we as an organization?*” and describes the organizational features that internal stakeholders consider the most central, distinctive and enduring about the firm (Albert & Whetten, 1985); it can be thought of as the essence of the firm (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, & Reger, 2017). In family firms, organizational identity is composed of a combination of the identity of the owning family and the identity of the business (Tagiuri & Davis, 1996; see also Zellweger et al., 2010). These two identities can be integrated or segmented to various degrees. This continuum can range from very

Table 1
Terms used in Family Business Branding Literature.

Term	Definition	Authors
Family Business Brand Identity	Unique family business resource that describes a set of promises and expectations indicating characteristics such as trustworthiness and consistency, for the customer.	Craig et al. (2008) and Gallucci et al. (2015)
Family Business Brand Associations/Secondary Brand Associations	References about the family’s involvement in a firm, used in combination with other components of the brand.	Blombäck (2009, 2010, 2011)
Family Business Brand	Associations and expectations created in stakeholder’s minds pertaining the involvement of a family in a firm.	Beck (2016), Binz Astrachan and Botero (forthcoming), Blombäck (2010), Blombäck and Botero (2013), Botero and Blombäck (2010) and Krappe et al. (2011).
Family Brand	Set of associations attributed to a particular family.	Parmentier, 2011 and Presas et al. (2011)
Family Business/Family Firm Image	Set of associations that individuals have in their memory regarding a family business.	Beck (2016), Ceja and Tàpies (2009), Hauswald et al. (2016), Memili et al. (2010), Orth and Green (2009), Ramdharie and Brinxma (2012), Sundaramurthy and Kreiner (2008) and Zellweger et al. (2012)
Family Business/Family Firm Identity	Family business leaders’ own perceptions of the company (e.g., ‘Are we a family firm?’)	Beck (2016), Blombäck and Ramírez-Pasillas (2012), Botero et al. (2013), Felden, Fischer, Graffius, and Marwede (2016), Micelotta and Raynard (2011), Presas et al. (2014); Sageder et al. (2015), Sundaramurthy and Kreiner (2008) and Zellweger et al. (2010)
Family Business/Family Firm Perceptions	Process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting the value of information about family ownership.	Botero (2014), Dessi et al. (2014), Eskine and Locander (2014), Hauswald and Hack (2013), Kahlert et al. (2017) and Okoroafo and Koh (2009).
Family Business/Family Firm Reputation	General perception that external stakeholders have of family firms as a distinct class of economic actors.	Beck (2016), Binz et al. (2013), Blombäck and Botero (2013), Botero and Blombäck (2010), Deephouse and Jaskiewicz (2013), Huybrechts et al. (2011) and Sageder et al. (2016).
Family Business Brand Heritage	Introduction of the concept of history as an important dimension that can be leveraged as part of the family business brand identity.	Blombäck and Brunninge, (2013)

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