
Guest editorial: Cultivating a broader paradigm to understand family business brands and the branding process

Introduction

As the predominant form of business worldwide, family firms [1] play a crucial role in shaping the global economy through their contributions to innovation, wealth creation, job creation and competitiveness (Calabrò *et al.*, 2019; La Porta *et al.*, 1999; Miroshnychenko *et al.*, 2021; Westhead and Cowling, 1998; Zellweger, 2017). In an increasingly competitive market where competition is constant, family firms need to brand their products and services to succeed and create a distinctive value for their offer (Anatolevena Anisimova, 2007; King, 1991; Reinartz *et al.*, 2019; Suchek *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, consumers today behave differently and have access to a wider set of products and services as they consider their options, contributing to making brands and branding a relevant topic today. Branding strategies provide a bundle of information that helps consumers differentiate a company's products and services from those of competitors (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Podnar, 2021; Hulberg, 2006; Kotler, 1991; Iglesias and Ind, 2020). Although research on brands and the branding process has boomed, only in recent years scholars and practitioners have become interested in understanding this phenomenon as it relates to family businesses (Andreini *et al.*, 2020; Beck, 2016; Binz Astrachan *et al.*, 2018; Sageder *et al.*, 2018 for recent reviews).

Defining a family firm is not an easy task. In its broadest sense, family firms are companies where members of the same family, or related family branches, hold a majority interest and where the owning family exerts a dominant influence on the strategic direction of the company (Chrisman *et al.*, 2005). When compared to nonfamily-owned firms, family firms place greater importance on long-term and value-oriented business models (Krappe, 2009; Krappe and von Schlippe, 2013). Also, because family firms couple financial goals with nonfinancial ones, their strategic decision-making is distinctive from that of nonfamily firms in that it includes the need of the family to preserve socioemotional wealth (Reina *et al.*, 2022). Thus, family firms can leverage the involvement of the family in the firm as a unique value proposition that helps to differentiate them in the marketplace to gain

competitive advantage (Binz Astrachan *et al.*, 2018; Craig *et al.*, 2008; Krappe *et al.*, 2011; Zellweger *et al.*, 2010).

One of the ways through which family firms leverage their uniqueness is through the use of family business brands (Rauschendorfer *et al.*, 2022). In a general sense, a family business brand encompasses “the formal and informal communication of the family element of firm essence, which includes the family's involvement in a firm, and which leads to associations and expectations in the mind of stakeholders that help differentiate these firms from others in the marketplace and other venues” (Binz Astrachan *et al.*, 2018, p. 5). On the same token, family business brands communicate the family nature of these firms, which leads to associations and expectations that differentiate these firms from competitors in their market. Theoretical, empirical and ample anecdotal evidence supports the assumption that promoting the firm's family nature as a building block of the organizational brand identity can offer important benefits (Bargoni *et al.*, 2023a; Beliaeva *et al.*, 2022; Binz *et al.*, 2013; Deephouse and Jaskiewicz, 2013; Sageder *et al.*, 2018; Zellweger *et al.*, 2012). Scholars have been particularly interested in understanding how family involvement in a business makes a brand different, how family firms make choices about their brand and how consumers perceive family business brands (Andreini *et al.*, 2020; Beck, 2016; Binz Astrachan *et al.*, 2018; Sageder *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the growing interest in family business branding, research in this area is still in its infancy and provides interesting opportunities for further exploration. This opening article of the special issue “Building Bridges Across Branding Research: Family Business Brands and The Branding Process” seeks to discuss some of the limitations of our current knowledge in this area and provide avenues to advance this field. We particularly discuss the importance of including multiple paradigms and the need for varied methodologies of exploration to build a more comprehensive understanding of family business branding.

Up to now, family business branding research is rooted in a stimuli–reaction paradigm (Andreini *et al.*, 2020). This approach focuses exclusively on the cognitive and emotional understanding of how consumers perceive and process the family business brand. However, a widely shared view among branding scholars suggests that a brand and its significance are largely a by-product of a negotiation of meanings that takes place in the marketplace (MacInnis *et al.*, 2019). From this paradigm, the brand is seen as the outcome of a socially constructed process and/or as an outcome of co-creation practices that involve consumers, producers and other audiences. Therefore, relying on a stimuli–reaction paradigm for our understanding downplays the role that contextual forces play in shaping consumer cognitions, emotions and perceptions. This suggests that, to move forward in our understanding of family business brands and branding, we need to create connections between different forms of scholarship to build a more comprehensive view of this topic.

The prevalence of the stimuli–reaction paradigm has also narrowed the type of methodological approaches currently used in the study of family business brands. Research so far relies on experiments, surveys or interviews as the primary forms of data collection. Although these methodologies have brought richness to the family business field (Evert *et al.*, 2016), there are other methodological approaches that can enrich what we know about

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study brands, the branding process and the effects of brands in the context of family firms. For example, given the hybrid nature of the field of study which bridges at least two key literatures (family business and branding), mixed method designs seem particularly promising. New insights can be derived by combining approaches such as text-mining techniques applied to big data (e.g. social media posts, newspapers press), structural topic modeling and aspect-based sentiment analysis (Dehler-Holland *et al.*, 2022), with a qualitative method (for an example, see Mangiò *et al.*, 2023). Other examples of potentially insightful mixed methods include the combination of case-based data on family business branding strategies with survey data on consumers' perceptions before and after the implementation of different branding approaches. In addition, given the implicit complexity of family business brands alongside their idiosyncrasy, the subfield of family business branding is a perfect candidate for the application of cultural approach to marketing research (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006) and its respective methods like ethnography, visual methods, discourse analysis and other methods which fall under the interpretive toolkit. Bringing broad methodological approaches enriches our understanding of the family business branding process.

The articles in this special issue

The aim of this special issue is to advance and enrich the current scholarly debate on family business brands and branding. To do so, we provided a platform to introduce and integrate multiple perspectives and methodologies that will help expand our understanding about family business brands and the branding process. We were fortunate to include six papers in this special issue that focus on the characteristics and roles of family business brands, the use of social media and websites to communicate the brand, the meaning stakeholders ascribe to the family business brand and the social media reactions to family business brands. Each of these articles brings a unique contribution to our conversation of this topic.

The first article, "Family business branding from a signaling theory perspective: an integrative framework" by Marco Galvagno, Vincenzo Pisano and Sonia M. Strano, presents a bibliometric analysis of the family business brand literature and uses signaling theory as a framework to integrate what we know so far about family business brands and their role. The authors analyzed 90 papers about family business branding published between 2009 and 2022 and used bibliographic coupling to organize the articles in three thematic clusters: the first cluster named "Family firm identity: building process and components"; a second named "Family firm's identity: effects on stakeholders"; and a third one labeled "Family brand identity: processes and communication channels." The authors suggest that one of the main challenges in the exploration of family business brands is the difference in the terminology used by researchers, which makes the create of a unifying framework challenging to realize. Given this challenge, the authors suggest that the reliance on a specific and well-identified theory can be a suitable approach to unify and understand family business brands. Building on this notion, they use signaling theory to group research about family brands and

branding. Their proposal indicates that signaling theory is useful because it helps identify the three broad components necessary to understand family business brands: the signaler (i.e. the what), the signal (i.e. the how) and the receiver (i.e. to whom). Using this framework, they outline ideas for future research.

In the second article, "Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder: consumers' and jobseekers' interpretations of the family business brand," Philipp Jaufenthaler explores how different stakeholders ascribe meaning to the family business brand. Using advanced brand concept mapping and a scenario technique, the author graphically captures consumers' and jobseekers' brand knowledge in relation to family business brands. Two network associations were developed to understand the differences and similarities in the meaning that job applicants and consumer ascribe to family business brands. The author finds that there are important similarities and differences between the value that is given to a family business brand by different categories of stakeholders. Independent of the context, family business brands are associated with factors such as tradition, reliability and cohesion. For consumers, the unique associations are on the positive side and include high quality, customer orientation, personal involvement and duration. However, jobseekers have positive and negative associations with family business brand. On the negative side, lack of career opportunities, outdated, very distinct hierarchies and generational conflict came to light. On the positive side, it includes appreciation, collegiality, securing and quality. Taken together, these results provide additional insights into the "mixed" associations that a family business brand elicits and the unique impressions that different stakeholders may have based on the context in which the brand is presented.

In the third article titled "To be (family) or not to be (family): the familiness effect over brand authenticity posts on social media and consumer engagement relationship," Augusto Bargoni, Jacopo Ballerini, Demetris Vrontis and Alberto Ferraris explore whether family brand authenticity impacts consumer engagement in social media, and which dimensions of brand authenticity are more relevant. Using a multigroup analysis with AI algorithm, the authors analyze Facebook postings, reactions and comments from 10 European family businesses listed on the Global Family Business Index and their nonfamily competitors. The authors find that when Facebook postings by family firms enhance the perceptions of three important dimensions of brand authenticity (i.e. heritage, originality and symbolism), consumers will be more likely to engage with the company. Results also show that engagement with social media varies among three types of engagement: likes, comments and shares. While family firms' total number of interactions are lower than their nonfamily counterparts, a closer look at the results suggest shows that family firms have considerably higher comments and shares.

The fourth article titled "The impact of brand perceptions on the post-to-purchase journey: a family branding perspective" is by Caitlin Pink, Dean Wilkie and Christopher Graves. This study focused on understanding how the characteristics of social media posts about the family business brand affect perceptions of brand authenticity, social media

engagement and purchase intentions. In this study, a representative sample from UK consumers answered survey questions about companies with whom they interacted via social media and from whom they had bought products. Results suggest that the family business brand information provided in social media posts influences purchase intentions through the effects that it has on social media engagement and brand authenticity. These results highlight the importance of communicating the family business brand through social media channels because it will influence the perceptions and behaviors of consumers.

The fifth article by Adele Berndt and Corné Meintjes titled “The interrelationship of family identities, personalities, and expressions on family winery websites” explores how family brands are communicated through websites. Using an interpretivist paradigm, the authors explore the identity elements that family wineries in South Africa use when communicating through their websites. The authors looked at the content of 113 websites using an adaptation of the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) to identify first- and second-order categories to identify a family business brand identity framework that they present. The authors suggest that the family business brand that is communicated on winery websites depicts an interplay between family identity and family personality that is expressed through verbal and visual communication directed at different stakeholders (i.e. family expression). The combination of these three factors represents the brand promise that family businesses have toward their stakeholders. The authors suggest that creating a family business brand using a website involves the interrelationship between family identity, personality and family expression components. This study continues to build an important understanding in how family business brands are communicated through different medium, in different industries, and in different cultural contexts.

The final article “Who Let the Dog’s Out? How Underdog Biographies told by Family Firms Affect Consumers’ Brand Attitude” by Natalie Rauschendorfer, Maximilian Lude and Reinhard Prügl focuses on how brand stories and who communicates them can play a role in consumer perceptions (i.e. brand authenticity and trust) and, in turn, on consumer product-related intentions. The authors suggest that family businesses tend to highlight their roots and heritage as part of their branding and communication strategy. In general, brand stories help consumers connect to the brand. However, the degree and relevance of the connection is dependent on who tells the story and what story they tell. Rauschendorfer and colleagues suggest that when family businesses tell stories, they create a stronger connection in the consumer because stories enable consumers to establish a deeper connection with a specific source (i.e. the founder and the family). They also suggest that branding stories that incorporate and stress disadvantages along with a strong determination and passion (i.e. underdog stories) are better able to immerse the reader in the story and generate higher emotional connections that will help in the perceptions that they have of the products and the intentions that they have toward the brand. Using a 2 (Type of storyteller: family vs nonfamily firms) by 2 (Type of narrative: underdog vs top dog) between-subjects design, the authors test their ideas with a sample of 314 participants from

German-speaking countries. They find that those who use underdog brand stories are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, particularly when they are family firms. These perceptions in turn influence the participants’ intention decisions towards the product. The results from this study enhance our understanding of brand stories as a component of family business branding strategies and how they can be a source of competitive advantage and differentiation for family firms.

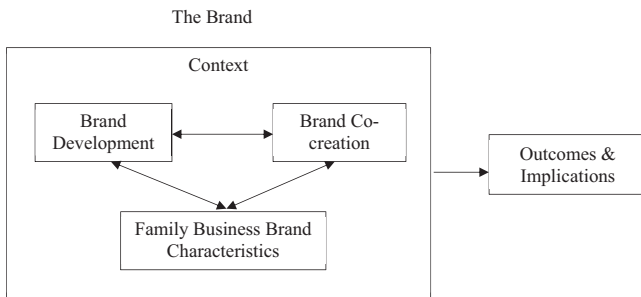
A broader framework to understanding family business brands and the branding process

As is evident when reading previous reviews of the branding literature, the exploration of this topic has grown and has been approached from multiple angles (Andreini et al., 2020; Beck, 2016; Binz Astrachan et al., 2018; Sageder et al., 2018). Beck (2016) focuses on the effects of communicating the family’s involvement in the firm and the opportunities for research from that point of view. The work of Binz Astrachan et al. (2018) tries to integrate the identity, image and reputation views taken to study the family business brand. They explain how these three approaches complement each other in thinking about a family business brand. Sageder et al. (2018) take a different approach by outlining the perceptions and effects of communicating the family brand. Finally, Andreini et al. (2020) take a consumer’s perception approach to understanding family business brands. Thus, when looking at the articles in this special issue, we focused on two specific aspects. First, we wanted to understand how these articles add to our understanding of family business brands and the branding process. Second, we wanted to be able to combine all this knowledge into a framework that can help to create connections between different streams of scholarship, provide space to use multiple methodological approaches and guide future research about family business brands to enrich our understanding in this area.

When taken together, the articles in this special issue highlight the importance of focusing on characteristics of the family business brand, including its meaning, communication and creation. Results from these studies provide some elements that can help us develop a broader framework to understanding and exploring family business brands. Building on this notion, we propose that family business branding is a topic that can be explored through different paradigms and encourage researchers to make use of a broader set of methodologies that can deepen our understanding of this topic. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 provides an initial visualization of our ideas. The model focuses on understanding the brand (i.e. family brand characteristics) and different aspects of the brand (i.e. the context in which it exists, the development of the brand and the co-creation process). In the following paragraphs, we provide a description of each of the components of the framework and the relevant research related to each of them.

Family business brand characteristics: This component of the model focuses on understanding what is a family business brand, what are the different components that are included within the family business brand and how the brand is communicated. As we see in several of the papers in this special issue, family business brands have multiple aspects

Figure 1 A broader framework for the exploration of family business brands



Source: Authors' own elaboration

that are relevant. These include the stories associated with the brand (Rauschendorfer *et al.*, 2023), the different aspects of the family that are reflected in the brand (Berndt and Meintjes, 2023) and the family brand authenticity that is communicated using different social media and online platforms (Bargoni *et al.*, 2023b; Berndt and Meintjes, 2023; Pink *et al.*, 2023). Understanding family business brand characteristics will inform the different ways that family business brands can be communicated and the importance of different aspects of the brand based on the context.

Family business brand development: This component focuses on outlining the different aspects that are involved in the development of the family business brand. For example, what role do the characteristics of the family play in the development of the brand? It also includes aspects such as which types of family firms are more likely to build a family business brand. In this special issue, Rauschendorfer *et al.* provide some evidence that stories play an important role in how we develop and communicate the family business brand.

Family business brand co-creation: This component examines how brands are co-created through interactions between the family business and its key stakeholders. This element emphasizes the significance of understanding the diverse perspectives and needs of stakeholders in the creation and evolutionary stages of the family business brand (Andreini *et al.*, 2020). Thus, taking this approach implies that the researcher needs to examine the various stakeholders involved in the co-creation process and the communication channels and touchpoints to deliver a unique customer brand experience. The stakeholders may include the nuclear and extended family members, employees, customers and clients, suppliers and the broader community. In the current issue, the work of Jaunfenthaler sheds some light in this area by considering how different stakeholders ascribe meaning to the family business brand.

Family business brand context: This component of the model outlines the relevance that the context can have for the brands. For example, it includes an understanding the conditions under which the family business brand is communicated? How does industry, country and other contextual factors impact the family business brand? What is the difference in the use of family business brands between B2C and B2B context? In general, studies in this area would explore the

different aspects that can impact what constitutes a family business brand, how the brand develops and how the brand is co-created. Two of the papers in this special issue provide some insights about the context. Jaunfenthaler shows that the context of the stakeholder will influence how a family business brand is viewed. Although he finds that there are some general associations with family business brands, he also finds that perceptions in the employment context have differences to those in the consumer context. Bargoni *et al.* show that the context also matters by finding that different companies behave differently based on the industry and the type of business that the family business is in.

Family business brand implications and outcomes: The final component of the model involves the outcomes and implications associated with family business brands. Factors that are part of this area include much of the work on the consequences of communicating a family business brand and the business and family outcomes that may be affected by the branding strategy or the branding process. The dominant paradigm has primarily focused on the outcomes associated with family business brands (Andreini *et al.*, 2020). Part of the interest surrounding family business brands relates to the implications of communicating it. Thus, it is extremely important to understand the outcomes that are associated with the branding process and how they influence the family and business. Several of the papers in this special issue provide valuable insights into the implications and outcomes of communicating a family business brand via social media. Bargoni *et al.* find that when family business brand messages are shared through social media and focus on the communication of heritage, originality and symbolism consumers will be more engaged with the company. Pink and colleagues also find that the way in which information about the family business brand is presented in social media influences perceptions of authenticity and purchase intentions.

Thinking about family business brands and the branding process from this broader framework enriches our field by combining the family business and the branding literatures and looking at this idea from multiple points of view. In our final section, we highlight where we see this research moving forward.

Future avenues for theory and research

The model that we just outlined opens new possibilities for future research using multiple methodological approaches. In this final section, we provide some ideas to explore and some methodological suggestions to continue to enrich our understanding of the branding process in family firms. As we mentioned before, although we have a basic understanding of *family business brand characteristics*, we still have a lot of unknowns too. Building on our model, we see two areas that may be of interest in understanding brand characteristics. The first area is a further exploration of the different ways that family business brands are communicated. Papers from this special issue highlight social media, websites and more traditional messages. However, Rauschendorfer and colleagues introduce the idea of stories as elements of a brand and the impact that they can have. Narratives are essential in

building family firm identity (Parada and Dawson, 2017) and entrepreneurial legacy (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015). Thus, it would be interesting to understand the different types of stories that family businesses use as part of their brands and the different types of channels through which these stories are shared. A second area to explore is the role that the family has in the development of the family business brand. Although family businesses combine two systems (i.e. family and business), most of the focus on understanding family business brands comes from the business side. This is a wonderful opportunity for future research to look at the family side, and how it helps a family brand be unique. An example of questions that could be studied here include how do family characteristics (i.e. the number of generations in the business) impact what is included as part of the brand? We see opportunities for both positivist methods like experiments and structural equation modeling but also ample room for post-positivist and interpretive methods like ethnography, critical discourse analysis and even semiotics when answering these questions. Thus, adding richness to our understanding of the field.

Examining the previous family business branding reviews, we notice that we know very little about the different factors that are involved in the development of the brand, and why some families decide to connect the brand to the family, others decide to connect it to the founder and others decide not to have their brand associated with any aspects of the family. Thus, an interesting avenue to explore within *family business brand development*, is the role that family characteristics (e.g. harmony of family relationships, having shared goals, involvement of multiple generations in the business, concern for legacy continuity) have on what becomes part of the family business brand (i.e. the messages that are used to communicate the brand) and how the brand evolves over time. Another area to explore within the development of the brand is the role that emotions play in this process. For instance, do positive emotions such as trust and love facilitate how brands develop, while negative emotions such as conflict, mistrust and hate impede it? Do these emotions impact/permeate the identity, reputation and values of the family-business brand? Answering these questions can be done through multiple methodological approaches. For example, interviews, deep and well-documented single or multiple case studies or direct observations can be valuable to both enrich knowledge in this subarea, as well as to advance new ways of theorizing about how family business brands are created.

One of the areas that we see as promising is the understanding of *family business brand co-creation*. There are multiple aspects about brands that can be explored within this area. For example, how established processes enable customer to co-creation a family brand? Does the use of different touchpoints help to deliver the family brand promise? Do these interactions help improve brand authenticity in such a manner that customer satisfaction is increased as well as family-business brand identity and reputation? We also need to further understand how aspects like family firm identity, identification and identity facilitate or hinder family business brand co-creation processes (Bettinelli et al., 2022). It may be that the co-creation process can be both blessing and a curse. For example, for some family firm brands, the co-creation of meanings can amplify risks of brand damages in case of family-related scandals. In this sense, the co-creation of brand meanings is not always an opportunity for brand evolution

but also a risk (Clemente and Gabbioneta, 2017). Specially for family business brands when the owning family and its members are publicly exposed and eventual scandals imply media attention and resonance (Rondi et al., 2023). Thus, it would be interesting to explore the conditions under which the co-creation of a brand benefits the family and the business, and the conditions under which it may be a curse. At a methodological level, this area also provides important opportunities. Given that co-creation is a perspective and not a theory (Ind and Coates, 2013), it is naturally flexible and open to an almost endless set of methods making this perspective a possible way to unify research rather than divide branch of scholarship depending on methodological choices taken. Multistudy designs are suggested to leverage surveys and experiments (Radoynovska and King, 2019 for an example) to capture the behaviors of both consumers and firms toward family-based brands.

Exploring the *family business brand context* provides another interesting avenue for future research. Although research about family business brands has been conducted in multiple countries and industries, we do not know much about how the context matters in family business branding. Thus, this area may be one that could really benefit our overall understanding of family business brands and the branding process. Some of the topics of interest could be How does culture, industry or organizational size influence how family business brands are used, perceived and formed? How do context changes impact the family business brand? For example, how do the historical roots of a family play a role in the family business brand and its evolution, and how does the family business brand react to key events (e.g. the death of the founder, an economic turnaround, etc.)? Given the relevance of context, a more comprehensive understanding of family business brands will require understanding how the context relates to what happens to a brand. Theories such as institutional theory (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), strategic action field theory (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) and the wide tradition of poststructuralist theories (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1984) are lenses that can help explain the interplay between family brands and the context in which they are nested. These theories could be used to interpret multicountry and/or multitemporal data where the meanings associated with family-based brands are compared and interpreted based on the changing context. Methodologically, adopting a comparative configurational perspective (Kaše et al., 2020) to study these topics may be helpful.

We also need to continue to understand the *implications and outcomes related to family business brands*. Within this area a promising avenue for future research could be understanding the dark side of family business brands. This could include an exploration of when using a family business brand would result in negative outcomes for the family and for the firm. Although we know that family business brands can produce negative stakeholder perceptions, we know very little about what these negative perceptions are, when they occur, and how they can affect the family and the firm. In the time of instant availability to information, exploring this negative side could provide a broader picture of the outcomes associated with family business brands. In this area, it would also be useful to explore the value that stakeholders find in the family business brand and how they extract this value. Another interesting aspect to explore within this area could be how

having/using a family business brand affects the commercial outcomes of a family firm. For example, does communicating the family brand lead to higher sales? Does communicating the family brand lead to higher rates of (attitudinal and behavioral) loyalty? Does communicating the family brand lead to better or more stable performances in the stock market? From our view, these questions need answers to push forward the field of family business branding.

Additional opportunities for research can also combine multiple components of the model. For example, understanding family business brand co-creation requires that we explore how does the participation of different stakeholders in the creation and evolution of the family business brand affects the reputation of the family firm. Does this participation contribute to a greater sense of originality and authenticity, or does it dilute the brand's reputation? It would also be relevant to explore aspects such as How the level of family involvement impacts the level of engagement of brand stakeholders in brand co-creation? And how this differs based on industry or country. In addition, how can the family businesses leverage technology to co-create their brands with stakeholders? What effects can this have for the performance of a firm? These questions combine several aspects of the model and bring opportunities to use a wide array of methodologies that can provide useful insights to understanding family business brands.

From this list, the reader can see that there are multiple avenues to continue to build our understanding about family business brands. This broader perspective could be greatly enriched by involving scholars that explore brands from multiple lenses and disciplines. Having input from a broader community can enrich the field and the understanding of this topic.

Conclusions

Our goal with this special issue was to enhance our understanding of family business brands by bringing multiple perspectives and methodological approaches to this area of research. Family businesses face unique challenges and opportunities in their branding efforts, which can be better understood by taking a multidisciplinary approach. At a theoretical level, cross-fertilization between fields can generate unexplored research avenues, unique methodological approaches and novel views that can inform and enrich this stream of research. Practically this would foster new investigations that, being more comprehensive and knowledgeable of the different perspectives, would provide useful managerial insights to the individuals involved in the family business branding process. In practice, a comprehensive understanding of family business brands facilitates the creation and effectiveness of branding strategies by helping to tailor what family businesses do in their branding efforts. This special issue is another step of what we hope will be a long path. We hope you enjoy reading this issue.

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Note

- 1 We use family firms, family-owned businesses and family businesses as interchangeable terms.

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