▪ Journal of Competitiveness

Communicating Family Identity to Improve Competitiveness in Indigenous Family-Owned Hotels

Orlando Llanos-Contreras, Graciela Sandoval-Álvarez, Manuel Alonso-Dos-Santos

Abstract

Family firms play a central role in the tourism and accommodation sector, offering a reputational advantage that can be leveraged through branding and communication. Family businesses are also predominant among the ventures developed by Indigenous entrepreneurs. This study examines how communicating the family identity of a family-owned hotel influences tourist immersion in the experience, and how it influences Word-of-mouth and Visit Intention through tourist attitudes. We conducted an online experiment in which participants interacted with fictitious websites of family-owned hotels from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and subsequently completed a survey, resulting in a sample of 440 Chilean participants. Results show that conveying a strong family identity significantly enhances tourist immersion in the experience, which in turn improves attitudes toward both the website and the destination, ultimately increasing visit intention and recommendation behavior. These findings underscore the strategic value of family identity as a signaling mechanism in tourism marketing. The study offers theoretical contributions to the literature on family-firm branding and hospitality, and practical implications for family-run businesses aiming to improve consumer response to branding strategies.

***Keywords*:** *Family-owned hotels, Indigenous entrepreneurship, Family identity communication, Consumer response, Indigenous entrepreneurship competitiveness*

JEL Classification: M31, Z33

Article history: Received: May 2025; Accepted: September 2026; Published: September 2026

1 INTRODUCTION

Research has begun to acknowledge the relevance of family firms within the tourism and accommodation sector (e.g., Dieguez-Soto et al., 2017; Kallmuenzer, 2018; López-Chávez et al., 2020). One theme which is gaining attention from scholars is these firms' resource-reputation advantage, which would be very important from a communication and branding point of view (Sageder et al. 2018). Recent research informs that family firms' identity provides opportunities for differentiation and positioning by leveraging the uniqueness of their family history, tradition, values, and experience (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023; Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Rovelli et al., 2022; Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2024). This is crucial for hotels focused on tourism, as all these elements are central in building unique touristic experiences (Chen et al., 2021; Singal & Batra, 2021). Touristic experience is an important decision factor in this market and understanding how it can be developed as a branding or signaling strategy for the experiences an operator could offer is key to enhancing the competitiveness of these firms (McLean & Barhorst, 2021; Kovanovienė et al., 2021).

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

Online platforms (including websites) are key for hotel branding and communication processes (Chan et al., 2017). Similarly, family business literature highlights the importance of these platforms in communicating these firms' family identity (Barroso et al., 2019). For family firms in tourism, this identification could provide critical elements to offer a unique touristic experience as it encompasses history, traditions, values, artifacts, architecture, and business expertise to bolster the value proposition of these businesses (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023; Rovelli et al., 2022). However, despite the apparent advantages of communicating a family identity, doing so imposes important challenges and demands a deeper understanding of how signaling processes operate in the branding of these firms.

Family identity is an idiosyncratic resource that makes these firms unique (Beck et al., 2020), but its effective communication requires a careful combination of family and firm identity elements (Zellweger et al., 2012), especially considering that its impact may vary across different contexts (e.g., industries) (Llanos-Contreras el al., 2024a). Properly managed, it can offer valuable insights into what makes the firm distinctive (Botero et al., 2013) and generate communicational cues that help consumers make inferences based on pre-existing beliefs about what the "family firm" image represents (Lude & Prügl, 2018). Yet, this requires the communication strategy to lead consumers to form the appropriate associations, since the term family firm may evoke both positive associations (e.g., trustworthy, socially responsible, employee-friendly) and negative ones (e.g., limited variety, higher prices, stagnation) (Sageder et al., 2018). Thus, being effective in communicating, for example, a family firm identity through online platforms like websites, is critical to enhancing potential guests' immersion in the experience they are offering (McLean & Barhorst, 2022).

Based on the above, when a hotel applies online branding strategies, it becomes essential to consider which specific signals have the ability to heighten individuals' immersion in the experience (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). These signals would have the potential to influence not only tourists' decisions about which destination to visit but also their preferences regarding who will provide the service at that destination (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023). There is literature suggesting that signaling a hotel's family identity would enhance tourists' responses in terms of immersion in the experience (e.g., Dieguez-Soto et al. 2017; Scholl-Grissemann et al. 2021; Ibanez et al. 2022). However, this research has acknowledged limitations that need to be addressed. From a theoretical standpoint, existing studies have largely overlooked the experiential dimension, which is considered central in tourism research, particularly in the context of heritage tourism (McLean & Barhorst, 2021). On the methodological side, while most prior works rely on experimental designs, they tend to signal family identity in a generic manner -typically by merely stating whether a business is family owned- without incorporating more nuanced cues that capture the complexity of identity communication (as can be achieved through websites that integrate textual and visual cues). Leveraging this information could be a source of differentiation that helps in attracting people's attention and improving their response to what is offered (Binz & Botero, 2018; Lude & Prügl, 2018). For this reason, this study aims to answer questions of how communicating the family identity of a family-owned hotel influences tourist immersion in the experience and how it influences Word-of-mouth and Visit Intention through tourist attitudes (toward visiting the destination) and attitude toward the website.

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

To answer these research questions, the study developed an online experiment based on websites of fictitious family-owned hotels from Rapa Nui (Eastern Island) and a survey to assess the variables of interest. Rapa Nui is one of the most globally-acknowledged Chilean touristic destinations, with most of the touristic offer provided by family firms and with a unique culture and identity which is an integral part of the value proposition of this island (Subsecretaría de Turismo, 2015; Servicio Nacional de Turismo. SERNATUR, 2015).

Thus, the study makes at least the following three contributions. Firstly, it contributes to family business branding literature (Beck, 2016; Binz et al., 2018), by providing additional insight on the effectiveness of a family firm identity in improving consumer response. Secondly, the study also contributes to the literature on hospitality and tourism management (Kim et al., 2018; Scholl-Grissemann et al., 2021), by shedding light on the value of a family firm's history, experience, traditions, values, and culture as assets to create and communicate authentic and interesting touristic experiences. Finally, the study makes progress on signaling theory (Spence, 1973) by providing additional insight on how this framework can be applied to the branding and communication of family-owned hotels.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Family businesses branding literature has increased significantly in the last few years (Temprano-García et al., 2023; Beliaeva et al., 2022; López-Chávez et al., 2020). Brand management in family businesses is particularly challenging as it must strike a balance between communicating differentiating elements that enhance consumer response (Presas et al., 2011; Llanos-Contreras et al., 2024b) and prioritizing the family's focus on communicating the core aspects of their identity that give meaning and significance to their business activity (Bargoni et al., 2023; Kinias et al., 2023). Thus, when a family firm develops their branding strategies based on their family identity, they are going to focus on communicating the "essence" of their business, aiming to meet identity-related motivations (e.g., pride), but also outcome-related objectives (Bargoni et al., 2023). In this process they face costs and benefits (trade-offs). To find this balance they need to consider that overemphasizing family identity may trigger negative associations or expectations (Sageder et al., 2018), but, not using it might mean losing opportunities for differentiation and emotional connection through legacy and values (Botero et al., 2013; Lude & Prügl, 2018). Therefore, communicating family identity can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Recent research by Berrone et al. (2022) suggests that these divergent effects may stem from variations in Family Business Legitimacy reached in the context where it operates.

In deciding whether to highlight or hide the firm family identity, these organizations also have to think about what to signal and how to do this (Beck et al., 2020; Llanos-Contreras et al., 2022). There is growing evidence suggesting that communicating family involvement can foster consumers' trust, perceptions of authenticity, purchase intentions, and willingness to pay (e.g., Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Jaufenthaler, 2022; Rauschendorfer et al., 2022). However, these benefits must be carefully weighed against potential commercial and reputational risks. Overemphasizing family identity may reinforce consumer perceptions of stagnation, limited innovation, or rigid pricing strategies (Sageder et al., 2018). Moreover, excessive exposure may make the family more vulnerable to reputational damage in cases of operational failures, service inconsistencies, or ethical issues (Beck et al., 2020; Maquieira et al., 2025). These risks are particularly salient considering that preserving the family's

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

reputation is one of the core socioemotional priorities in family firms and often serves as a guiding reference in strategic decision-making (Llanos-Contreras & Jabri, 2021; Welsh et al., 2024). Therefore, signaling strategies must strike a delicate balance—leveraging the symbolic value of family identity while also safeguarding the long-term credibility of both the brand and the family behind it. A more critical approach is thus needed when designing branding strategies in family-run hotels, where emotional and symbolic assets must coexist with market demands and professional management.

Hotels and tourism seem to be one of the industries where family businesses' output and identity motivations can be aligned to create value for the family and the business. Early works from Presas et al. (2011, 2014) already suggested that, because of the nature of the businesses, the family identity can be enhanced with very low risk of damaging the family name, and doing so would improve the output in terms of consumers' response. Recently, empirical studies have confirmed Presas and colleagues' ideas about the advantages of branding a hotel with a "family image" within the tourism industry. Results report that hotels which inform about their family identity get better results in terms of online reputation, hospitableness, perceived quality, expectations, willingness to pay, word of mouth, and visit intention (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023; Spielmann et al., 2022; Scholl-Grissemann et al., 2021). These studies provide important insight into the benefit of developing branding/communication strategies based on the family firm identity of these hotels. They also provide some explanation for the drivers supporting such positive consumer response and open avenues for new research. However, despite the advantages identified, the potential risks associated with overexposing family identity call for a more critical and cautious approach. There is a need for greater theoretical clarity regarding how, when, and under what contextual conditions the signaling of family identity results in both commercial and socioemotional benefits for business families seeking to leverage their identity as a strategic asset. Advancing this understanding is essential for ensuring that branding strategies not only enhance differentiation and consumer connection but also protect the long-term reputation and emotional value associated with the family name.

2.1 Family business identity communication and immersion in the touristic experience

Branding literature has acknowledged the importance of customers' experiences as a central part of brand formation and customers' buying decisions (Aledo-Ruiz et al., 2022; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Experiences are the results of what happens when the client meets the value proposition made by a firm, but it also depends on how accurately this value proposition is communicated when the firms deploy their branding strategies (Motta-Filho, 2021). Particularly in tourism, the firm's ability to communicate the experience they offer influences the level of customer satisfaction when the services are provided and also provides information about how close the firm's value proposition is to what the customer seeks to purchase (McLean & Barhorst, 2021; Ponsignon & Holmqvist, 2023). It suggests that signals provided early in the buying decision process will shape people's perceptions and expectations about a touristic experience, which in turn is central to gaining consumers' preferences (Gil-Soto et al., 2019; Presas et al., 2014).

Research based on signaling theory suggests that when the information provided by a firm decreases the level of uncertainty about the product/service offered, people's response improves (Carpentier et al., 2019; Llanos-Contreras et al., 2022). In tourism, one important element to effectively do this is to reach a high level of immersion in the experience (Stojanovic et al., 2022). The experiential dimension is central in how the tourism activity is conceptualized, and its relevance is acknowledged in the marketing of touristic services and

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

destinations (Lugosi & Walls, 2013; Ngwira et al., 2022). Immersion in the experience can be assessed as an outcome of a real touristic experience, but it is also a response to communicational stimuli looking to improve a consumer's buying intention (McLean & Barhorst, 2021). Based on McLean and Barhorst (2021), in this work, immersion in the experience is defined as the deep engagement of a person in the experience promised by a tourism service offered on a website, in the absence of a real and physical world that directly provides such information.

Therefore, when a family-run hotel implements online branding strategies, it must carefully consider which cues have the potential to enhance consumers' immersion in the offered experience, while avoiding overexposure of identity elements that may activate negative perceptions commonly associated with the *family firm* label (Sageder et al., 2018; Beck et al., 2020). In the particular case of hotels owned by indigenous families —such as Rapa Nui tourism ventures— communicating the ancestral family identity may generate benefits that outweigh the traditional commercial risks associated with such signals, as it operates not only as a differentiating factor but also as a mechanism to transmit authenticity, hospitality, and cultural coherence (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023; Lugosi & Walls, 2013; Llanos-Contreras et al., 2022). Given that consumers increasingly value immersive and culturally meaningful experiences, indigenous family identity represents a symbolic asset capable of fostering greater immersion and emotional connection (McLean & Barhorst, 2021; Han et al., 2011). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Communicating a family firm identity positively influences immersion in the experience.

2.2 Immersion in the experience driving positive tourist attitudes

Both family firm literature and research on tourism-accommodations have acknowledged the importance of a firm's websites in implementing effective branding and communication strategies (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023). One aspect of such effectiveness is to provide signals and information that drive positive attitudes in people (Botero, 2014). Attitudes are important because they inform on how customers feel about a subject or an object (e.g., brand, firm, technology, places or platforms/media a firm uses for contacting them) (Lee et al., 2017; Park et al., 2010). Attitude toward the web would inform on how interesting, attractive, easy to navigate, and exciting a hotel website is, which drives concentration (Zanon et al., 2019). Similarly, attitude toward the destination would inform on the feeling people have toward the place, how interested they are in the information provided on the place, and how eager they are to visit the place (Pereira et al., 2022). In this way, both factors would report on the firm's ability to connect with the target audience. Hence, understanding how they can be enhanced is critical for improving these firms' competitiveness in their markets.

One way to improve people's attitudes would be to enhance their immersion in the experience when navigating a firm's website. Research on branding and online communication sheds light on the relevance of captivating consumers when they seek information online, and particularly on being effective in communicating the type of tourist experience offered (Fernandez-Gamez et al., 2020; McLean & Barhorst, 2021). Tourism encompasses a wide range of services and moments which include accommodation, visiting attractions, enjoying local food, cultural heritage, and events, all of which are part of the experiences of tourists (Lugosi & Walls, 2013; Riu & Wilson, 2023). Accordingly, hotels make efforts to communicate the best possible

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experience they offer and try to create deep immersion in the experience to improve consumer response toward their value proposition (Israel et al., 2019).

People are highly concerned about the type of experience they would like to have, and hotel selection is considered a key decision that shapes the overall touristic experience (Floricic & Jurica, 2023; Han et al., 2011). Accordingly, these firms' ability to immerse and deeply involve people in the experience they offer, through the information provided on their website, would be important in shaping both tourists' attitudes toward the destination and attitudes toward the website (Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012; Stojanovic et al., 2022). Immersion in the experience improves the quality of the communication interactions and informs on how captivated people are with the information provided by the communication platform (Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012; Han & Kai, 2015). Hence, when communicational cues inform about a touristic destination, they would have the ability to drive positive attitudes toward it. Immersion in the experience also informs about the support provided by the online platform, such as its ability to drive enjoyment and concentration (Flavián et al., 2019; Kim & Hall, 2019). Accordingly, it would also influence attitudes toward it. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Higher levels of immersion in the experience positively influence tourists' attitudes (toward visiting the destination).
H2b: Higher levels of immersion in the experience positively influence people's attitudes toward the hotel website.

Attitude toward corporate websites is particularly relevant because of the importance it has for communicating information on their services and the firm (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). It is normally assessed in relation to the quality of the website, such as if it has a professional design, whether it is easy to use and navigate, and/or the quality of the information provided (Ladhari, 2010). Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) propose that the persuasiveness of a website is influenced by several important dimensions, including informativeness, usability, inspiration, credibility, reciprocity, and involvement. However, in tourism, people's attitudes toward visiting a place make a difference in their interest, concentration, and engagement when they search online (Huang & van der Veen, 2019). Hence, their attitudes toward visiting a place (or hotel) would also influence attitudes toward communicational stimuli or the platform(s) through which they are exposed. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Better tourist attitudes (toward visiting the destination) positively influence their attitudes toward the hotel website.

2.3 The influence of attitudes on word of mouth and visit intention

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that in tourism and accommodation contexts, a positive attitude is likely to be a good predictor of visit intention and word of mouth. According to this theory, an individual's attitudes toward (in this case, buying and/or recommending) a product/service significantly influence their intention to engage in such a behavior. Positive attitudes, which encompass cognitive (people's beliefs), affective (emotional response and feeling toward the behavior), and behavioral components (tendency to behave in a certain way), increase the likelihood of forming a favorable intention. However, attitudes do not operate in isolation; they interact with subjective norms (perceived social pressure) and perceived behavioral control (people's perception of their ability to perform the behavior) to collectively shape intentions and subsequently influence actual behaviors.

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

There is agreement on the predictive ability of attitude on people's behavioral intention. Several studies report the positive influence of attitude on people's behaviors (Mou & Benyoucef, 2021; Nardi et al., 2019; Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2021). Literature on family firms and tourism has highlighted the importance of tourists' attitudes toward visiting a destination and their attitude toward corporate websites as important predictors of consumers' behavior (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Pereira et al., 2022). Attitudes toward the corporate website and the destination offer insights into tourists' feelings and beliefs towards the firm website (including the information provided on this platform) and the place (Pereira et al., 2022; Ibáñez et al., 2022). Based on the discussion above, it is clear that such feelings and beliefs would drive the tourist's behavioral intention to visit the place. But also, due to the experiential nature of tourism, in which people are eager to tell others (Jin et al., 2020; Hameed et al., 2021), such (positive) attitudes would also drive (positive) word of mouth. Based on this rationale, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Better tourist attitude (toward visiting the destination) positively influences (a) visit intention and (b) word of mouth.
H5: Better tourist attitude toward the hotel website positively influences (a) visit intention and (b) word of mouth.

In Fig. 1, the summary of the conceptual model guiding this study is observed.

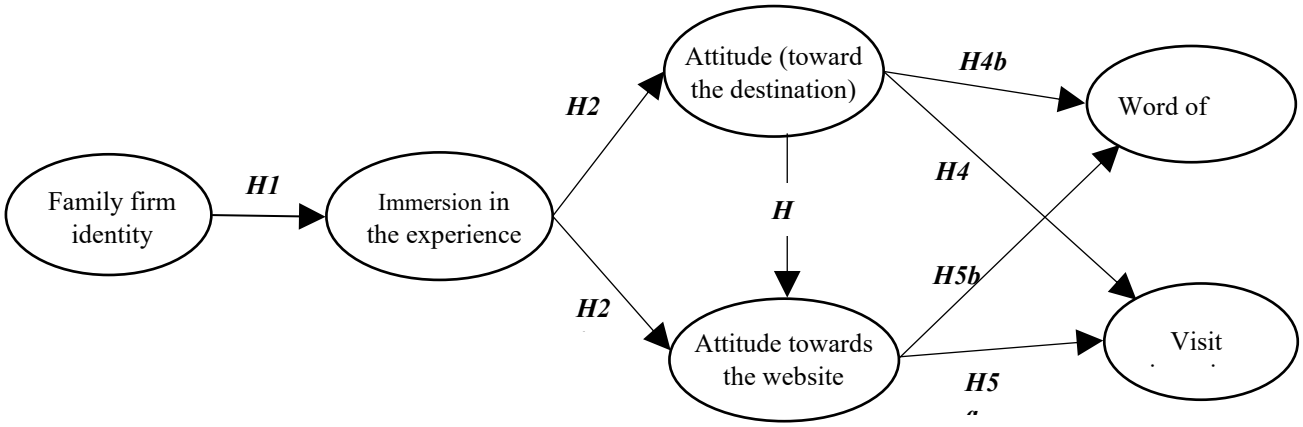


Fig. 1 - Summary of the Conceptual Model. Source: own elaboration.
Note*: H1, H2a, H2b, H3, H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b are hypotheses*

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The fundamental aim of the paper is to investigate how communicating the family identity of a family-owned hotel influences tourist immersion in the experience and how it influences word-of-mouth and visit intention through tourists' attitude toward visiting the destination and attitude toward the website. Therefore, our initial step in employing an experimental approach was to craft a fictitious hotel website as stimuli conveying varying levels of family identity intensity. A survey was developed concerning these stimuli and was applied in Chile.

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Responses were validated through a manipulation check, and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 software.

3.1 Experiment Design

For the experimental design, Rapa Nui, Chile, was chosen due to its worldwide recognition as one of Chile's main tourist destinations (Subsecretaría de Turismo, 2015), with tourism being the primary economic activity, primarily driven by locals (Figueroa & Rotarou, 2016). It is important to highlight that family businesses are significant in tourism and accommodation (Dieguez-Soto et al., 2017; Kallmuenzer, 2018), with the majority of hotel enterprises being family-owned (Kallmuenzer, 2018).

From a list comprising Hotels, Apart Hotels, Boutique Hotels, Lodges, and Hostels provided by the Servicio Nacional de Turismo - Rapa Nui, we conducted a systematic review of web platforms (51), analyzing how entrepreneurial families transmit their family identity, such as their history, cuisine, culture, and family tradition, as part of the hotel's value proposition, following Micelotta and Raynard's (2011) strategies. Similarly, we identified elements of their familiarity like images and texts, tailored to this framework to operationalize family identity transmission. The intensity of using the identified elements allows differentiation between the strategies. Finally, three transmission strategies ranging from high family transmission to no transmission (Family Preservation, Family Subordination, and Non-Family) were established based on Micelotta and Raynard's (2011).

As the next phase, we conducted an experiment by creating three websites for fictitious hotels in Rapa Nui for each family transmission strategy (family preservation, family subordination, and non-family). A qualitative pretest was conducted in person with 30 individuals over 18 years old who had the financial capacity to travel to the island. Each participant was individually asked to review a hotel website in Rapa Nui, followed by structured inquiries about their comprehension, if they could differentiate whether the hotels were family-owned or not, if the hotels seemed real, among others. The average browsing time was 90 seconds, consistent with other studies (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Hernández-Méndez & Muñoz-Leiva, 2015).

3.2 Application of the Experiment

In a new phase, the websites and the survey were introduced on the Qualtrics online platform, and their link was distributed by a panel company. The experiment was conducted in Chile because Rapa Nui Island is part of its territory, and domestic tourists account for the majority of visits to the island, with 3,651 tourists (52.7%), while foreign tourists numbered 3,318 (47.3%) (Gobernación Provincia de Isla de Pascua, 2020). Data collection was carried out in March 2022.

The survey was distributed to individuals over 18 years old, balanced by gender, and stratified by socioeconomic level (income and education). Due to the use of the website, responses were limited to computer use, excluding tablets and cell phones. This methodological choice ensured a homogeneous experimental experience, as previous research shows that mobile devices introduce differences in cognitive processing due to factors such as screen size, interface, and input precision, which may affect visual tasks and influence outcomes (Passell et al., 2021).

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Qualtrics randomly assigned a web page to each respondent, who then proceeded to complete the survey without the ability to return to the web page. A total of 449 respondents participated. An analysis of the responses was conducted, considering factors such as response times, which were shorter than expected and identical across all scales, and duplicate surveys based on IP address were filtered out.

Consequently, the total number of valid surveys was 440. The mean age was 45.3 years (SD = 13.5 years). 48.9% of the respondents were male. 76.1% of the surveyed individuals had an income exceeding one million pesos (1,058 USD). 92.5% of the respondents were employed either part-time, full-time, or retired. Tab. 1 provides a summary of the sample characteristics.

Tab. 1 - *Demographic information of respondents. Source: own research.*

Variable	Category	Percentage
Age	18-30	12.7%
	31-40	30.9%
	41-50	23.6%
	51-60	16.1%
	61 or more	16.6%
Gender	Men	48.9%
	Women	51.1%
Monthly income	Less than $1,000,000	23.9%
	From $1,000,000 to $1,999,999	46.6%
	From $2,000,000 to $2,999,999	18.9%
	More than $3,000,000	10.7%
Employment	Full time employee	70.0%
	Part time employee	13.6%
	Unemployed	3.6%
	Retired	8.9%
	Student	2.5%
	I prefer not to say	1.4%

3.3 Measures

Sociodemographic variables were utilized in the survey, and the scales were of the 7-point Likert type. The immersion in experience scale (InExp) was comprised of one item adapted from McLean and Barhorst (2021), the attitude towards the website scale (ActWeb), consisting of three items, was adapted from Scholl-Grissemann et al. (2021) and previously used by Zanon et al., (2019) and Sundar and Kalyanaraman (2004). To measure tourists' attitude towards visiting the destination, the attitude scale (ActTur) was adapted from Huang and van der Veen (2019) was utilized, consisting of five items and previously used by Huang and Hsu (2009) and Lam and Hsu (2006). The word of mouth (WOM) scale was adapted from Scholl-Grissemann et al. (2021) and consists of two items. The visit intention scale (IntVis) consists of two items and adapted from McLean and Barhorst (2021).

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4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Qualitative Pretesting

During qualitative pretesting, respondents assumed the reviewed websites were real. They understood the information provided on the website. Qualitative pretesting revealed that participants identified differences between the three family identity transmission strategies.

4.2 Manipulation Check

A one-item family firm identity (FFI) communication scale "The hotel I just saw on the web identifies itself as a family business", adapted from Beck and Kenning (2015), served as a manipulation check. For the family preservation, family subordination, and non-family strategies, an ANOVA was conducted among respondents to compare the impact of family identity transmission. A significant effect on family identity transmission was identified at the $p < .05$ level for all three conditions [$F(2, 437) = 58.891$, $p = .000$]. Post hoc comparisons (HSD Tukey test) indicated significant differences between Preservation ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.337$), Subordination ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.589$), and Non-Family ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.464$). Thus, for different levels of family identity transmission intensity, respondents could differentiate that one hotel was more familiar than another. Finally, although the manipulation based on fictitious hotel websites allowed for a controlled comparison of family identity transmission strategies, this approach has inherent limitations. It should be noted that the artificial nature of the stimuli may cause participants' responses to differ from those generated by real websites, and that this approach was applied in a single cultural context (Rapa Nui).

4.3 Evaluation of the measurement model

SmartPLS 4.0 software (Ringle et al., 2022) was used to conduct partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. Reliability analysis (Tab. 2) confirmed the internal consistency of the scales with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, the composite reliability index (CR), and external loadings exceeding the recommended values in the literature of 0.707 (Henseler et al., 2016), with all external loadings significant and the rho_A indicator exceeding 0.7 in all cases (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Convergent validity of the scales was confirmed by analyzing the average variance extracted (AVE), all of which were greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017).

Tab. 3 displays the HTMT value, Fornell Larcker criteria, and cross-loading criteria for performing the discriminant validity test. HTMT coefficients were all less than 0.89, and correlations between constructs were less than the square root of the extracted variance (Henseler et al., 2016). Cross-loading behavior was appropriate (Hair et al., 2019), with the average variance shared between a construct and its own indicators greater than the amount of variance shared with other variables.

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

Tab. 2 - *Evaluation of the measurement model: AVE =average variance extracted; CR =composite reliability. Source: own research.*

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	C.R.	AVE	Factorial loads
ActTur	0.960	0.960	0.969	0.864	0.846- 0.955***
ActWeb	0.937	0.938	0.959	0.887	0.937- 0.950***
FFI	0.945	0.948	0.965	0.902	0.938- 0.971***
IntVis	0.948	0.948	0.975	0.951	0.975- 0.975***
WOM	0.936	0.938	0.969	0.940	0.968- 0.971***

Note: ***p<0.001

Tab. 3 - *Discriminant validity; HTML above the diagonal; square root of the AVE in the diagonal (bold) and correlations between the dimensions under the diagonal (Fornell–Larcker criterion). Source: own research.*

	ActTur	ActWeb	FFI	InExp	IntVis	WOM
ActTur	**0.930**	0.373	0.289	0.310	0.778	0.726
ActWeb	0.356	**0.942**	0.255	0.714	0.593	0.615
FFI	0.276	0.243	**0.950**	0.279	0.299	0.250
InExp	0.304	0.693	0.271	**1,000**	0.420	0.425
IntVis	0.743	0.560	0.283	0.409	**0.975**	0.882
WOM	0.690	0.576	0.235	0.412	0.831	**0.969**

4.4 Evaluation of the structural model

Tab. 4 shows the Path coefficients, the determination coefficients (R^2) and the redundancy coefficients (Q^2) for evaluating the structural model obtained using SmartPLS 4.0 software. The values of the Q^2 coefficients being greater than zero indicates that the variables have predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2014). All endogenous variables had an R^2 coefficient greater than 0.503, except immersion in the experience which was 0.072 and tourist attitude with 0.090. Path coefficients (Fig. 2) were all significant and positive (Bootstrapping = 5000), supporting all proposed hypotheses. From a theoretical perspective, the positive and significant relationships between family identity, attitudes, and behavioral intentions confirm the theoretical assumption that identity cues shape tourists' perceptions and responses. These results support the idea that communicating family identity can increase immersion and influence attitudes toward both the website and the destination, reinforcing previous findings in the hospitality and tourism literature.

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

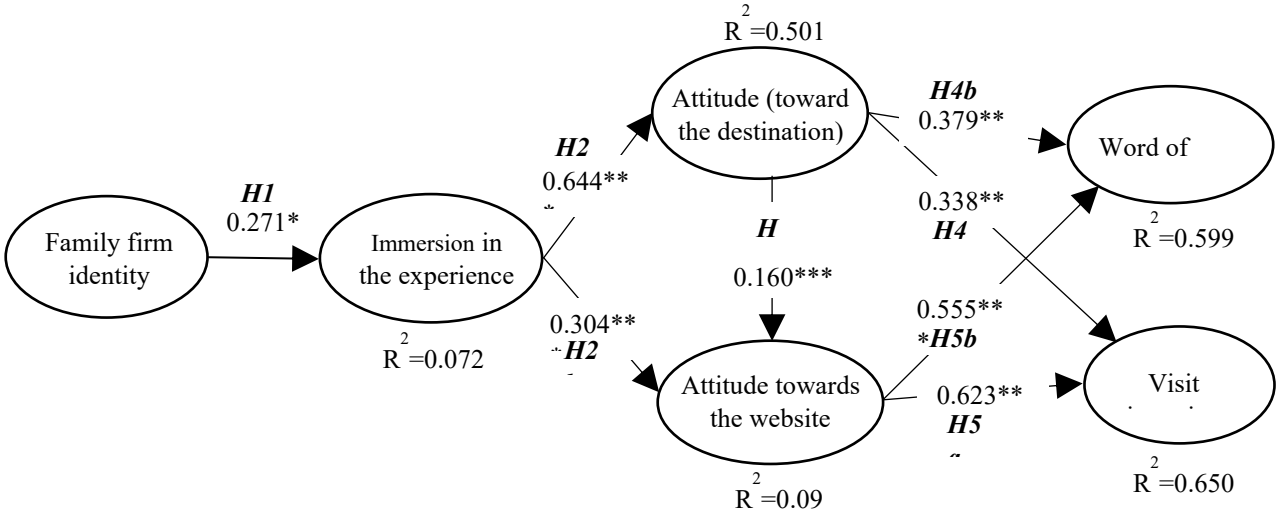


Fig. 2 - Summary of the Conceptual Model of the study and Structural Model. Source: own elaboration.
Note*: H1, H2a, H2b, H3, H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b are hypotheses*
Note: Relationships show Path Coefficients; *** p < 0.00, adjusted R^2.

Tab. 4 - *Assessment of the structural model. Source: own research.*

	Path effect	R^2	f^2	Q^2
FFI -> InExp (H1)	0.271***		0.080	
InExp -> ActTur (H2a)	0.304***		0.102	
InExp -> ActWeb(H2b)	0.693***		0.757	
ActTur -> ActWeb(H3)	0.160***		0.047	
ActTur -> IntVis(H4a)	0.677***		0.972	
ActTur -> WOM(H4b)	0.616***		0.675	
ActWeb -> IntVis(H5a)	0.338***		0.287	
ActWeb -> WOM(H5b)	0.379***		0.314	
FFI -> IntVis	0.115***			
FFI -> WOM	0.117***			
FFI -> ActWeb	0.188***			
FFI -> ActTur	0.083***			
InExp -> IntVis	0.424***			
InExp -> WOM	0.431***			
ActTur		0.090		0.038
ActWeb		0.501		0.053
InExp		0.072		0.068
IntVis		0.650		0.051
WOM		0.599		0.040

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

Note: ***p<0.001

4.5 Discussion

This study aimed to advance understanding of how communicating the family identity of a family-owned hotel influences tourists' immersion in the experience and its impact on Word-of-Mouth and Visit Intention through tourists' attitude (toward visiting the destination) and attitude toward the website. All hypotheses were supported, confirming family firms' reputational advantages (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013) and the value of family identity cues to improve consumer response (Beck et al., 2020; Botero et al., 2019). Crucially, this research identifies "immersion in the experience" as a specific psychological mechanism through which indigenous family-owned firms can leverage their identity when developing and implementing branding strategies in their web sites. Through this mechanism, family identity can be translated into tourists' behavioural responses. Grounded on an experiment using fictitious websites of family-owned hotels from Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the findings reinforce the relevance of the experiential dimension already noted in tourism research (Lugosi & Walls, 2013; Ngwira et al., 2022) and shows how family firm identity elements - such as history, traditions, values, and culture - can be strategically articulated to craft authentic and emotionally resonant touristic experiences.

Our results support the conceptualizations of family identity as an idiosyncratic resource that delivers differentiation and emotional connection, while requiring careful communication to balance benefits and risks (Sageder et al., 2018; Beck et al., 2020). Furthermore, they validate the firm's websites as effective signalling environments (Barroso et al., 2018; Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2023), where combined textual and visual cues can trigger immersion in the experience, shaping attitudes toward both the destination and the website in line with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In this way, our findings also caution that the persuasive power of family identity in Indigenous family-owned hotels depends not only on its mere presence but also on how effectively it is enacted to foster immersion in the touristic experience these firms want to deliver. It suggests that, if the signalling strategy fails in selecting the correct cues, it also would fail in activating the experiential and attitudinal mechanisms upon which its strategic value ultimately relies. Thus, by experimentally manipulating a richer and more nuanced set of visual and textual signals embedded in the website, our study tackles a key limitation of prior family business branding research that has relied on the generic cue "it is a family firm". This finer-grained signalling approach advances current understandings of how identity communication can be strategically orchestrated to shape consumer responses in more authentic and impactful ways.

In line with the above discussion, our results also reveal that, in indigenous touristic hotels, signalling a family identity online can shape tourists *"*anticipated" immersion in the experience (even before consumption takes place). By moving the traditional focus from the "experience delivered" (Chang & Hung, 2021; Motta-Filho, 2021; Ramos et al., 2022), *to* "experience anticipated" (McLean & Barhorst, 2021; Ponsignon & Holmqvist, 2023), we show that family-owned hotels can preconfigure consumer reactions through strategically designed identity cues that trigger immersion early in the decision-making process. This perspective positions immersion not as a by-product of service consumption, but as an intentional lever within the branding process itself. Hence, rather than relying solely on on-site delivery of cultural,

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historical, or emotional value, family-owned hotels (particularly Indigenous family firms) can use identity-based online communication to proactively stimulate the experiential expectations that ultimately drive tourists' choices and decision as consumers.

Taken together, these insights underscore the importance of approaching Indigenous family firm branding not as a static act of identity display, but as a sophisticated process of signalling where anticipating touristic experience is key. In doing this, the family identity can be a source of competitive advantage. As digital environments become central to tourists' decision making, understanding how subtle variations in identity cues translate into immersion and behavioral intentions becomes a critical agenda for both scholars and practitioners. Our findings thus open new questions and research opportunities for example on the boundary conditions, contextual contingencies, and long-term effects of an identity-based online branding-signalling strategy.

4.6 Theoretical contributions and practical implications

This study provides insight into theory and practice. First, it contributes to the literature on family business brands (Beck, 2016; Binz et al., 2018), by offering additional information on how a family firm identity enhances consumer response and how a firm's family identity can be leveraged in designing and implementing branding strategies. Thus, this study sheds light on how the reported reputational advantage (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013) of these firms can be utilized as part of a communication/branding strategy. Recent research indicates that the term "family firm" can evoke both positive and negative associations in its recipients (Botero et al., 2018), and the effectiveness of leveraging such an image would change depending on the context in which it is implemented (Llanos -Contreras et al., 2022; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). In the context of indigenous family-owned hotels, a firm's family identity helps in improving immersion in the experience. Confirming this relationship underscores that enhancing immersion is not a peripheral effect but a pivotal design criterion for effective family business branding strategies. This insight adds nuance to prior research that has mainly emphasized trust-building, perceptions of quality, or authenticity as typical consequences of family firm signaling (e.g., Botero et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2020), suggesting instead that the experiential dimension -captured here through immersion- can play a more central and dynamic role than previously acknowledged in driving consumers' reactions to family business brands.

Secondly, our study advances the hospitality and tourism literature (Kim et al., 2018; Scholl-Grissemann et al., 2021). While most family firms within this sector are family owned and run (e.g., Dieguez-Soto et al., 2017; Kallmuenzer, 2018), research on how these firms can take advantage of these conditions is still in its infancy. Our research contributes by showing the potential of combining a family identity and tourists' immersion in the experience to develop effective branding strategies enhancing word of mouth and visit intention. While family firms' identity allows them to take advantage of their history, experience, traditions, values, and culture to communicate unique touristic experiences, immersion in the experiences is confirmed as a critical mechanism which needs to be considered by indigenous family-owned hotels to develop their branding strategies. This insight enriches existing tourism scholarship by revealing that the communicative value of "family" extends beyond authenticity signaling and operates through deeper experiential engagement processes. In doing so, the study responds to calls for research linking branding strategies with tourists' psychological states and opens new avenues for understanding how cultural heritage and identity can be mobilized to foster competitive advantage among Indigenous tourism ventures. Thus, our findings position

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immersion not as an outcome but as a key strategic lever capable of transforming family identity from a static descriptor into a dynamic experiential asset in tourism contexts.

Finally, contributions are also made to signaling theory (Spence, 1973), by exploring its application in the branding and communication of family hotels. This research draws on family business literature to identify cues and signals that have the potential to successfully meet the stated hypotheses. Thus, progress is made in the identification of specific signals to communicate the experience that a family hotel offers, reducing tourists' uncertainty about what they are going to get when they arrive at the hotel. This approach not only has implications for future research but also offers insights into how signaling theory can support research in tourism and accommodation. We show that signals combining family identity with experiential storytelling are particularly effective in contexts where service quality is difficult to evaluate ex ante. Our findings suggest that immersion in the experience operates as a perceptual driver through which such signals are decoded. Our finding contributes by suggesting that signals do not only need to reduce noise to improve communication, but also need to find psychological mechanisms, such as immersion in the experience, to make it easier for receivers to decode signals. By showing that immersion in the experience improves people's attitude (toward the website and destination), core antecedents of behavioral intention in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), our work contributes by linking signaling theory with Theory of Planned Behavior, exposing how signals would influence not only perception but also decision-making.

This study also offers valuable lessons for managers and public policymakers. It provides owners with insights into how family identity can be a key resource for effective brand strategies, especially for family hotels facing financial constraints (Ahmad, 2015; Glover & Reay, 2015). It suggests that family identity can counteract advertising budget disadvantages in this type of business, highlighting the importance of leveraging it on online platforms to improve target market response. Additionally, it invites managers and owners to identify elements of their family identity that support a unique tourist experience and value propositions, and to integrate them into the overall hotel strategy. This would be particularly relevant for multigenerational family firms with distinctive cultural aspects or a unique history. Finally, policymakers interested in supporting the development of the tourism (and accommodation) sector should note the importance of identity in shaping travelers' attitudes and behaviors, which could strengthen collaboration between family businesses and other actors in the tourism industry, improving the competitiveness of the destination through economies of agglomeration.

4.7 Research limitation and opportunities for future research

The study makes important contributions, which are discussed above; however, it is not free of limitations that need to be acknowledged. This study includes fictional hotel websites, and test stimuli such as history, tradition, and culture as part of the firm website to communicate the family firm identity. However, it does not assess specific signals; rather, it assesses people's response to websites which vary in the amount of information about the family-firm identity provided. This opens the opportunity for future studies to assess the influence of specific signals rather than the heterogeneity in the amount of information. It would be useful for identifying the effectiveness of specific signals when a family-owned hotel wants to communicate the touristic experience they offer.

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The fictitious nature of the hotel websites also limits the extent to which tourists' reactions reflect real-world decision-making processes, since actual booking environments typically involve richer multisensory and interactive routines that may evoke emotions or associations beyond those generated by controlled experimental stimuli. Although the use of simplified websites is intentionally designed to isolate the effect of identity cues and reduce potential bias, this experimental control comes at the cost of realism, which may limit the transferability of our results to real digital consumption settings. This limitation opens avenues for future studies to replicate our design with more immersive and interactive digital formats, such as virtual tours, to assess whether identity-based cues operate similarly in environments that more closely mimic actual consumer experiences. Additionally, the exclusive use of computers may limit the representativeness of our findings, since responses could vary if participants had interacted with the stimuli through mobile devices or tablets. This restriction, while necessary to ensure experimental control, should be addressed in future studies that incorporate adaptive designs across devices.

The exclusive use of a Rapa Nui (Chile) cultural context may constrain the transferability of the findings to Indigenous hotels operating in other territories or cultural settings, as tourists may respond differently to identity signals depending on their familiarity with, or perceptions of, a given destination. Future studies could therefore test the robustness and generalizability of our conclusions by conducting similar experiments based on a different indigenous-cultural family firm. Also, other industries where Indigenous family firms intensively develop commercial activities could be tested (e.g., gastronomy, handicrafts). This could reveal whether indigenous or cultural family identity-based signaling operates differently across industries. Comparative studies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous family firms would also help isolate the unique cultural components that may drive consumer responses to identity cues.

Our study has its exclusive focus on the communication of family identity through the corporate website, without considering other relevant dimensions of the digital consumer experience, such as content personalization through artificial intelligence, social media, or online reviews. These platforms are important channels through which consumers form impressions of hospitality firms and make purchase decisions. Future research could broaden the analytical scope by exploring how family identity signaling interacts with these digital environments. For instance, experimental designs or survey-based studies using simulated content from social media or review platforms could be used to assess their effects on perceptions of authenticity, trust, and purchase intentions. Additionally, qualitative research could investigate how consumers interpret family business messages on user-generated content platforms such as TripAdvisor or Instagram. This line of inquiry would allow for a more holistic understanding of how the symbolic value of family identity is shaped within a broader digital ecosystem.

Finally, results of this study are also limited because of the sample from which they are obtained. Data came exclusively from Chile; accordingly, it is not clear whether results will behave in the same way if they include people from other countries and/or cultures. To strengthen the robustness of our conclusions, future research could incorporate larger and more demographically diverse samples, thereby capturing possible variations in responses linked to tourists' age, socioeconomic status, travel experience, or cultural background. Such efforts would not only enhance the external validity of current findings but also contribute to the

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development of more finely tuned strategies for (indigenous) family-owned hotels seeking to leverage identity signaling within culturally heterogeneous market segments.

5 CONCLUSION

Overall, this study advances the fields of family business and tourism in context of indigenous entrepreneurship branding. By integrating signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) with an experiential perspective, we reveal that family Indigenous identity operates not merely as a static reputational resource but as a dynamic and anticipatory mechanism. This mechanism actively shapes tourists' psychological immersion in the experience prior to actual consumption, shifting the traditional focus from the passive delivery of experience to the proactive construction of an anticipated experience. This shift enriches current insights into how identity signaling engages consumers cognitively and emotionally early in their decision-making process. Our study offers a richer and more nuanced set of visual and textual signals embedded in fictitious hotel websites we tested. In this way, we move beyond the simplistic signal of "we are a family firm". This approach captures the complexity of identity communication more effectively and complements (providing empirical support) prior research (Micelotta & Raynard, 2011) on how family firms can leverage corporate websites to communicate their identity authentically and persuasively. From the perspective of Indigenous entrepreneurship, we conclude these firms have, in their corporate identity, a strategic asset to keep competitive by improving consumer response. Our findings offer concrete, actionable guidance for Indigenous family firms to strategically and competitively develop online branding while genuinely reflecting their family identity in the process. Striking this balance is essential to optimize tourist engagement and encourage positive behavioral outcomes. Importantly, our results highlight that effective signaling requires more than mere representation; it demands deliberate and skillful orchestration of identity cues to foster authentic connections with target audiences and reinforce their brand power.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the financial support provided by "Dirección de Investigación de la Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, Chile" research project DIREG 07/2025

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https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06

Contact information

Prof. Orlando Llanos-Contreras, Ph.D.
Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción
Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administrativas.
Departamento de Administración.
Country: Chile
E-mail: ollanos@ucsc.cl
ORCID: 0000-0002-2619-6166

Prof. Graciela Sandoval-Álvarez, Mg.
Universidad Adventista de Chile
Facultad de Ingeniería y Negocios.
Ingeniería Industrial.
Country: Chile
E-mail: gsandovalalvarez@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-5447-1063

Prof. Manuel Alonso-Dos-Santos, Ph.D.
University of Granada
Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales.
Department of Marketing and Market Research.
Country: Spain
manuelalonso@ugr.es
Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción
Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administrativas.
Departamento de Administración.
Country: Chile
E-mail: malonso@ucsc.cl
ORCID: 0000-0001-9681-7231

https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2026.03.06