

Claiming a family brand identity: The role of website storytelling

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the creation of a family identity as a central communication objective in business storytelling. We contribute to the field of business website marketing by identifying, through textual analysis of US winery website narratives, how businesses communicate family brand identities. Results show that three claims that are critical for family brand identities—character, temporal continuity, and distinctiveness—do appear in the website texts. Our study provides beginning evidence that family identity does not require family ownership alone but can be built upon complementary narrative elements and tactics, including kinship references and heritage storytelling. Both content and linguistic style of narratives are useful in conveying a family brand identity to an external public for website design. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: brand identity | family | storytelling | website | winery

Article:

1. Introduction

This paper examines the mechanics of communicating a family identity for a winery business by analyzing family stories in “About Us” pages on winery websites. The study assumes that a family identity is a theoretically achievable and desired marketing position for wineries. This paper is relevant to firms and marketing professionals who rely on the development and implementation of family storytelling as an important marketing device. In particular, the study offers insights to website content writers who are composing narratives to formulate family-related stories for their businesses or business clients. Storytelling has emerged as an upwardly trending communications practice for businesses trying to connect with customers and create a positive identity in the marketplace (Forman, 2013).

Storytelling is used by companies to market and brand themselves because stories are persuasive and are a fundamental way we communicate (Wachtman & Johnson, 2009). The use of storytelling to promote consumer brand awareness has been the topic of a special journal issue (Woodside, 2010) as well as of individual articles (for instance, Herskovitz & Malcolm, 2010).

Stories build concrete images so that consumers can better identify with an organization. Storytelling affects conscious and unconscious thinking and verbal and nonverbal knowledge about the product, the brand, and the firm.

There are different types of story themes that help elicit emotions from customers: family, heritage, philanthropy, folklore, and innovation, with some natural overlap, that is, family enterprises engaging in philanthropy (Feliu & Botero, 2016). Family stories occupy a niche of their own, deriving from the strength of family businesses around the globe. Much of the world's wealth is created by family-owned businesses. Estimates suggest that businesses that are majority-owned by a single family's members contribute to 70% to 90% of the world's GDP (Tharawat Magazine, 2016). Also, 85% of start-ups worldwide are created by investors using family funds (Grand Valley State University, 2017). According to family-firm leaders, family-business branding helps differentiate family firms from their competitors. It also improves the reputations of family companies in general (EY Family Business Center of Excellence, 2014).

This paper focuses in particular on family-themed stories. These are interesting because there is emerging interest in the concept of familiness as a competitive advantage for a business (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Presas, Muñoz, & Guia, 2011; Tokarczyk, Hansen, Green, & Down, 2017). To date, there is very little concrete information about the construction of a family-based story, how it is generally composed, how much it relies on actual family-firm ownership in the narrative, and what narrative devices or storylines are useful in creating a family-based identity for a business entity. It is very important to understand at this juncture that the present authors did not require sample data to be from a family-owned firm. Family storytelling is viewed as a separate concept from family-firm ownership in this study. Rather, family storytelling depends on the use of the term “family” and related words in constructing a business identity.

We selected website content as the primary study medium, since the Internet and new media have changed how we transmit business stories (Smith, 2007). We also argue that studying the wine industry offers insights into any industry where name value, the appearance of heritage traditions, and family appeals take greater precedence, and we wish to continue a vein of research that has begun in this realm (Binz Astrachan & Astrachan, 2015; Mora & Livat, 2013). To compete in the wine industry, building a family brand image is a meaningful strategy, even for firms that do not possess long-held family-ownership structures (Doloreux, 2015). The key goal to humanize a brand by communicating specific messages that borrow interest from the notions of family and heritage. The primary research interests for this study comprised:

RQ1: How is family identity conceptualized in a winery story?

RQ2: How is family identity communicated in a winery story?

2. Background literature

2.1 Family branding and organizational identity theory

Researchers have been striving to characterize businesses with family descriptors for a variety of reasons. Zellweger, Kellermanns, Eddleston, and Memili (2012) suggested three aspects of

family that can be articulated in business narratives: the involvement of family in the ownership of the firm, the essence of family participation in running the company, and the relevance of the family in constructing the identity of the firm (see also Zellweger, Eddleston, & Kellermanns, 2010). With respect to identity, an organization's brand identity is communicated via messages transmitted to an external public (Aust, 2004). Firms showcase their unique family characteristics and attributes in ways that influence an audience's perceptions of the companies. Moreover, Huang-Horowitz and Freberg (2016) find that the Internet is increasingly the place where organizational brand identities are formed, justifying the study's analysis of website content as a data source.

According to Albert and Whetten (1985), organizational identity comprises three unique features: a claimed central character, claimed temporal continuity, and claimed distinctiveness. Consequently, as depicted in Figure 1, a business seeking to establish a family brand will do this by making family a central subject of its stories; documenting that family has been a central feature of the brand from inception to current day; and using language in some way that marks the brand distinctively as a family brand and permits contrast to nonfamily brands. To explore these tactics further, references to semiotics are in order to bolster an understanding of how each of Albert and Whetten's (1985) three identity-construction features may be implemented in the writing of a business story.

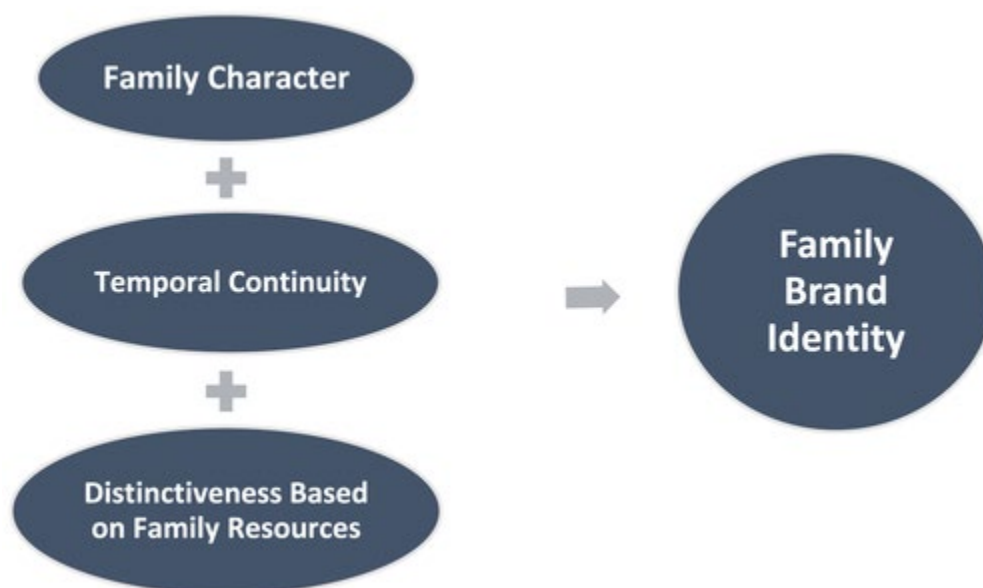


Figure 1. How family identity is formed

2.2 How to make family character a central theme in a winery story

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and how these function to convey meaning. It has been a useful approach for examining the role of marketing messages as mediators between companies and consumers (Beasley, Danesi, & Perron, 2000). From the viewpoint of the field of semiotics, the term “family” is a sign comprising both a signifier, that is, the word itself as observed or counted in a text, and a signified, that is, meanings that are conveyed through the phrasing surrounding the term (Raber & Budd, 2003).

The simplest way to articulate the family character of a firm is to expose a consumer to numerous instances of the term family or related words that will bring family images to mind. This tactic relies on the presence of strong signifiers, that is, commonly agreed-upon words that allude to the dictionary meanings of “family.” “Family” is defined as actors who share a kinship relationship, as in a group consisting of parents and children living together as a unit, or all the descendants of a common progenitor (Dictionary.com, 2017). Consequently, we anticipate that family-brand messaging will contain a greater number of references to family signifiers in public information outlets than will messaging from nonfamily brand strategies. By increasing the number of family signifiers throughout a business narrative, the firm deploys the advertising technique of repetition, which is known to cement an idea in the mind of a message receiver (Chang, 2009).

2.3 How to portray family as an important character over time

The second dimension of a family brand identity—temporal continuity—requires evidence of family connections to the firm, ownership and/or involvement over time. Thus, family in this case denotes kinship linkages as well as connotes evolving and enduring relationships with the business. However, length of time is not the only concern in this case. Temporal continuity is strongly linked to heritage storytelling, which is a favoured narrative strategy in creating business identities. Heritage stories employ historical fact and organizational timelines in ways that connect directly to claims companies are making in the present and create value and encourage emotional responses from consumers. Heritage stories have been used to validate product quality by strategically engaging consumers in the history, traditions, and production methods of beverage firms, illustrated by a 300-year-old Sake brewery, Kida Brewery in Japan (Lee & Shin, 2015); a 250-year-old beer brewery, Guinness in Ireland (Simmons, 2006); and a 150-year-old beer brewery, Coopers Brewery in Australia (Byrom & Lehman, 2009).

Heritage-based stories are especially important in establishing a family-based business identity, through the recounting of historically based tales about family involvement in starting and nurturing a business (Chua, Chrisman, & Steier, 2003). Such stories document ongoing family commitment to growing the business, as well as greater community involvement, and fostering ethical or social practices closely linked to expressed family values (Zwack, Kraiczy, von Schlippe, & Hack, 2016). Heritage storytelling about family appeals to consumers. Gallucci, Santulli, and Calabrò (2015) find that firms that include some component of family in their branding strategies (that is, history, values, identity) tend to register higher sales growth. Beck and Kenning (2015) note that when family heritage is strongly perceived by the customer, there is a positive effect on perceived firm trustworthiness, and new product acceptance increases indirectly. Family heritage messaging can also reassure consumers that the brand will continue and is stable. For example, referring to “family generations” in a story shows consumers how the family organization is growing in size, perhaps with family members specializing in diverse and critical functions that strengthen the brand overall.

2.4 How to turn family into a distinctive competitive advantage

Considering the third dimension of Figure 1 “claims to distinctiveness”, we draw upon the familiness construct that marks a firm's possession and use of idiosyncratic resources uniquely available to that family-owned firm (Habbershon & Williams, 1999). Such resources are expected to provide the family firm with competitive advantages (Dyer, 2006). Marketing studies have documented the use of familiness as a strategy to support family-firm branding and influence consumer opinions about the firms (Presas et al., 2011; Tokarczyk et al., 2017). However, it is important to comprehend how evidence of familiness or family capital might manifest in a business story.

Returning to semiotics, it is clear that counting the presence of signifiers is not the only task at hand. Linguistic signs (such as a word, phrase, or symbol) can infer multiple connotations or signified meanings. Maguire, Strickland, and Frost (2013) provide a departure point for the present study in their qualitative study of interview transcripts from three Australian wineries. They found five themes “around which the notion of family was clustered [. . .] family as a key dimension of marketing strategy; day-to-day family involvement; family heritage; family as a symbolic quality; and the brand as family” (Maguire et al., 2013, p. 117).

Their first thematic key dimension correlates to the idea of family character (Figure 1). The family-heritage theme is directly related to a claim of temporal continuity. While the remaining themes were interesting, the authors did not rationalize them within a given theory, which is a gap we strive to close by connecting family-related content to the creation of family-brand identity under Albert and Whetten's (1985) scheme for constructing an organizational identity. Given that resource possession underpins our working concept of distinctive family competitive advantage, we expect that family firms will position family signifiers next to many common resources normally held by a business firm (Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, 2001)—financial, physical, labour or know-how, and intellectual property or name-value rights—in an attempt to make these resources appear more rare or unique in some manner. As such, Maguire et al.'s (2013) themes of involvement, symbolism, and brand as family may be repositioned as valuable capital resources for the firms they studied.

In this paper, we focus on understanding claiming a family identity as a communication strategy that employs narrative techniques, as well as heritage storytelling that can be intentionally employed by winery businesses. The remainder of this paper will outline the methods used to locate and analyze family-story content from wineries and provide results of that analysis, along with discussion of meaningful findings and potential for future research.

3 Methods

3.1 The rationale for textual analysis using website data

Business researchers have used textual analysis to pursue a variety of objectives, including identifying dominant themes in business communications. Business communication takes a variety of print and electronic forms: memos, letters, proposals, reports, press statements, newsletters, magazines, brochures, speeches and emails, and controlled and social media, like websites, Twitter, and Facebook. Moreover, “web pages provide a window into the ways that organizations present themselves to their audiences” (Powell, Horvath, & Brandtner, 2016, p.

109). Family firms are reportedly intensifying their use of websites to promote themselves and their values (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012). Self-promotion of the firm occurs with significant frequency in the “About Us” or “Our Story” sections of websites, making these outlets a prime avenue for further analysis of family messaging (Powell et al., 2016). This study assumes that consumers do read “About Us” profiles, following: previous studies' findings that they are a predictable part of website construction (see for instance Powell et al., 2016); and documented collective wisdom about the importance and performance of “About Us” webpages for businesses (Kaley & Nielsen, 2019).

Following the practice of using ordinary and available business communication texts to comprehend business or brand images, business narratives on winery websites were tapped as appropriate subject material for this study. Family content was subsequently sorted and measured to provide evidence of the three strategies crucial to the creation of a family brand identity: developing a family character; marking evidence of family heritage or traditions; and distinguishing the firm by demonstrating evidence of familiness or family capital.

3.2 Sampling frame

Multiple steps were incurred in accessing the “About Us” texts from winery websites. In order to minimize the influence of culture on storytelling, only US-based, English-language winery websites were included in this exploratory study. The authors used a third-party niche online portal to access producer websites (wineries, breweries, and distilleries). The portal permitted the authors to drill down by country and state to access alphabetized information regarding producer name and website address (Winesearcher.com, 2017). The portal had reasonably current listings of wineries given the retail focus of the portal, and wineries listing with this portal were strategically pursuing an online presence.

3.3 Sampling method

Alcohol producers were randomly selected from the 13 top wine-producing states in the US, yielding an initial 520 producers at 40 producers per state. Even though state is not a variable of interest for this study, it was assumed that states with greater numbers of wineries would yield sufficient availability of website content. Table 1 shows the sample configuration, that is, the final number of wineries in the study with usable website “About Us” sections. Usable in this case means the producer had to first be a winery (rather than a distillery or a brewery), secondly, had to have a website, and third, needed to have either an “About Us” section or an “Our Story” section or both. A total of 280 text samples were procured for further analysis. The texts were copied manually from the websites and saved as individual.docx files under state folders. We note that, of the wineries sampled, a majority had websites, and of the websites sampled, a majority had “About Us” content. There was no indication that the sample was in any way biased in using websites or stories as devices for marketing or business purposes.

Table 1 Sample configuration based on sampling 40 producers for each of 13 states

| State | Number of 40 sampled producers that were wineries | Number of sampled wineries with website | Percent of sampled wineries with websites | Number of sampled websites with narratives | Percent of sampled websites with narratives* |
|---------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| California | 40 | 34 | 85.0% | 32 | 94.1% |
| Colorado | 22 | 18 | 81.8% | 18 | 100.0% |
| Florida | 14 | 8 | 57.1% | 5 | 62.5% |
| Illinois | 23 | 20 | 87.0% | 17 | 85.0% |
| Michigan | 29 | 23 | 79.3% | 18 | 78.3% |
| Missouri | 27 | 20 | 74.1% | 20 | 100.0% |
| New York | 28 | 21 | 75.0% | 20 | 95.2% |
| North Carolina | 34 | 29 | 85.3% | 25 | 86.2% |
| Ohio | 29 | 22 | 75.9% | 14 | 63.6% |
| Oregon | 36 | 25 | 69.4% | 24 | 96.0% |
| Pennsylvania | 33 | 20 | 60.6% | 20 | 100.0% |
| Texas | 22 | 18 | 81.8% | 18 | 100.0% |
| Virginia | 33 | 29 | 87.9% | 27 | 93.1% |
| Washington | 34 | 23 | 67.6% | 23 | 100.0% |
| Total usable sample | | | | 280 | |

Note.

*Narratives refers to “About Us” sections on winery websites.

3.4 Content analysis steps

A mixed-method approach was employed to analyze the text content of these website narratives, involving both manual and computer-assisted text analysis (CATA) using DICTION 7.0. The CATA procedure was deployed to determine the presence of terms relevant to family-brand identity. Two search dictionaries were created and applied to see if any of the terms appeared in the text corpus and what the frequency of appearance was (see Table 2). The kinship dictionary was used to explore claim 1 (of family character). The generational dictionary supported analysis of claim 2 (of temporal continuity). CATA was also used to generate automatic text stylistic scores available from the proprietary software to determine any textual traits that further supported family identity messaging.

Table 2. Author-devised dictionaries for content analysis ($n = 280$)

| Family | Kinship | Generation |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Family (386) * | Son (80) | Tradition (107) |
| | Wife (55) | Generation (90) |
| | Father (42) | Heritage (41) |
| | Children (42) | Ancestor (8) |
| | Daughter (34) | Inherit (7) |
| | Brother (35) | Ancestral (2) |
| | Mother (20) | Heir (1) |
| | Grandfather (19) | Dynasty (0) |
| | Sister (22) | Descent (0) |
| | Grandchildren (14) | Ancestry (0) |
| | Husband (13) | Antecedent (0) |
| | Uncle (11) | |
| | Cousin (9) | |
| | Grandson (6) | |
| | Patriarch (4) | |
| | Grandmother (4) | |
| | Nephew (4) | |
| | Niece (3) | |
| | Aunt (2) | |
| | Stepfather (1) | |
| Matriarch (1) | | |
| Granddaughter (0) | | |
| Stepmother (0) | | |
| Parent (0) | | |

Note

*number in parenthesis reflects total instances of the term in the total sample of 280 texts.

CATA produced an exportable spreadsheet to which all manual analysis scores and information were appended to support statistical analysis in subsequent steps. Manual analysis on the 280 text files was performed using basic find search functionality in Microsoft Word to construct a dataset of 386 discrete sentences including the term “family.” Two trained raters reviewed these sentences to identify family storyline themes, to comprehend claim 3 (of distinctiveness). Sentences were sorted into categories and theme labels created, starting with themes from Maguire et al. (2013).

3.5 Statistical analysis

All data extracted from manual and CATA analysis were converted to an SPSS dataset and employed in statistical analysis. In addition, to support comparative analyses, the authors split the data set into two subsets using the rule that at least one instance of the word “family” had to appear in the “About Us” or “My Story” webpage content to place a text sample into the family

story subsample. Further analysis was conducted to explore significant differences between narratives containing the term family and narratives without the term.

4. Results

Data analysis explicitly shows family-related content in this set of winery websites to be relevant to the establishment of a family-brand identity as per organizational identity theory.

4.1 Claiming a family character in the brand’s identity

Frequency analysis of the term “family” was conducted in order to establish the existence of family character—the first tenet of establishing a family identity for a firm. Table 3 describes instances of the term “family” itself; results from using the kinship dictionary of related terms are in Table 4.

Table 3. Number of wineries at each level of family instances

| Category | Frequency | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|--------------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------|
| Used “family” once | 67 | 43.2 | 43.2 |
| Used “family” 2x | 37 | 23.9 | 67.1 |
| Used “family” 3x | 17 | 11.0 | 78.1 |
| Used “family” 4x | 15 | 9.7 | 87.7 |
| Used “family” 5x | 8 | 5.2 | 92.9 |
| Used “family” 6x | 3 | 1.9 | 94.8 |
| Used “family” 7x | 3 | 1.9 | 96.8 |
| Used “family” 9x | 2 | 1.3 | 98.1 |
| Used “family” 12x | 2 | 1.3 | 99.4 |
| Used “family” 13x | 1 | 0.6 | 100.0 |
| Total | 155 | 100.0 | |

Table 4 Comparison of family versus nonfamily narratives (n = 280)

| Terms related to family character | Narrative contains “family” (n = 155) | Does not contain “family” (n = 125) | Chi-square value | df | Sig (2-sided) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---------------------|----|---------------|
| Kinship | Yes (88) No (69) | Yes (29) No (94) | 29.899 ^a | 1 | .000 |
| Generational | Yes (55) No (102) | Yes (19) No (104) | 13.605 ^a | 1 | .000 |

Note

^a Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Presence of the word “family” or root equivalent

Basic descriptive frequency results (see Table 3) show that of 280 wineries in the sample, there were 155 wineries (55.4%) with the word “family” in singular or hyphenated form appearing in their narratives on their business websites. Across these 155 wineries, the word “family” appeared 386 discrete times in the corpus of winery stories with an average of 2.5 times per winery (SD 2.2) and a minimum of one to a maximum of 13 instances for any single winery narrative (see Table 3). A total of 67 wineries used the term “family” only one time in their texts, which was also the modal response. Less than 10% of the sample used the word “family” more than five times in their story content.

4.3 Presence of other kinship terms

Table 4 verifies that other family signifier terms are reasonably apparent in winery website content; two-fifths of the total 280 winery narratives displayed kinship terms. To further explore the semantic integrity of family character, we tested (using cross-tabulations) for differences between wineries referring to family in their narratives and wineries that did not reference the term “family.” In every case, the family winery texts were proportionally richer in the use of terms relating to kinship. Over half of family narratives communicate explicit kinship relationships. Nonfamily narratives pay proportionally less attention to these social ties.

4.4 Claiming temporal continuity

Table 4 provides insight into the strong role of temporal continuity in family stories as well. Over a third of wineries with family stories included terms from the generational dictionary (Table 2). In contrast, wineries with no mention of family in their narratives only mentioned a heritage term in 12% of cases. Based on further inspection of phrasing surrounding the term “family” in 386 sentences, we found the use of historical or heritage elements far surpasses other themes, as shown in Table 5.

4.5 Claiming distinctiveness through family resource messaging

Table 5 also illustrates how frequently other family themes are being used in this study sample. Findings show that, in describing family-brand identity, family is indeed being associated with resources commonly required to run businesses. The primary resources mentioned included ownership of the firm (implying investment), family labour participation, family symbolic values, and family physical resources such as inherited land or family farms. Notably, consumer as family is relatively even in weight with the aforementioned family resources. In contrast, the wineries seem not to deploy their family name as a marketing device all that much in the “About Us” narratives and do not comment much on family involvement in expansion and reinvestment strategies. These wineries also neglect to identify specialized skills or intellectual capital the family brings to the production and sale of wine. Lastly, the generic phrases “family business” or “family company” without any adequate qualifications are sparse.

Table 5. Themed messages linked to the term “family” in winery narratives

| Family theme | # Wineries using theme (of 155) | Examples from “About Us” text corpus |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| Family history or heritage | 80 (52%) | <p>“all the family generations have joined in our winemaking venture”</p> <p>“shares her passion with the next generation of family winemakers”</p> <p>“tried to keep the family traditions alive”</p> |
| Family ownership | 37 (24%) | <p>“XXX is a boutique, family-owned winery”</p> <p>“XXX is a small family-owned and operated vineyard and winery”</p> <p>“XXX remains proudly family-owned”</p> |
| Consumer as family | 36 (23%) | <p>“XXX has become my mainstay white wine for friends and family”</p> <p>“We are kid and pet friendly and enjoy meeting the entire family”</p> <p>“it’s fun for the entire family and a great learning experience”</p> |
| Family labour | 34 (22%) | <p>“friends and family helped transition the soil and plant each vine by hand”</p> <p>“kids in the family all grew up working summers in the vineyards”</p> <p>“each family member participates in digging, planting ...”</p> |
| Family symbolic values | 32 (21%) | <p>“influences the XXX family in their passion for fine wines”</p> <p>“keeping the family’s patriotic roots alive”</p> <p>“our wines reflect the personal family flavor of XXX Winery”</p> |
| Family physical resources | 29 (19%) | <p>“scenic rural setting on a 150-year-old, 4th generation family farm”</p> <p>“acquired 60 acres of the original family holding”</p> <p>“the family’s iconic warm climate site”</p> |
| Family name capital | 19 (12%) | <p>“XXX Family Cellars strives to craft wines”</p> <p>“Welcome to the XXX Family Vineyards website”</p> <p>“and so the XXX Family Winery was born”</p> |
| Family business or company (unqualified adjective or noun) | 9 (6%) | <p>“the winery remains a family company”</p> <p>“the family business brings us home”</p> <p>“many tedious tasks associated with maintaining a family business”</p> |
| Family intellectual capital | 4 (3%) | <p>“family has also become experts on other native grapes”</p> <p>“with his family’s reassurance, support, and secret recipe”</p> <p>“studying to sit the exams with the Court of Master Sommeliers”</p> |
| Family continuity and expansion | 4 (3%) | <p>“the family decided they needed to expand their production facility”</p> <p>“the family sees an opportunity to open a third winery”</p> <p>“the family is embarking on a fun and practical new venture”</p> |

4.6 Lexical strategies that support family identity formation

The final stage of this exploratory study was to examine specific lexical strategies that might support any of the three claims required in fostering a family-brand identity. Narratives were scored using DICTION 7.0. A selected norming agent of public relations (PR) texts was employed from the array of agents available (which vary widely across business, literary,

scientific, and general interest writing). Scores of all variables measured in this section derive from proprietary software algorithms and variable definitions can be accessed in the user manual from the provider (Hart & Carroll, 2013). We will define any variables that show significance for the present study as part of the subsequent analysis.

Table 6 shows the mean scores for those wineries that used the term “family” in their narratives. The table displays scores for all winery narratives as well, since it is important (in crafting a brand image) to understand both the communication style the industry favours in general as well as what the influence of family orientation might be. Six variables fell outside the ± 1 SD norms for PR messages. Certainty (speaking with authority), cognition (referring to cerebral processes) and hardship (documenting disasters, fears, and bad behaviour) fell under their expected ranges, while satisfaction (positive affective states), use of temporal terms, variety (avoidance of overstatement), and realism (speaking to tangible everyday matters) came in above their expected ranges. In general, considering these results, winery narratives tend to communicate positive and tangible images rather than abstract ideas or negative issues.

In order to determine whether wineries constructing family images on their websites had anything unique about their lexical styles, we ran a comparison of means analysis on the subsample of narratives that utilized the term “family” versus the subsample without references to family. Table 7 indicates significant differences for eight lexical strategies computed by DICTION 7.0 as well as for average text word counts (narrative size). Regarding the latter, family-oriented texts averaged 115 words more than non-family-focused narratives (the equivalent of a moderately sized paragraph of content).

In six cases, family-focused narratives scored higher than non-family-focused content. The variables scoring higher comprised activity (movement or change), use of collective terms (group nouns), human interest (people and their activities), familiarity (use of more common English words), past concern (use of the past tense), and temporal terminology (referencing a time period). Family-focused content scored lower than non-family-focused content on embellishment (heavy use of adjectives), and praise (adjectives affirming a positive quality).

Table 6. Comparison of mean scores for all winery and family winery texts to PR norms

| Variable | PR norm low | PR norm high | Average winery score | Average family winery score |
|-------------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Accomplishment | 14.27 | 37.71 | 17.22 | 17.50 |
| Aggression | 1.54 | 8.16 | 1.90 | 1.90 |
| Ambivalence | 2.89 | 17.50 | 5.10 | 5.11 |
| Blame | -0.28 | 2.86 | 0.58 | 0.56 |
| Centrality | 2.72 | 10.45 | 3.45 | 3.53 |
| Cognition | 5.09 | 15.93 | 4.97* | 4.96* |
| Collectives | 4.32 | 13.69 | 7.22 | 8.18 |
| Communication | 0.72 | 9.92 | 1.89 | 1.77 |
| Complexity | 4.62 | 5.40 | 4.84 | 4.81 |
| Concreteness | 10.02 | 27.58 | 24.59 | 24.11 |
| Cooperation | 0.28 | 11.55 | 4.69 | 4.40 |
| Denial | 0.60 | 7.95 | 1.49 | 1.53 |
| Diversity | 0.32 | 4.70 | 3.40 | 3.00 |
| Embellishment | 0.27 | 0.94 | 0.57 | 0.52 |
| Exclusion | -0.11 | 3.47 | 1.13 | 1.24 |
| Familiarity | 107.28 | 144.30 | 118.73 | 120.55 |
| Hardship | 0.83 | 7.79 | 0.65* | 0.72* |
| Human Interest | 14.27 | 44.85 | 29.36 | 31.17 |
| Insistence | 9.40 | 99.67 | 53.45 | 54.10 |
| Inspiration | 1.46 | 15.84 | 3.79 | 3.97 |
| Levelling Terms | 4.79 | 13.36 | 5.48 | 5.16 |
| Liberation | -0.11 | 4.01 | 1.34 | 1.33 |
| Motion | -0.11 | 3.78 | 2.01 | 2.17 |
| Numerical Terms | 3.14 | 16.12 | 13.24 | 13.45 |
| Passivity | 2.40 | 8.46 | 4.03 | 3.76 |
| Past Concern | 0.25 | 5.40 | 4.69 | 5.11 |
| Praise | 3.12 | 10.48 | 6.45 | 5.75 |
| Present Concern | 8.10 | 17.63 | 11.28 | 10.73 |
| Rapport | 0.89 | 4.50 | 1.38 | 1.29 |
| Satisfaction | 0.23 | 5.93 | 6.37* | 6.19* |
| Self-reference | -1.84 | 7.97 | 0.94 | 1.20 |
| Spatial Terms | 3.09 | 15.12 | 13.65 | 13.16 |
| Temporal Terms | 5.12 | 17.76 | 17.04 | 17.99* |
| Tenacity | 18.94 | 36.19 | 19.00 | 18.35* |
| Variety | 0.45 | 0.53 | 0.60* | 0.59* |
| <i>Master variables</i> | | | | |
| Activity | 48.16 | 52.43 | 49.27 | 49.60 |
| Certainty | 48.43 | 52.71 | 45.74* | 45.99* |
| Commonality | 48.40 | 54.08 | 48.45 | 48.49 |
| Optimism | 48.21 | 55.58 | 52.65 | 52.39 |
| Realism | 44.40 | 50.66 | 51.30* | 51.29* |

Note

*Indicates scores outside normed value range for public relations text.

Table 7. Lexical strategies that differentiate family versus nonfamily narratives

| | Story contains "family" (n = 155) | Does not contain "family" (n = 125) | Mean diff. | t | df | p |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|------------|---------------------|-----|------|
| <i>Text stylistics that differ</i> | | | | | | |
| Activity | 49.60 | 48.87 | .73 | 2.609 ^b | 278 | .010 |
| Collectives | 8.18 | 6.02 | 2.15 | 3.918 ^a | 278 | .000 |
| Human Interest | 31.17 | 27.11 | 4.05 | 2.432 ^b | 278 | .016 |
| Familiarity | 120.55 | 116.46 | 4.09 | 1.983 ^b | 278 | .048 |
| Past Concern | 5.15 | 4.10 | 1.05 | 2.360 ^b | 278 | .019 |
| Temporal | 17.99 | 15.87 | 2.12 | 2.193 ^b | 278 | .029 |
| Embellishment | 0.52 | 0.64 | -0.12 | -2.286 ^b | 239 | .023 |
| Praise | 5.75 | 7.32 | -1.57 | -2.982 ^a | 230 | .003 |
| Mean total words | 423 | 308 | 115 | 3.884 ^a | 278 | .000 |

Note

^aSignificant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed);

^bSignificant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

(NB Score calculations vary based on proprietary software algorithms.)

5 Discussion

An immediate goal of the present study was to verify if the various claims for asserting a family-brand identity were in evidence in the study sample. We believe that we have demonstrated that examples of all three claims critical to the establishment of family-brand identities, that is, character, temporal continuity, and distinctiveness, have appeared in the text corpus as a whole.

Family character was indicated by the existence of family as a subject term in firm narratives and its significant associations with an expanded kinship dictionary. Lexical measures provided by DICTION 7.0 also reinforce the assumption of family character in these narratives by showing family brand stories to have higher human interest scores. Human interest is a measure that concentrates on people and their activities, which would naturally be important subjects in describing the story of a family business. The activity measure rates the presence of language featuring movement, change, the implementation of ideas, and the avoidance of inertia, which is consistent with the description of the day-to-day activities of family members. Conversely, the present results show that family narratives have a lower score for the stylistic strategy of embellishment. Embellishment is scored as a selective ratio of adjectives to verbs and higher scores indicate reduced focus on human and material action. Thus for family-focused wineries that choose to generate an image of an active family doing things over time, the use of embellishment would naturally be lower and the use of subject/verb phrasing higher.

Temporal continuity was captured in the DICTION 7.0 scores as well. In developing family-based stories, part of the storytelling technique is to describe historical actions of previous generations and family members. Thus the use of past tenses of verbs shown in the CATA results correlate with the presence of family themes in website content. The same logic can apply to temporal terms (that fix a person, idea, or event within a specific time interval). Higher temporal terminology scores were seen for family-based stories. However, when constructing a family brand identity, companies need to consider how consumers interpret longevity based on the

industry the business is in. For technology companies, being an old-timer may be less exciting than being a start-up; for wineries and artisan brands, perhaps the very opposite is true.

Distinctiveness was attributed through contextual phrasing that surrounded the term “family” in 386 sentences. These sentences connoted possible competitive advantages, that is, family ownership, labour, and symbolic qualities such as passion and authenticity. Further support for this claim is offered by the lower praise scores in the family-focused sample; praise is based on adjectives that affirm some person, group, or abstract entity such as the wine product itself. Rather than attempting to drive more hedonic-focused messaging that elicits emotional responses of viewers through explicit use of product-related adjectives, family narratives are painting images of family networks and belonging to a home that strike at more basic psychological needs for security and trust. Again, if family-focused narratives describe family member activities, they do so in an active sense rather than overemphasizing or exaggerating the personal characteristics and traits of family members. Study findings in general offer credence for the viability of using organizational identity theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985) as a theoretical base upon which the construction of family brand image can be studied. Findings also infer that ordinary online business messaging potentially has a role in family identity creation.

5.1 Practical implications

Basically, a positive family image sells the brand and its products and supports a firm's overall marketing strategy. Clearly communicating family identity requires understanding of the array of narrative elements discussed in this paper. Firms can actively associate family with other images that help connote positive impressions about family in intentional ways. In addition, marketers can seek to control what is signified by family by inserting and positioning related terms that help to denote what family means to the business rather than leaving it to the interpretation of the consumer. Marketers may seek to moderate connotative influences through the narration of real-world circumstances and concrete examples in an attempt to offset consumers' prior associations with a family name. For example, Walter S. Taylor, a descendant of the New York Taylor wine family (bought out by Coca Cola in 1977) had to find a way to combat his legacy going mass market. He resisted by creating a new winery called ‘Bully Hill’ (Bully Hill Vineyards, 2019). He created a story that explained why he left Taylor Wine Company and what his vision was, but at the same time emphasized his legitimate heritage and the ancestral wine knowledge implied in the Taylor name.

In general, an effective family narrative has to do several things:

1. Create a clear family character by making family and related terminology a central piece of the business story on the firm's website.
2. Document the temporal continuity of family involvement over time, which includes family heritage and succession.
3. Communicate distinctiveness by describing elements such as family ownership status, the day-to-day participation of family members, values and symbolic qualities, and an extended-family orientation inclusive of customers.

For wineries specifically, some valuable insights have been gained. Wine businesses are high-value economic sectors but often geographically dispersed in rural areas. Thus, wineries are increasingly turning to websites and social media to complement cellar-door and retail distribution tactics in order to increase visibility and drive sales. A majority of wineries are small- to medium-sized operations (SMEs), which forces them to be economical in spending on marketing and related technology. Getting their stories right on their websites is critical.

The wineries studied did a solid job of sharing family histories or heritage storytelling, showing that, in the case of winemaking, the majority of wineries are conveying a mental model based on a tradition of a craft being passed down from generation to generation. Wineries can use these study results to understand that wineries use family messages about kinship and heritage to engage customers. We suggest that heritage stories are potentially more authentic in that they emphasize facts and the tangible actions of the winery owners and winemakers rather than hyperbole-laden rhetoric or external testimonials about the product. The minimal use of references to family names on their wine products and services suggests that winery stories building family-brand images have different goals than mere product awareness, such as inspiring trust and confidence in a winery where the family face is easily recognized.

Nonetheless, it is particularly revealing that, in this study, wineries exhibited numerous missed opportunities to strengthen the value that family offers to the winery's reputation. For the most part, less than a quarter of wineries combined the term “family” with clear assertions of how family provided a critical resource to the winery and thus increased value for the consumer. Wineries need to do a better job of communicating the family capital implied when they try to tell a family story about their winery, by making more powerful statements about unique family physical resources, labour, symbolic values, or intellectual property that are being contributed to the running of the winery and ultimately to the benefit of the consumer. Family stories can also complement other possible claims, such as being a local agricultural business, a small-sized operator, a green or sustainability-minded supplier, and so forth.

5.2 Conclusions, limitation and future developments

By generating additional discourse around the role of family in business storytelling, this study attempted to verify how brands promote a family image to their outside communities through the development of their business narratives. Our study provides evidence that family identity does not require family ownership but can be built upon an array of other narrative elements to form a family story that can be shared with consumers. We have also emphasized family stories disseminated via the digital environment of business websites.

Our findings extend theory on organizational identity claims (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and extend the results of prior family-identity research in the wine business field (Maguire et al., 2013; Strickland, Smith-Maguire, & Frost, 2013). Both content and linguistic style of narratives are deemed to be useful in conveying family identity to an external public. A family story is constructed by using kinship, heritage, and temporal terms, as well as by communicating one or more family storylines. The storylines found in this study include family ownership of and continued investment in the firm, family possession of physical and intellectual resources, use of family-name capital, and communication of family symbolic values. Further research is

warranted to determine which of these might be more powerful storylines for wineries based on consumer response to the various choices identified in this study. Beyond simply writing these story elements into the “About Us” content on the winery website, wineries should use supporting images and videos to give face to the characters that represent the family. Research in future can also compare the utility of text-based stories with other storytelling formats online, such as video-taped narrated family stories posted on the business website.

However, there is insufficient evidence from our study to conclude that individual firms are intentionally driving the construction of a family-brand image through the systematic use of family-identity-based narrative elements. Of particular concern are the facts that many firms mention family only once in their stories, thereby only weakly reinforcing their claims to a family character; and no firm deployed all (or even that many) of the possible family storylines that could have supported the requisite claim to distinctiveness. Two themes in Table 5 were difficult to interpret from a resource vantage point. First, the use of the idea of the consumer as family to promote the brand (such as invitations to “join our family!”) must be distinguished from the other types of themes uncovered. This particular theme has no clear connection to the operant notion of family involvement in starting, building, or operating a firm, but rather is being used as an advertising metaphor for the emotional connections that consumers are encouraged to feel for the winery. The second theme in question is the use of “family” in a vague adjectival or nominal sense to describe their business, with no surrounding context to indicate that family was in any way a competitive advantage or resource or any type of positive factor. We do not assume that these two themes are unimportant, but since they do not clearly fall within the roles of character development, heritage storytelling, or family as competitive advantage, it is necessary to stipulate the limitations of the theory for some instances of the word “family” in winery websites.

Our findings are limited in generalizability to “About Us” webpage text samples. We recognize the existence of other content areas and formats on websites, as well as other places where stories may be told in wineries, such as the tasting room and tour services. However, given that “About Us” sections are recognized for sharing histories and stories about businesses, a decision was made early on to confine the data sampling to these text samples in particular to preserve study resources. Future studies can focus on consistency of family storytelling between the official stories on “About Us” webpages and other strategic outlets where family messaging might occur, such as tasting rooms.

While necessarily restricting the manuscript to storytelling in English via American websites as a methodological constraint, the element of culture remains important for the study of family stories. National cultural differences might affect each of the resources that family members potentially bring to a business and thus impact the writing of a firm's family story. For example, national differences in ownership and inheritance laws, social views on the desirability (status) of working in the family-business sector, or varied attitudes toward specific symbolic values all exemplify how culture could be an influential driver of what goes into a particular firm's family story. Future research on cross-cultural comparisons of family stories using a framework of relevant national cultural differences is warranted. Even within the American sample, the type and strength of cultural roots can vary, for instance, a US family winery whose wine traditions

started hundreds of years ago in Italy compared to a family winery with several decades of family involvement but no Old-World ties.

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