INTRODUCTION

Family firms play a vital role in the global economic landscape and their business has become more and more international (Leppäaho & Metsola, 2020). Research on internationalization processes in these firms is gaining momentum (Pukall & Calabrò, 2013; Hennart et al., 2019), but there has been little analysis of how these processes take place. Pukall & Calabrò (2013) suggested that much it would be helpful to integrate literature on building processes and socioemotional wealth dimensions. SEW therefore assigns a key role to corporate identity-building processes in family firms when considering internationalization pathways (Sciascia et al., 2012; Leppäaho & Metsola, 2020).

SEW captures the “affective endowment” of family owners (Laffranchini et al., 2020). This includes family goals such as family social status in the community, the identification of family members with the firm, achieving a sense of belonging and maintaining family values (Gómez-Mejia et al., 2007). SEW literature relies on an organizational identity-based rationale for the relevance of “non-financial aspects of the firm that meet the family’s affective needs, such as identity, the ability to exercise family influence, and the perpetuation of the family dynasty” (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007, p. 106). SEW therefore assigns a key role to corporate identity-building processes in family firms when considering internationalization strategies and pathways (Zellweger et al., 2010; Gómez-Mejia et al., 2011; Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013). Corporate identity may have a particular role in family firms, where specific core values and family affective relations can provide a distinctive imprint (Berrone, Cruz, & Gómez-Mejía, 2012). Beyond the company’s economic value, identity has also an intrinsic value that clarifies the company’s purpose and scope to those outside the firm, helping to define strategies (Matherne et al., 2017).

The underlying idea behind these conceptualizations is that family involvement may make the corporate identity into a valuable basis for developing internationalization strategies (e.g., Pittino et al., 2019). Studies that rely on this position (e.g., Kraus et al., 2016) connect family

KEYWORDS
corporate identity, family firms, internationalization, socioemotional wealth

Abstract
This study aims to improve understanding of how identity-building processes shape corporate identity and how dimensions of socioemotional wealth affect internationalization pathways in a family firm. The paper uses an in-depth case study of an Italian family firm internationally recognized as excellent in its industry. We developed an integrative theoretical model, combining socioemotional wealth frameworks and elements of the corporate identity mix. This enabled us to incorporate more theoretical knowledge from the field of international management into the domain of family business research. The latent construct of socioemotional wealth provides an in-depth understanding of the multidimensional nature of corporate identity-building processes and shows the intertwined nature of corporate identity and the “affective endowment” in the development of internationalization strategies.
influence, management style and culture to the chosen internationalization pathways. Several studies have used these lines of research (Pukall & Calabrò, 2013; Mitter et al., 2014; Matherne et al., 2017), but few have examined the relationships among corporate identity-building dynamics and processes of internationalization in family firms. Little is known about how SEW endowment supports internationalization processes in these firms (Pukall & Calabrò, 2013).

Our study aims to improve understanding of the relationship between corporate identity-building dimensions and internationalization from an SEW perspective. It addresses the following research questions:

- How do multidimensional identity-building processes shape corporate identity in a family firm?
- How do SEW dimensions affect the internationalization pathways in a family firm?

We combined the theoretical perspective of SEW (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007, 2011; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2010; Berrone et al., 2012) with elements of the corporate identity mix (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986; Balmer, 2001). We used a case study to improve understanding of the core aspects characterizing the corporate identity of family firms undertaking internationalization. The study company was an Italian textile firm, E. Marinella, internationally recognized as excellent in its industry.

Our paper’s contribution to the SEW literature sits at the crossroad of decision-making and strategy process in the family business domain. It provides an in-depth understanding of the multidimensional nature of corporate identity-building processes, explaining their role in family firm strategy and providing an additional feature in the “affective endowment” of these firms (Botero et al., 2013; Matherne et al., 2017). It also contributes to the internationalization literature on family firms, showing how SEW extends beyond these firms’ identification processes to shape successful internationalization strategies, particularly through the intertwined concepts of corporate identity and family firms’ values.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Corporate identity and internationalization

The concept of corporate identity has evolved through the contribution of several disciplines, including graphic design (Selame & Selame, 1975), marketing and communication (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986), business strategy (Schultz et al., 1994), and organizational behavior (Gioia et al., 2000). It covers a range of aspects from visual/graphical and practice-oriented approaches to strategic, cultural and communication issues (Bednar et al., 2020). Melewar & Karaosmanoglu (2006) described it as a multidisciplinary concept representing the sum of all factors that define and project “what the organization is”, “what it stands for”, “what it does”, “how it does it” and “where it is going”.

We adopted an interdisciplinary approach and an overarching view (Tourky et al., 2020), drawing on the contribution of Balmer (2001). This displays the complex nature of the concept, and the large number of potential channels through which it can be shown. Balmer (2001, p. 280) defined corporate identity as:

“A summation of those tangible and intangible elements that make any corporate entity distinct, shaped by the actions of corporate founders and leaders, by tradition and the environment. At its core is the mix of employees’ values, expressed in terms of their affinities to corporate, professional, national and other identities.”

Corporate identity therefore includes both tangible and intangible elements, such as communication, design, culture, behavior, structure, and enterprise strategy (Balmer, 2001).

It is recognized as a key feature preparing an organization to embark on sustainable internationalization (Dörrenbächer & Lappe, 2017). Weerawardena et al. (2007) suggested that it is part of how the organization and its members show they are ready to sustain the internationalization process, with the required organizational and entrepreneurial culture, leadership style, and social ties to compensate for the assumed risk averseness associated with internationalization. In these processes, corporate identity might be “an umbrella to integrate these perspectives and to provide a unique concept to elucidate organizational preparedness for internationalization” (Dörrenbächer & Lappe, 2017, p. 171). Corporate identity may be especially critical in family firms, which often suffer from a lack of managerial orientation and experience problems developing internationalization strategies (Hennart et al., 2019).

Connecting corporate identity, SEW and family firm internationalization

Literature on family firms suggests that the interaction of economic and SEW dimensions creates a unique set of characteristics and conditions that affect internationalization and survival of the firm’s social system (Berrone et al., 2012; Matherne et al., 2017). SEW is the “noneconomic and affective goals and attachments—such as emotional connection to the business, identification with family values, and family control over generations—that the family owners want to achieve and preserve in their family firms” (Leppäaho & Metsola, 2020, p. 9). It is a
multidimensional “umbrella concept” covering preservation of family control, identification, emotional attachment, binding social ties and the renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession, as well as economic business goals (Nason et al., 2019). SEW may include family goals, such as the family’s social status in the community, the identification of family members with the firm, and the family involvement in the intention to pass on the firm to the next generation (Gómez-Mejia et al., 2007). In a seminal paper, Berrone et al. (2012) argued that SEW was a multidimensional construct that captures affective endowments by considering family control and influence, family identity, binding social ties, emotional attachment, and bonding through succession.

Sasaki et al. (2020) pointed out that company history, culture and values, and storytelling all play a key role in linking organizational identity with strategies in family firms. It can therefore be argued that historical corporate identity is infused in emotional endowment, because SEW considers the feelings of family members about the history of their business and family.

Scholars still disagree about whether the overlap between economic and SEW dimensions has a positive or negative effect on internationalization (e.g., Kraus et al., 2016). Pukall & Calabrò (2013) suggested that it was important to explore how SEW endowment and preservation support internationalization processes and generational change in family firms. Gómez-Mejia, Makri, & Larraza Kintana (2010) analyzed diversification decisions and found that family firms have lower levels of international diversification than non-family firms. They suggested that this was because of a fear of losing family control, and a reduced ability of family principals to establish an effective monitoring system that ensures that non-family executives in distant locations will act in line with family wishes. Cirillo et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between employee down-sizing and sales internationalization strategy using SEW. They found an inverse relationship between emphasis on SEW and internationalization strategies. However, few studies have explored the corporate identity-building processes in family firms, and how identity dimensions may shape internationalization strategies in these firms (Botero et al., 2013; Matherne et al., 2017).

This study extends both the interdisciplinary conceptualization of corporate identity and the relationship between identity dimensions and internationalization processes in family firms. We adopted a SEW perspective, and used the corporate identity mix developed by Birkigt & Stadler (1986), which acknowledges the complex nature of identity by combining graphical, organizational, strategic, and communicative dimensions. We revised these in the light of the five types of identity discussed by Balmer (2001), to combine the concept of corporate identity with other types of identity distinguishable within family firms. The framework was developed alongside key SEW corporate identity-building dimensions for internationalization (Gómez-Mejia et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). This paper therefore responds to the need to integrate contributions within the literature in a unified framework.

### Building the corporate identity mix using a SEW perspective

The corporate identity mix framework (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986), revised in light of the five types of corporate identity identified by Balmer (2001) and the key dimensions of SEW (Berrone et al., 2012), provides an integrated view of corporate identity in family firms (Table 1). We have rearranged the five dimensions identified by Berrone et al. (2012) to fit the five types of identity (Balmer, 2001), and in light of the most recent literature on SEW (e.g., Astrachan et al., 2018; Baù et al., 2019; Cirillo et al., 2020).

This framework was chosen because it acknowledges the complex and interdisciplinary nature of corporate identity, including both graphical (more practical), cultural and organizational aspects. This fits the literature on SEW in family firms, which highlights the close ties between these firms and the process of developing an identity:

“The identity of a family firm’s owner is inextricably tied to the organization that usually carries the family’s name. This causes the firm to be seen both by internal and external stakeholders as an extension of the family itself” (Berrone et al., 2012, 262).

### Table 1 Model of analysis

| Five identity types (Balmer, 2001) | Linked corporate identity dimensions (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986) | Five SEW dimensions (Berrone et al., 2012; Astrachan et al., 2018; Baù et al., 2019; Cirillo et al., 2020; Martinez-Sanchis et al., 2020) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Actual identity                  | Personality and behavior                                      | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment                                                                                                                                      |
| Communicated identity            | Communication                                                 | Branding                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Conceived identity               | Symbolism and communication                                    | Family identification with the firm (eponymous)                                                                                                                                                   |
| Ideal identity                   | Personality and behavior                                      | Embeddedness in the community (binding social ties)                                                                                                                                               |
| Desired identity                 | Personality and behavior                                      | Renewal of family bonds/generational succession                                                                                                                                                    |
The corporate identity mix (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986) is based on four pillars, and shows the relationship between “what we are” (identity) and “how we look” (image). It makes clear that image reflects identity. The first pillar, personality, describes how the organization operates, and considers aspects such as mission, past results, general objectives, culture, and structure. The second pillar, behavior, includes strategy, products and services, prices, core values, personal conduct, management styles, and ethics. The third pillar, symbolism, covers how the company expresses its identity through its logo, language, clothing, art, and exterior and interior of any store. The last pillar is communication. This describes messages and style of formal and informal contacts with customers, employees, press, politicians, and interest groups.

To our knowledge, this framework has never been applied empirically to understand corporate identity features within family firms. We used this approach in the study organization by matching the four pillars of the corporate identity mix with the five types of identities identified by Balmer (2001): (1) the actual identity; (2) the communicated identity; (3) the conceived identity; (4) the ideal identity; and (5) the desired identity.

The actual identity is based on internal values, organizational behavior, activities, market scope, performance, and positioning. It is related to the “personality” and “behavioral” aspects highlighted by Birkigt & Stadler (1986). The “mixed gamble” between family influence and emotional attachment affects both strategic/organizational decision-making processes (e.g., scope and organizational structure), and organizational behaviors of family and non-family members (Zellweger, Edleston, & Kellermanns, 2010; Gómez-Mejia, Patel, & Zellweger, 2018). Family influence derives from family members’ power to control key firm decisions. Family members’ emotional attachment results from their shared culture, history and knowledge of past events, which influence how they now act (Lawler, 2001). The family’s substantial influence on decision-making and their strong emotional attachment can explain managerial choices in market scope and positioning, and organizational structure and behavior (Barros et al., 2017).

The communicated identity is how the various organizational messages are conveyed via primary, secondary, and tertiary communications. This aspect falls within the “communication” category (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986). Balmer (2001) argued that corporate identity might manifest through various communication modes, with multiple channels and stakeholders. Micelotta & Raynard (2011) examined how family firms leverage their distinctive socio-emotional attributes in branding strategies and marketing activities to communicate the familial aspect of their businesses. Astrachan et al. (2018) proposed a multi-dimensional conceptualization of family business branding strategies: the identity view of the family business brand includes characteristics that are viewed as differentiating by family business owners and leaders. Family business branding also includes how the businesses’ family nature is portrayed to internal and external stakeholders, for example, how the family is featured in corporate communication.

The third type is the conceived identity, or the image, representation, and reputational profile of the organization held by stakeholder groups and networks. This aspect falls within the “symbolism” and “communication” categories (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986). The key dimension of SEW addresses the close identification of the family with the firm. The identity of a family firm’s owner is inextricably tied to the organization, which usually carries the family’s name (Berrone et al., 2012), also known as an eponymous firm (Van Gils et al., 2019).

A firm’s name is closely related to reputational dynamics: family eponymy is a powerful mechanism used by family entrepreneurs to signal unique skills or high ability and quality (Belenzon et al., 2020). Balmer (2001) observed that these elements may affect consumers’ perception and loyalty (Orth & Green, 2009). Consumers may be more willing to acquire something that is unique and linked to the overlap between family culture, the affective value of enhancing a family’s reputation with stakeholders, and brand image.

The fourth aspect, ideal identity, is the optimum positioning for the organization at that time. It covers the categories “personality” and “behavior” (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986). This aspect is essential because corporate identity is also shaped by binding social ties (Balmer, 2001). It could therefore be adapted to family firms by maintaining a strong connection and structural embeddedness generated by local social ties (Martínez-Sanchis et al., 2020). Artisan businesses (such as E. Marinella, our case study) often have strong links to both the area and the values of the founder. Local embeddedness is an important feature of family firms (Baù et al., 2019; Cirillo et al., 2020). Linking the brand to a region or tradition may be a success factor, especially when the boundaries between the social environment, the family, and the business are blurred (Berrone et al., 2012). Family businesses’ sense of belonging and social ties are often shared by non-family employees, promoting a sense of stability and commitment to the company (Gómez-Mejia et al., 2011; Berrone et al., 2012; Vardaman, Allen, & Rogers, 2018).

The fifth type of identity is the desired identity, the vision articulated by the corporate founder and/or the management board. This falls within the “personality” and “behavior” aspects (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986). Berrone et al. (2012) argued that the desire for dynasty has important implications for the time horizons in the decision-making process. The emotional value of ensuring firm survival across generations is highlighted by the SEW literature (Berrone et al., 2012). The aim of
FAMILY FIRMS GOING INTERNATIONAL: INTEGRATING CORPORATE IDENTITY-BUILDING PROCESSES AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL WEALTH DIMENSIONS

Dynamic succession is to renew and maintain family control and influence over generations. It is an important goal for family members to preserve family identity and values through the generations, especially when they are unlikely to consider selling the family business and want to evaluate their investment on a long-term basis (Zellweger et al., 2012a).

Table 1 shows our model, and the links between the corporate identity mix framework and the five types of identity. It also shows how we identified five SEW dimensions for the construction of the corporate identity, to guide both the interviews and the writing of the case study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We used a case study methodology to explore a complex phenomenon in which hypotheses are difficult to define before collecting research data, and to answer “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2003). De Massis and Kotlar (2014, p. 18) suggested that single cases are particularly revelatory, offering opportunities for unusual research access “to explore a significant phenomenon under rare, unique or extreme circumstances”. We wanted to provide insights from a unique case as a valid candidate for theoretical sampling (Yin, 2003) to support the theoretical analysis of how SEW dimensions shape corporate identity and internationalization pathways in family firms. In studies using quantitative methods or multiple case studies, the sample usually includes several firms that are not necessarily unique and extreme cases. However, choosing a single case can be better to explore how specific processes and complex issues take place within that case (Yin, 2003). Pukall and Calabró (2013, p- 17) argued that:

“A deeper knowledge about behaviors of internationalizing family firms might give something back to the actual discussion in the international business domain on the phenomenon in the sense that family firms are special and “unique” research settings that offer the opportunity to investigate one specific (business or family) phenomenon along an extraordinary life span through the involvement of new generations in the business and in the family systems”.

Our study organization was an Italian family firm, E. Marinella S.R.L., which is internationally recognized as excellent in the textile industry and particularly in the production of ties. We had several reasons for choosing Marinella as a case to show the relationship between corporate identity-building dimensions and internationalization from a SEW perspective. First, the firm is unique in its degree of success and position of excellence in its industry, with 2019 sales turnover of 14 million euro. Second, Maurizio Marinella, the CEO, provided a high level of access to the firm. We interviewed him and other important members of the firm, such as managers and employees, and also had access to extensive archival data on the history of the firm. Third, the socio-economic context in which the company competes makes Marinella even more interesting. Italy is ranked first in the European Union for the number of employees in the manufacturing industry and its leadership in this industry is globally recognized. The dynamism of Italian artisan companies has driven the use of the “made in Italy” trademark to historically high levels in 2016, when it reached 33% of GDP and contributed to a record surplus in the balance of foreign trade (ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica), 2016).

In this international and local context, Marinella is an important family firm in the textile industry, and especially in the production of ties. It was founded in 1914 in Naples by Eugenio Marinella. It started as a small family business, aiming to create a small corner of England in Naples, with exclusive rights from English suppliers. Initially, production mainly focused on shirts, but the production of ties increased rapidly during the 1980s. Nowadays the firm is managed by the third generation, and has 60 employees in its single-brand stores/showrooms around the world, including in Naples, Rome, Milan, Tokyo, London, and Lugano. Over the last 15 years, the firm has opened several new single-brand stores/showrooms abroad, including Tokyo in 2007, London and Lugano in 2011, and Hong Kong in 2015. This success makes it interesting to understand the factors related to corporate identity that supported Marinella’s successful internationalization.

We collected primary data from interviews with the CEO, managers and employees of Marinella. Data were also gathered from documentary sources, such as internal reports, financial documents, and the firm’s website. The protocol aimed to stimulate interviewees’ interest in this participative research process and to promote a narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2004), crucial for the success of the interviews. The interviews lasted about 70 minutes, with questions following a broad outline of topics rather than a structured set of questions. The topics were designed to explore key moments in the firm’s history, the features of the family/corporate culture, strategies and aspects related to communication, the strategies used by the firm so that it was perceived as different, the strong territorial ties and family roots, features of the organizational environment, and the key aspects related to generational change. We recorded and then transcribed the interviews. To collect any missing data, participants were asked to review and correct the transcripts before analysis.

Analysis of documentary sources (e.g., internal reports and financial sheets) showed how the firm has
grown over the period 2007–2019. For instance, the turnover increased from around 10 to 14 million euro (about +50%), and the number of employees rose from 20 to 60 (+200%). In 2019, exports reached about 40% of turnover. The number of single-brand stores jumped from one in 2007 to seven in 2019 (+600%), with more than 20 other shops selling Marinella’s products in eight countries. Today there are seven showrooms, and 18 “corners” in prestigious department stores around the world, with more planned.

Steps were taken to ensure reliability and increase the validity of our analysis. Figure 1 shows the research procedures, and how the case study was conducted through interviews and coding. We went back and forth between the data from the interviews and the literature (Locke, 2001), categorizing raw data, linking categories to themes, and re-aggregating them into the theoretical framework of the study (Pratt et al., 2006).

Using the theoretical framework, we identified key concepts as initial themes for developing coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Table 2 shows how the interviews were codified after transcription.

In the final step, we re-aggregated and abstracted thematic codes into the theoretical framework, following the association of the framework’s key concepts with the macro-themes driving the interviews (Pratt et al., 2006). Table 3 shows the documentary sources analyzed and the issues discussed with the interviewees.

CASE ANALYSIS

Following our framework (Table 1), this section discusses how Marinella has built its internationalization process on the five aspects of the corporate identity mix combined with economic and SEW dimensions.

Family influence and emotional attachment

Family influence and family members’ emotional attachment are strategic, supporting the significance of SEW factors in corporate identity-building processes (Simões & Sebastiani, 2017). This dimension, as shown in Table 1, is linked to both actual identity and personality.

The story of E. Marinella reveals the level of mutual attachment between the family and the company. In 1914, Eugenio Marinella founded his world-famous shop selling English suits and ties in Naples to bring a “corner of London to Italy”. He wanted to combine the high quality of products from England with the knowledge and skills of Neapolitan craftsmen. This key founding value of Marinella has been maintained throughout its history, even after the Second World War, when the Italian government imposed a requirement for the production and consumption of Italian products alone. Eugenio Marinella decided to close the shop for two years rather than change its corporate identity. The long history of the company has been characterized by turning points that contributed to the evolution of Marinella’s corporate identity and, above all, to its growth process.

Two key moments were 1985 and 1994, as Maurizio Marinella reported:

“When Cossiga became President in 1985, he decided to take a box with six of our ties as a gift whenever a meeting with a Head of State was scheduled; we were essentially asked to create tailor-made ties for each person. Our ties were therefore being worn around the necks of great historical figures like Chirac, Mitterrand, Kohl, Gorbachev, Bush, and many others who later remained our loyal customers. Another significant moment was the G7 in 1994 in Naples, when all the Heads of State chose to buy ties from our shop.”

For over 100 years, four generations of Marinella men have created, fostered, and maintained this corner of England in the waterfront neighborhood of Naples, Italy. Over time, the small boutique has acquired an international reputation, especially after the former President of the Republic started to give Marinella’s ties during his official visits to other heads of state around the world. The family-operated Naples shop has expanded its business to include locations in Rome, Milan, and Tokyo and...
| Interview extracts                                                                 | Codes                          | Macro-themes                                           | SEW dimensions associated                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Our company was founded 102 years ago, in 1914. My grandfather liked the idea of | Firm’s foundation              | Key moments in the firm’s history                      | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment    |
| creating a small corner of England in Naples.                                    |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| Throughout our history, there are several relevant events that contributed to    | Meetings with international key | Key moments in the firm’s history                      | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment    |
| the formation of our identity and, above all, to the determination of our        | figures                        |                                                        |                                                                  |
| success. [... ]                                                                  |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| My father has maintained our identity based on Italian craftsmanship with        | Firm’s key values and culture  | Features of the corporate culture                       | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment    |
| English products, and I subsequently continued with this approach; I never       |                                |                                                        | Renewal of family bonds/generational succession               |
| wanted to betray our DNA based on a strong link with England.                    |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| We know we are special to our company, and we treat our customers the same.     | Relationship with clients      | Strategies and aspects related to communication         | Branding                                                       |
| We call them by name.                                                            |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| The logo must allow people to immediately recognize the firm and must contain   | Characteristics of the logo    | Strategies adopted to be perceived as different         | Branding                                                       |
| all the company’s own features. [... ]                                           |                                |                                                        | Family identification with the firm (eponymous)                |
| The shops are very similar and the choice of wood for internal design is        | Store design                   | Strategies adopted to be perceived as different         | Branding                                                       |
| deliberate, because it represents a warm welcome and hospitality.                |                                |                                                        | Family identification with the firm (eponymous)                |
| Our idea was to create a strong tie with the territory, capturing all its       | The strong link to the city of | The territorial tie and family roots                   | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment    |
| strengths; when my grandfather died, my father took me aside saying: “Maurizio,  | Naples                        | Features of the organizational environment              | Embeddedness in the community (binding social ties)            |
| we have to convey to the people that we can do important things starting from    |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| Naples but mainly staying in Naples.”                                            |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| I represent a family and craftsmanship profoundly tied to the city of Naples and | Marinella’s relationship with  | The territorial tie and family roots                   | Family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment    |
| I do not want this feature to be lost. [... ]                                    | the surrounding environment     | Features of the organizational environment              | Embeddedness in the community (binding social ties)            |
| I had a hard time characterized by strong friction with my father when I        | Generational change from the   | Key aspects related to generational change              | Renewal of family bonds/generational succession                |
| enrolled at the University, which he considered to be a waste of time as he     | father to Maurizio             |                                                        |                                                                  |
| wanted me to spend all day in the shop. Such an intense link with the traditions |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| and the past has made it difficult to adapt to the changing world and above all |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| the ability to have a glance towards the future without upsetting the past, but |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| we did it carefully and with feeling, looking to collect and overcome an         |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
| important challenge, and this is what I want to pass on to my son Alessandro.    |                                |                                                        |                                                                  |
is also found in department stores including Bergdorf Goodman in New York, Santa Eulalia in Barcelona, Bongénie in Geneva, and Bon Marché Rive Gauche in Paris.

Maurizio Marinella strongly underlined the high quality of company products, driven by the mix of English raw materials and the skills and knowledge of Italian-Neapolitan craftsmen, and the strong personality of the firm. He felt that these aspects had determined the choice of ties among all these important people:

“I would like to emphasize that the production of E. Marinella has paid scrupulous attention to the quality of raw materials and today still focuses strictly on the craftsmanship of these truly very British Neapolitan ties. My grandfather and my father maintained our identity based on Italian craftsmanship with English products, and I am determined to maintain this approach.” (The CEO)

Marinella has built its culture and values on this strong personality. It also considers social citizenship to be essential, with strong links with the city of Naples, and its culture and values of openness, passion, and hospitality. Maurizio Marinella noted that the shop opens every day at 6.30 AM and closes at 8 PM, to give people a sense of welcome, because Marinella wishes to be “rather than a point of sale, a lounge where the interactions with clients are based on cordiality and respect”.

This sense of respect is also shown toward employees. All Marinella shops have the same environment, where employees are part of the company, and share its values, behaviors, and culture. This leads to a close attachment and identification with the family. Transmitting permanent features of the family, guaranteeing employee perceptions of the family’s past and present reputation inside and outside the business, and perceptions of a shared fate between employees and the family are important in maintaining a stable corporate culture and identity over time (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2011). This view is shared by Marinella and confirmed by the employees interviewed.

“In our labs, there are people [who have been employed] for over forty years; we have grown up together in the true sense of the word.” (Employee #1)

“We feel part of a big family, and the fact that we have worked together for many years created such a positive climate that it is always a pleasure to be together.” (Employee #4)

**Branding strategies**

This dimension reflects communications with stakeholders and visual identity. It captures all written, spoken and/or graphic design components of the company’s self-presentation that affect corporate image. History and notoriety of the brand play a decisive role in its ability to continue to attract customers. The brand is associated with longevity and family. Familiarity is communicated
to create “intimacy” with customers, and to inspire confidence, and “air of home.” The first part of the interview with the CEO clearly showed that the strong links with the values of the founder and his birthplace have been critical in creating a corporate culture and transmitting it to employees, by accurately choosing behaviors and communication channels. The communicated identity is strongly linked to the values and culture that the firm chooses to communicate (Balmer, 2001). Marinella recognizes that its relationship with employees is crucial because they are the main points of contact with clients. One employee stated:

“We know we are special to our company, and we treat our customers the same. We call them by name. The problem is that nowadays when you go to a store and ask where the jeans are, the shop assistant replies: ‘Over there.’ Instead, our customers are taken by the hand and led around the whole store.”

(Employee #5)

Marinella perceives the importance of communicating the same messages to all stakeholders, including employees, the media, and clients. The firm has therefore chosen to publish press releases on its website, to provide information about important events associated with the firm. One of the managers noted:

“We enhanced family, tradition and longevity as crucial elements for brand identity construction and affirmation. We communicate our corporate identity in the same way to all the stakeholders. This represents a distinctive and characteristic trait that links Marinella’s philosophy to its way of acting and communicating, even with the custodian.”

(Manager #1)

“Some years ago, a communications company conducted a branding survey asking the interviewees ‘who is the person in Naples who represents it most?’ Maradona came first, Totò second, Marinella third, San Gennaro fourth and Antonio Bassolino [the former Governor of the Campania Region] fifth. I think this is the clear sign of our communication and link with the city”

(Manager #4)

Family identification with the firm (eponymous)

A family firm’s name, within the corporate identity-building process, corresponds to the conceived identity construct (Balmer, 2001). It is related to symbolism and the strategies used by the company to ensure that it is perceived as different and is another aspect of success for Marinella. Despite the high demand for products from international customers, Maurizio Marinella did not transform the firm into a big brand. He preferred to conserve Marinella’s image as a small boutique, producing artisanal products.

Marinella has therefore bet on its links to its founder’s birthplace, unlike other companies where this link has faded. This is very different from companies that preferred to adapt to a mass-demand market that does not recognize the importance of a cultural and social relationship with the region. Maintaining a link to its native territory in a globalized world might, paradoxically, be a source of international success for family firms, because it may be a distinctive trait and therefore add value (Zellweger et al., 2012b). Marinella’s identity was preserved by combining innovative processes with old handicraft techniques, applying knowledge about old materials to new production methods. The strength in craftsmanship is mainly linked to traditions passed down over time (Micelotta & Raynard, 2011; Zellweger et al., 2012b).

The strong link to the company founder’s birthplace is easily recognizable in the symbolism used by the company. The logo includes both the name of the founder and the city, E. Marinella Napoli, together with images of the coats of arms of the British Royal Family and the Bourbons.

“The logo must allow people to immediately recognize the firm and must contain all the company’s own features. In the case of E. Marinella, it perfectly fulfills this task especially in relation to our scope of analysis, where the corporate image is the reflection of the corporate identity.”

(The CEO)

The choice of logo reflects the SEW literature about the family’s close identification with the firm that carries its name (Berrone et al., 2012). It also highlights the company’s strong links to both the city of Naples and London as a quality guarantee. Being able to use the coat of arms of the British Royal Family, and being one of its official suppliers, is an element of great pride for Marinella.

Significant effort is also devoted to the style and design of the shops, as the direct expression of the corporate identity. The manager in charge of the design of the showrooms asserted:

“Our philosophy is also evident in our showrooms; there is a thread that links them all. The shops are very similar and the choice of wood for internal design is deliberate, because it represents a warm welcome and hospitality.”

(Manager #2)
The shops are located in different parts of the world, so making them similar is an important part of demonstrating a unique, but shared, corporate identity.

**Embeddedness in the community**

Marinella has successfully grown and opened many single-brand stores/showrooms abroad, but it still bases its ideal identity on the links to its founder’s birthplace and the surrounding context. This again highlights the intertwined relationship with the social environment (Berrone et al., 2012) as an important aspect of identity. Linked to ideas of singularity and differentiation, Marinella has tied its activities very closely to its sense of place, conferring value onto the specific qualities of the region and drawing value from the region’s cultural image. The strong and inseparable connection between the business, the family, and the territory is definitely one of the secrets of company success. The CEO noted: “We do not just sell a product, we sell our land, our lifestyle, our culture.”

Maurizio Marinella emphasized the link with Naples, his active participation in the region, and his desire to convey the essence of being Neapolitan without hiding its challenges, such as local crises related to waste, or its negative image through the connection with organized crime. In his words, family and regional links are at the heart of creating and transmitting the corporate identity:

“...When I asked my father why all my friends were playing football when I had to stay in the shop instead, he replied that it was more important for me to breathe that atmosphere made of fabrics and crafts” (The CEO)

“We try to convey to people that it is possible to do important things for Naples, starting in Naples. Our idea was to create a strong link with the area, considering all its strengths. I represent a family and craftsmanship profoundly tied to the city of Naples and I do not want this feature to be lost. Naples often has a heterogeneous image that is not understood abroad, but this relationship with the city has strengthened us more and more. Now people are happy to buy a product that, rather than being made in Italy, is made in Naples, knowing that this represents tradition and quality.” (The CEO)

“We are proud to be Neapolitan and we are proud that our birthplace and our firm are recognized all over the world.” (Employee #2)

The idea of singularity in design was closely linked with the uniqueness of place, and to a feeling of social closeness that was not separable from the product itself.

**Generational succession**

The desired identity clearly emerged from Maurizio Marinella’s words, as he expressed the desire that the firm would maintain this identity into the future. Marinella is currently run by the third generation and is close to the fourth. The “renewal of family ties through dynastic succession” is an important goal for family members (Berrone et al., 2012). This was confirmed by Alessandro (Maurizio’s son), the fourth generation who now works alongside his father:

“I have always been close to the activities of the family business to breathe the Naples atmosphere. In 2017, I completed my university studies and joined the company. I also chose to spend a six-month period in our London store. Back in Italy, I have been involved in improving organizational and operational aspects, with specific reference to international and digital projects, carrying on our family philosophy, transmitted by my grandfather and great-grandfather.” (Alessandro Marinella)

Maurizio commented on Alessandro’s involvement in the business, including in decision-making, as adding value in the internationalization and innovative development of the business. He noted that Alessandro had more freedom than he had when he was younger:

“When I first entered the business, I had great difficulties, my grandfather and my father were very rigid with me; it was only once I reached the age of 18 that I was able to express even a simple judgment. I certainly allow much more freedom to Alessandro ... I think he can really bring a more fresh, innovative and international vision to our business.” (Maurizio Marinella)

As the world changes, so do ways of producing goods and communicating with customers. One manager commented that a rapidly evolving world leads to generational differences that may threaten the transmission of values and corporate culture across generations:

“The generational change is a crucial moment in the process of transmitting business values from father to son. In our case, it has not been too difficult to convey our identity as we have created a strong link with the city of Naples over time, and this still transmits an image of positivity, happiness, genius, and an enviable desire for color. That is why people look at what we do with
extreme interest, appreciating it all over the world.” (Manager #3)

Marinella has been able to leverage all five aspects to support internationalization, based on careful work to identify foreign locations that will best align with its corporate identity. The company selected places where the trademark and the image of Naples would easily be recognized, to create an “Italian Lounge” where clients can feel at home, regardless of the country.

In 2015, for the first time in its history, Marinella appointed an external manager, Andrea Petochi, to help the company to preserve its identity during change processes, take advantage of the opportunities from internationalization, and avoid one of the most difficult challenges faced by the firm. Petochi is a fashion industry expert and had previously worked on the development of big brands. The aim of this appointment was to modernize Marinella and introduce more structure to the organization in view of the approaching generational change, giving continuity to the internationalization process through the different generations.

“To help us adapt better to a rapidly evolving world, we appointed a manager from outside the family. Years ago, managing the company meant being in the shop from morning to night, close to the customer. Now it means staying in the company as much as possible, but also having an open and international look in America, London, Paris, and various other corners of the world, searching for much wider visibility. This is an important aspect, but it needs to be fueled, sustained, and followed.” (The CEO)

The link between identity and internationalization in Marinella is also remarkable in a recent interview with Maurizio Marinella on the newspaper Milano Finanza. Marinella stated: “We are not obsessed with increasing turnover or graphs. Rather, we want to continue to convey our identity based as much on the quality of the product as on a shopping experience marked by a typically Italian tradition” (Milano Finanza, 2020).

**DISCUSSION**

Recent advances in SEW research (e.g., Gómez-Mejía et al., 2018) used the concept of “mixed gamble” (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2014) to provide a behavioral explanation (Brigham & Payne, 2019) for the “strategic decision-making process within [family firms]” (Berrone et al., 2012: p. 261), such as internationalization pathways. We used SEW as the basic perspective to explain the narrative analysis of the study firm (Czarniawska, 2004) to provide a contribution sitting at the crossroad of decision-making and strategy process in the family business domain. The multi-dimensional nature of SEW (Berrone et al., 2012; Astrachan et al., 2018; Baù et al., 2019; Cirillo et al., 2020; Martinez-Sanchis et al., 2020) in corporate identity-building is captured by five attributes or dimensions (Table 1): (1) family influence and (family members’) emotional attachment; (2) communication and branding strategies; (3) family members’ identification with the firm conceived identity (eponymous); (4) binding social ties with the community (embeddedness in the community); and (5) renewal of family bonds and generational succession.

The five dimensions overlap within SEW, which acts as an “umbrella” in our study. These attributes are understood as a set of interrelated constructs, explored from dynamic and mutually interdependent points of view (see Figure 2). The family emotional attachment and rootedness with traditions and local culture and values, the relationship between family members, family identification with the firm and the desire for dynasty affect the multidimensional nature of corporate identity (Zellweger et al., 2012b; Matherne et al., 2017; Bednar et al., 2020). The case analysis also shows that the
strength of family involvement and emotional attachment to the firm, long-term orientation (De Massis et al., 2018), and higher endowment of cultural roots and social ties (Kraus et al., 2016; Dörrenbächer & Lappe, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2020) acted as incentives to develop international initiatives.

The analysis showed that Marinella has successfully leveraged its actual, communicated and conceived identity drawing on the strong historic links between the firm, Naples (the founder’s birthplace) and “Britishness”. These features are key points within each strategy or behavior of the firm. The links to the city of Naples are important in the way the firm communicates with its stakeholders. They are also present in the firm’s culture and values of openness, passion, and hospitality, all of which are typically Neapolitan. These aspects support the relevance of the close and intertwined relationship with the surrounding context, characterized by blurred boundaries. This is consistent with the SEW literature, as Berrone et al. (2012, p. 269) noted: “the context in which the firm operates is invariably intertwined, and boundaries between social environment, family, and business are rather blurred.” Those constitutive values of the corporate identity merge with an orientation that, throughout Marinella’s history, have been linked to an international vocation inspired by British style.

These findings show the importance of consistency in how the firm communicates its identity, both internally and externally. This allows the firm to have a high degree of integrity and coherence across different types of communication with stakeholders (Schultz et al., 1994), and maintain a stable relationship over time (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2011). Marinella actively uses its website to communicate, especially the section on press releases, which reports on important events in which the firm is involved. The firm has also chosen to base its symbolism on the links with its founder’s birthplace. This ensures that it is perceived as different in a globalized world, and gives it a competitive advantage (Zellweger et al., 2010). The strong links to the birthplace of the founder are easily recognizable from the logo, including both the name of the founder and the city, “E. Marinella Napoli”, and two other images, of the coats of arms of the British Royal Family and the Bourbons. The choice of this logo has three meanings. First, the use of a logo that includes the family name reflects the close identification of family members with the firm that carries their name, discussed in the SEW literature (Gómez-Mejia et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). Second, and additionally to the literature (Van Gils et al., 2019), it demonstrates the strong identification with the founder’s birthplace. Third, it represents a guarantee of quality production connected to Neapolitan and Italian artisanship and the English raw materials.

This highlights the importance of symbolism and graphic design in giving form and distinctiveness to a firm’s conceived identity (Selame & Selame, 1975). The link between the symbolism and the city of Naples is also seen in the effort spent on the choice, style, and design of the company’s shops, seen as a way of expressing the ideal identity. The choice of new international locations is also closely related to the recognizability of Naples there. The firm has successfully built its identity combining elements of communication strategies with elements of SEW. It has integrated different aspects of symbolism, graphic design, and branding with aspects related to its tradition, family nature, and strong tie with the founder’s birthplace (Balmer, 2001; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). Even more importantly, it has shared these values with its employees, and ensured that they also feel “part of the family.”

Marinella shows that the ideal and conceived identity is also a key resource for selecting locations for new stores, and selecting trusted individuals (including non-family members) for key positions. It shows a reduced fear connected to the risk of losing the SEW linked to the family firm. To internationalize, Marinella acquired skills and capabilities from outside. The ability of the firm to leverage these integrated aspects of its identity, and maintain the conceived identity over time, meant that in 2015, the firm appointed an external member of the management team for the first time in its history. This choice was made because the family knew that international business experience and market knowledge (i.e., international business knowledge specific to a market) is crucial for successful internationalization (Fletcher & Harris, 2012) and increases international competitiveness (Lu & Beamish, 2006). The creation of a new strong link between family members and non-family employees is understood as a mechanism to strengthen the corporate identity both internationally and longitudinally.

Marinella trusted its values and desired identity and saw this as an opportunity to better manage the approaching fourth generational change, given the challenges and threats of the new, modern, and globalized world. Two of the most important concepts emerging from the interviews, especially with the CEO, were Marinella’s ability to maintain a stable desired identity over time and its success in achieving generational change. These aspects are important for maintaining family values, an important goal for family members in the SEW literature (Berrone et al., 2012; Matherne et al., 2017). Marinella is in its third generation and close to the fourth. Maurizio Marinella expressed his desire to maintain the firm’s identity in the future, as in the two previous generational changes. From the case, it is clear that both the training process and the position occupied by Alessandro Marinella (the fourth generation of the family in the company) is consistent with the increasingly international vocation of the family business. In turn, SEW endowments support processes of generational continuity and internationalization strategies (Pukall & Calabrò, 2013).
Figure 2 shows the propositions deriving from our study and connects them in a model explaining the phenomenon. Our findings suggest that corporate identity-building processes are supported by the intertwined and interrelated action of the firm’s influence, the eponymy of the firm, the link with the founder’s birthplace, the firm’s branding and the desire for dynasty.

Affective endowment of family owners and desire to maintain family control over generations may be significant barriers to extending business overseas and being “exposed” to external environments (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2010). Marinella was able to overcome these typical family firm weaknesses through family-specific resources, including family emotional attachment, family members’ identification with the firm, the creation of a family/organizational culture that encourages pursuit of international opportunities, family embeddedness in the community, and aspiration for generational continuity (Zellweger et al., 2012a). These dimensions created a corporate identity that encouraged the firm to pursue international opportunities and endure short-term deprivation for the sake of long-term survival (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2011). Marinella’s international success is related to its focus on high-quality products in an international niche; ability to build a distinctive image as a small boutique; ability to shape a communication strategy combining roots in the local culture, social ties and British style; the presence of (non-family) managerial capability in the top management team and structuring of internationalization planning (Kano & Verbeke, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to understand how identity-building processes shape corporate identity and how SEW dimensions affect the internationalization pathways in a family firm. We developed an integrative theoretical model, combining SEW frameworks and elements of corporate identity mix (Balmer, 2001), to incorporate more theoretical knowledge from international management into family business research.

We captured the latent multidimensional construct of SEW (Brigham & Payne, 2019) in Marinella’s corporate identity-building process by five dimensions: family influence and emotional attachment; the familial aspect of the business and branding strategies; family members’ identification with the firm’s conceived identity; social ties with the community, and generational continuity. This socioemotional knowledge and experience, which are “non-tradable”, enabled this firm to achieve a solid market position in domestic markets, acquire knowledge about business opportunities abroad and enable economic strength preservation in international markets.

The paper makes several interesting academic and practical contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on family firm corporate identity, by providing an empirical study exploring this under-studied area.

Second, the paper contributes to the literature on SEW in family firms, showing the relevance of its key dimensions and adding insights into the importance of the founder’s birthplace. In particular, our findings suggest that corporate identity-building processes are supported by the firm’s influence, the eponymy of the firm, the firm’s branding, the desired for dynasty, and the link with the local embeddedness. The analysis showed that Marinella has successfully leveraged its ideal, actual, communicated and conceived identity drawing on the strong historic links between the firm, Naples (its founder’s birthplace) and “Britishness” (as international vocation). The constitutive values of the corporate identity merge with an orientation that, throughout Marinella’s history, have been linked to an international vocation inspired by British style. Therefore, we also explored the role of SEW in internationalization by showing the intertwined nature of corporate identity and the “affective endowment” in the development of strategies.

The study acknowledges the complex nature of corporate identity, and provides an integrated analysis of family firm identity that combines marketing aspects (visual symbolism and graphic design) with organizational features of identity (such as employee involvement, and organizational history, culture, and values).

We acknowledge that our findings are not directly transferable to other settings or generalizable to all family firms. However, the aim was mainly to provide a deeper understanding and articulation of one unique case that may offer insights into the issues (Parker & Northcott, 2016). We believe that the findings on a successful case provide valuable insights on how SEW dimensions shape corporate identity and affect internationalization strategies in family firms. Our findings could therefore be a starting point for other family business scholars exploring how processes of internationalization take place in family firms, instead of only focusing on the factors affecting these processes.

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ENDNOTES

1Marinella’s first generation was represented by Eugenio, the founder. The second generation was brought by his son Luigi that then passed the firm to Maurizio, the third generation. Currently, the firm is managed by Maurizio but his son Alessandro, representing the fourth generation, is already involved in the firm’s everyday life.

2See footnote 1.
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