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Estrategias asset-light e internacionalización de las cadenas hoteleras españolas: el efecto moderador de la implicación familiar en la empresa

Asset-light strategies and Spanish hotel chains' internationalisation: The moderating effect of family involvement in the firm

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Resumen

Cada vez es más habitual que las cadenas hoteleras opten por estrategias alternativas a la propiedad a la hora de incorporar un nuevo hotel a su cartera en el extranjero, especialmente desde la crisis por el COVID-19. Entre estas estrategias, se encuentran las conocidas como *asset-light*, siendo los acuerdos de alquiler, gestión y franquicia los más comunes en el sector hotelero. Combinando las ideas de la teoría institucional y de la teoría *stewardship*, proponemos varias hipótesis sobre la relación entre la distancia institucional y la distancia cultural y la internacionalización empleando estas formas no patrimonialistas que suponen un menor compromiso de recursos. También se analiza cómo puede influir en esa decisión

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la implicación familiar de las empresas. Los resultados confirman que existe relación entre la distancia institucional y cultural y el régimen en el que las cadenas hoteleras mantienen sus hoteles internacionales, así como que la implicación familiar modera, en parte, dicha relación. Este trabajo aporta nueva evidencia empírica sobre la elección del régimen de gestión de la cartera de hoteles internacionales con datos actuales post-pandemia, demostrando que predominan los modelos *asset-light* frente a asumir la propiedad. Además, supone una nueva investigación sobre la influencia del carácter familiar en el compromiso internacional de las empresas.

Palabras clave: distancia institucional; distancia cultural; estrategias *asset-light*; implicación familiar; internacionalización.

Abstract

Increasingly, hotel chains opt for alternative strategies to ownership when adding a new hotel abroad to their portfolio, especially since the COVID-19's crisis. Among these strategies, are those known as asset-light, with leasing, management and franchise agreements being the most common in the hotel sector. Combining insights from institutional theory and stewardship theory, we propose several hypotheses on the relationship between institutional distance and cultural distance and internationalization using these asset-light forms that involve a lower commitment of resources. We also analyze how the family involvement of the firms may influence this decision. The results confirm that there is a relationship between institutional and cultural distance and the regime in which hotel chains maintain their international hotels, and that family involvement partly moderates this relationship. This paper provides new empirical evidence on the choice of international hotel portfolio management regime with current post-pandemic data, showing that asset light models predominate over assuming ownership. In addition, the paper provides new research on the influence of family character on the international commitment of firms.

Keywords: institutional distance; cultural distance, asset-light strategies; family involvement; internationalisation.

1 Introduction

Increasingly, hotel chains have moved towards alternative growth strategies to ownership when adding a new hotel to their portfolio. Especially since the last economic downturns, hotel chains are changing their business model to a more flexible, with less asset-intensive strategies and lower fixed costs (Seo et al., 2021). These alternative strategies, known as asset-light, allow the company to grow with less capital investments (Li and Singal, 2019). Leasing, management and franchise agreements are the most common in the hotel sector. These agreements are considered fee oriented and allow firms to achieve high returns and profitability (Sohn et al., 2013). Therefore, it is to be expected that this trend will increase after the hotel sector's crisis due to COVID-19's impact. Thus, for example, the Spanish hotel chain Meliá International has confirmed its strong commitment to growth through asset-light strategies by creating its own brand to include franchised hotels (affiliated by Meliá). In this sense, it seems appropriate to focus on the study of these strategies. Specifically, we focus on the use of these strategies in the internationalisation of Spanish hotel chains.

The Spanish hotel industry presents a high internationalisation (Andreu et al., 2020; Brida et al., 2015) and, moreover, a high percentage of firms are Family Firms (FFs) (Andreu et al., 2018). However, the family character and the internationalisation strategies relationship has not attracted much interest in this sector. For this reason, this study aims to analyse the FFs-internationalisation relationship. More specifically, the family involvement's influence on the commitment to the international markets since FFs present certain particularities that may condition this decision (Cano-Rubio et al., 2017; Claver et al., 2009; Fernández and Nieto, 2006; Gallo and García, 1996; Graves and Thomas, 2004, 2008).

Among the theories used to explain the level of resources commitment in the internationalisation strategy, institutional theory is one of the most commonly used. This theory allows analysing how the institutional environment and the differences between home and host countries shape the firm's perception of risk and, therefore, condition the international strategy (Schwens, et al., 2011). Otherwise, according to stewardship theory, this risk perception may be moderated by the family nature of the firm (Andreu et al., 2020; Rienda et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that family involvement in firm ownership and control can influence the firm's attitude towards international activity (Calabró et al., 2009; Cano-Rubio et al., 2017; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2001). For all these reasons, drawing on institutional and stewardship theory, our paper investigates if the *familiness* of Spanish hotel companies influences on the relationship between institutional and cultural differences and the use of the asset-light strategies in international markets, since these strategies are being increasingly important after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Our paper makes several contributions. On the one hand, it provides new evidence of these asset-light strategies which are on the rise and under-studied (Almeida et al., 2022), with great benefits for companies' internationalisation in this sector hard hit by the crisis (Kruesi et al., 2017, 2018; Seo et al., 2021). On the other hand, our paper also contributes to the literature on FFs' internationalisation. The internationalisation strategy is one of the topics that has attracted most attention in the FFs literature (Lin, 2012), becoming one of the most relevant areas of research (Sciascia et al., 2012). Our study presents new empirical supporting the family character's influence on the type of hotel affiliations in foreign markets since this character may influence the perception of risk involved in this strategy.

In the next section of the paper, we analyze the decisions to opt for asset-light versus ownership hotels and the influence of family involvement in order to establish the hypotheses. Then, we describe the empirical study carried out, the results obtained and the discussion. Finally, the conclusions section summarizes the main ideas and contributions of the paper, the limitations and future research.

2 Theory review and hypotheses statement

2.1 Level of uncertainty and asset-light strategies in the hotel sector

The way a hotel chain incorporates a new hotel abroad is one of the most important decisions in its internationalization process (Quer et al., 2007). The options available to hotel chains can be grouped into two broad categories depending on whether or not a capital investment is made abroad (equity and non-equity entry modes). In the second case, are included contractual arrangements, known as 'asset-light' growth paths, with leasing, management and franchise agreements being the most usual in the hotel sector (Dimou et al., 2003; Kruesi et al., 2017). These non-equity entry strategies are characterised by a separation between hotel management and ownership. However, there are differences in the degree of control over international activity. Contractor and Kundu (1998) identify international strategies of the hotels according to the degree of control over daily management, service quality, physical assets, tacit expertise and strategic assets. Ownership hotels are the strategy that provide the most control in all aspects. Opposite would be agreements because provides less control and requires a lower resources commitment (Kruesi et al., 2017).

In the choice of the type of affiliation of the hotels abroad, some of the factors that influence are the political, social and economic rules of the destination and home countries of the firm, that constitute institutional environment. How formal (political, legal and economic rules) and informal institutions (behaviours, identity, traditions or customs, ideology or culture) influence firm behaviour is justified from institutional theory (Peng, 2000). Institutional differences (both formal and informal) in the destination country compared to the firm's home country raise the external uncertainty faced in setting up in that country and may condition this decision (Chen et al., 2017).

The greater the formal institutional differences, the greater the difficulties for the company to establish itself in that country due to the economic and political risks the asymmetric information, the administrative and organisational cost and the difficulty to relation with local institutions (Pinto et al., 2017). This may lead to use less compromised forms of management that involve less investment of resources, but also less control of international business. Therefore, it would be expected that the formal institutional differences and more resource-intensive strategies were negatively related (Brouthers 2002; Pak and Park, 2004). To put it another way, when the institutional differences are important, it's expected a positive relationship with asset-light forms, as propose hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between formal institutional distance from the destination country and the choice of asset-light vs. ownership strategies for the international hotels of Spanish chains.

As for informal institutional differences, one of the most used measures of external uncertainty is the cultural distance (Zhao et al., 2004). Cultural distance captures differences between countries in various behaviors, which can influence the ability to transfer practices and knowledge (Hofstede, 1980). The cultural and ideological differences increase the costs and risks of doing business in the destination country. Many studies have obtained a negative relationship between cultural distance between countries and more resource-intensive strategies in the destination country (Brown et al., 2003; Erramilli and Rao, 1993; Gatignon and Anderson, 1988; Hennart and Larimo, 1998; Kim and Hwang, 1992; Osborne, 1996; Pak and Park, 2004). In short, in the greater uncertainty situations, where risk is high, hotel companies could use strategies that involve less resources investment as leasing, management contracts or franchising, although less control of international activity. In the case of hotel industry, according to Dimou et al., (2003) and Kruesi et al., (2017, 2018), it is to be expected that hotel chains will opt to a greater extent for asset-light strategies as the cultural differences increase, as propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between cultural distance from the destination country and the choice of asset-light vs. ownership strategies for the international hotels of Spanish chains.

2.2 The moderating effect of family involvement in hotel chains

In the case of the FFs, the international strategy choice may differ from Non Family Firms (NFFs). As Kraus et al. (2016) point out, the decision to internationalise creates uncertainty for both FFs and NFFs. However, owners of FFs present a greater identification with the firm and family's values and these feelings influence the strategic decisions such as internationalisation, which entails a certain risk of loss of those values (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2010). This strong identification of managers with the company's motivations is one of the principles of stewardship theory, which argues that managers and owners' interests are aligned (Lee and O'Neill, 2003). This theory, proposed by Davis et al. (1997) as an alternative to the Agency Theory in the study of FFs, appoints that in FFs, if ownership and management are under family control, duality of interest is less likely to exist as managers do not pursue their own interests but those of the firm.

The business is a way to support the future of the family providing continuity and security for the subsequent generations (Miller et al., 2008). Therefore, these companies try to create conditions in order to ensure the business survival (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). This desire for protection will be greater the larger the members of the FFs involved in the ownership and management of the firm (Miller et al., 2008).

This may lead them to undertake-growth strategies to ensure the continuity of the firm. In the case of international growth, there is no clear consensus on whether FFs are more or less inclined to internationalise because some authors consider these companies to be more risk-averse while others argue the opposite. Calabró et al. (2009) indicated that family businesses tend to internationalise later and more slowly than non-family businesses. And that companies with a higher percentage of non-family members would show greater internationalisation because they can contribute more knowledge and experience in the international market. In this case, FFs would opt for a lower commitment to international markets. Romano et al. (2001) also argue that FFs are more averse to undertaking growth strategies that involve a significant increase in debt because of the risk of large losses in the event of failure. Assuming the property of a hotel abroad may lead to higher levels of debt. Therefore, asset-light strategies could be a preferred alternative for these companies.

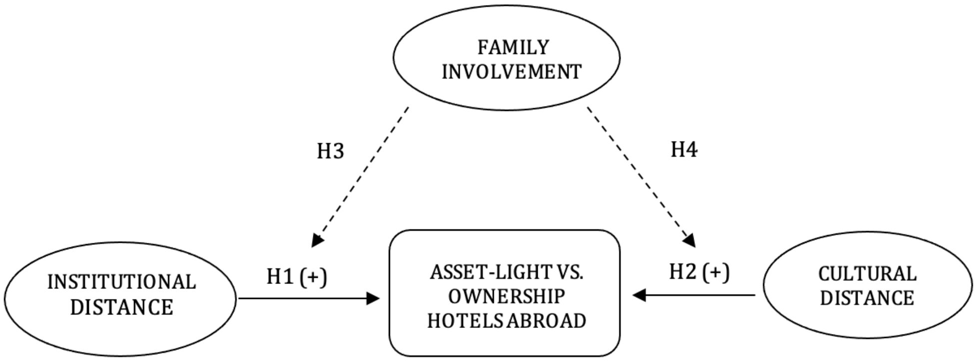
On the contrary, some authors consider that the family involvement may reduce the perceived risk associated with the internationalisation process (James, 1999) and may lead them to choose strategies that involve a greater investment of resources and greater control of their operations in the destination country (Kraus et al., 2016). The importance of reputation for these firms and family values makes FFs want to have greater control more likely than firms without family involvement (Deephouse and Jaskiewicz, 2013; Dyer and Whetten, 2006). They would therefore opt to take ownership of international hotels and, to a lesser extent, asset-light arrangements. Although the sign of the moderation is not clear, there seems to be consensus that the previously proposed relationship between institutional and cultural differences and the commitment to international markets can be moderated by the family involvement, as we capture in hypotheses 3 and 4, respectively.

Hypothesis 3: Family involvement moderates the relationship between institutional distance and asset-light vs. ownership strategies for the international hotels of Spanish chains.

Hypothesis 4: Family involvement moderates the relationship between cultural distance and asset-light strategies vs. ownership for the international hotels of the Spanish chains.

The Figure 1 shows the conceptual model with the relationship between the hypotheses.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Source: author elaboration

3 Methodology and data

3.1 Data collection

In this study is used secondary information from the Spanish hotels & restaurant Alimarket database in 2022. We selected the chains with, at least, one hotel abroad. In total, 78 Spanish hotel chains operate 1,097 hotels abroad. On average, the degree of internationalization of these chains is around 51%. That is to say, about half of their hotels are located outside Spain. Of these hotels, 38% are under property and 62% under asset-light forms (leasing, management agreements and franchising). This distribution has changed with respect to before the COVID-19 crisis, as the data show that in 2016 Spanish hotel chains had 45% of hotels abroad under property compared to 55% under the contractual agreements. This trend to asset-light forms is expected to increase in the coming years, as many chains are opting to reduce their asset portfolios, divesting assets to obtain liquidity but, in many cases, maintaining their management or leasing.

Of the total hotels abroad o Spanish hotel chains, 693 (62%) are considered to be under the control of a family chain (46.5% under property and 53.5% under asset-light forms). According to Gómez-Mejía et al. (2010), a company is considered family firm if the following two conditions are met: 2 or more managers must be family related and family members must have at least 10% ownership of the company. In our sample, 50 hotel chains can be considered FFs. The minimum amount of capital in family hands is 20% and, in all cases, two or more family members are part of the management team. Table 1 shows some characteristics of the companies in our sample.

Table 1. Sample description

VARIABLES	
Type of affiliation hotels abroad of Spanish hotel chains	Asset-Light hotels (679 hotels; 62%) Ownership hotels (418 hotels; 38%)
Family involvement of internationalised Spanish hotel chains	Percentage of family equity (54%) Percentage of managers family members (31%)
Degree of Internationalisation (average) of Spanish hotel chains	International Rooms/Total Rooms (51%)
Main destinations of asset-light hotels abroad	Germany (87 hotels) Cuba (80 hotels) Italy (74 hotels)
Main destinations of hotels abroad under property	Mexico (94 hotels) Dominican Republic (79 hotels) Portugal (27 hotels)

Source: author elaboration

3.2 Dependent variable

Asset-light vs. ownership hotel. The type of affiliation of the hotels abroad was defined as a categorical variable with two values: value 0 for hotels abroad under property of the Spanish hotel chains that involve higher resource commitment and allow the firm a higher control (Dimou et al., 2003; Kruesi et al., 2017, 2018); and value 1 asset-light contractual forms, which involves less resources commitment and less control of the international activity (Contractor and Kundu, 1998; Pla and Leon, 2002, Pla et al., 2010).

3.3 Explanatory variables

Institutional distance. To measure Institutional Distance (ID), we rely on the six dimensions of the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project (Kaufmann et al., 2009): expression and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. From these dimensions, the formal institutional distance between Spain and each host country is calculated using the same methodology of the Kogut and Singh’s (1988) index (Li et al., 2012; Malhotra and Gaur, 2014; Slangen, 2011; Zhang and Xu, 2017). Institutional distance approximates the differences or similarities in the regulations and standards established in the host country with respect to those of the home country. The greater the institutional differences, the greater the difficulties that the company will have to establish itself in the host country, due to greater economic, political risk, higher administrative and organizational costs (Pinto et al., 2017). Previous studies focused on the internationalisation of the hotel sector have used this variable, such as Andreu et al. (2020) or Quer and Andreu (2021).

Cultural distance. Cultural Distance (CD) between Spain and each destination country has been measured using Kogut and Singh's (1988) index based on Hofstede's extended six-dimensional model (Hofstede et al., 2010). Cultural distance is one of the most widely used variables to measure external uncertainty (Zhao et al., 2004). It refers to the possible differences in the behavior of individuals from different countries, which will influence the way of doing business, in negotiations, in the transfer of practices and work methods from one country to another. This variable has been widely used in the field of international business research, including studies focused on the hotel sector (Andreu et al., 2020; Kruesi et al., 2017; 2018; Martorell et al., 2013; Pla et al., 2010).

3.4 Moderating variable

Family involvement. The most commonly used characteristics to determine the family nature of the firm have been family ownership and management (Abdellatif et al. 2010; Kraus et al., 2016; Lin, 2012). We use Family ownership, measured with the percentage of the firm’s equity held by the family (Astrachan and Kolenko, 1994; Sciascia et al., 2012); Family management, was measured by the percentage of family members in management positions (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2006; Rienda and Andreu, 2021) and the presence of a family

CEO measured as a categorical variable with the value 1 if the CEO is a family member and 0 otherwise (Almeida et al., 2022; Garcia-Castro and Aguilera, 2014; Rienda et al., 2020).

3.5 Control variables

Degree of Internationalisation (DOI). In the case of hotel industry, the variable most used is the percentage of rooms abroad over the total rooms of the chain (Brida et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2014; Lu and Beamish, 2004; Ramón, 2002; Tallman & Li, 1996). This variable approximates the importance of the international activity and may condition the affiliation's choice of the hotels abroad (Rienda et al., 2020). It is also considered in many papers as a measure of the level of knowledge or experience in the international market, which can influence the level of commitment to the particular host markets (Niñerola et al., 2016), including family business (Boellis et al., 2016).

Firm size. The size of the firm may condition the growth decisions, as the internationalisation process (Brida et al., 2015) and for FFs (Romano et al., 2001). There are studies that point a positive relationship between firm size and more capital-intensive strategies, as larger firms have more resources at their disposal (Brouthers, 2002; Driha and Ramon, 2011; Pla et al., 2010). However, several research studies have also found a negative relationship, as larger firms can have a higher level of indebtedness, or because present the capabilities and knowledge necessary to opt for contractual arrangements (Andreu et al., 2020; León et al., 2011; Martorell et al., 2013). Therefore, we control the firm size using average total number of rooms over the last three years, with a logarithmic transformation[1] as previous papers focused on the hotel sector (Andreu et al., 2017a; Brida et al., 2016; Camisón, 2000).

3.6. Statistical technique

We used the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This multivariate method allows the incorporation of unobservable variables that are indirectly measured by observable variables or indicators, does not require a given distribution of the data, and easily operates with single or multiple indicator constructs, giving it high statistical power (Hair et al., 2019a). The analysis was performed using SmartPLS v3.3.7 software.

1 Due to the fact that in recent years hotel chains show atypical sales and staffing figures due to the pandemic, we thought it more convenient to use the average number of rooms for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Evaluation of the proposed model

The systematic evaluation of the results in PLS-SEM is performed in two stages (Hair et al., 2019a). In the first stage, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), convergent validity (indicator reliability, average extracted variance or AVE) and discriminant validity of the measurement model are analyzed. In the second stage, the structural model is estimated through the coefficients of determination (R^2), the predictive relevance (Q^2), the magnitude and significance of the path coefficients and the effect sizes. The following table summarizes the results of the first stage of the evaluation of the model with the different criteria used.

Table 2. Reliability and validity analysis of the measurement model

CRITERION OF VALORATION	REFERENCE VALUES
Internal consistency reliability	▪ Cronbach's Alpha > 0,70 (fulfilled for all the constructs) ▪ Composite reliability > 0,70 (fulfilled for all the constructs)
Convergent validity	▪ External loadings > 0,708 (high reliability of all indicators, the lowest value is 0.876) ▪ Average Variance Extracted (AVE) > 0,5 (the construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. The lowest value is 0.786)
Discriminant validity	▪ Cross-loadings (the loading of the indicators on its construct is greater than the other loadings on the other constructs). ▪ Fornell and Larcker: the square root of the AVE of each construct is greater than the highest correlation with any of the other constructs. ▪ Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) < 0.85 and the 95% confidence interval after running the bootstrapping process (with 5000 subsamples) does not include 1.

Source: author elaboration

The results of the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) tests with de correlations are shown in table 3. This criterion solves the problems of correlations of the constructs with a single indicator presented by Fornell-Larcker (Hair et al., 2019a).

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Inference

	Asset Light-Property	Cultural Distance	Family involve.	Firm Size	Institut. Distance	DOI	Moderat-Instit.Dist
Asset Light vs. Property							
Cultural Distance	0.079						
Family involvement	0.216	0.201					
Firm Size	0.085	0.049	0.204				
Institutional Distance	0.010	0.595	0.254	0.026			
DOI	0.004	0.130	0.351	0.491	0.042		
Moderation-Instit.Dist.	0.098	0.121	0.111	0.017	0.155	0.161	
Moderation Cultur.Dist.	0.017	0.172	0.084	0.070	0.127	0.090	0.600

*All values are below 0.85

Source: author elaboration

We can conclude, therefore, that all the constructs achieve discriminant validity. After determining the reliability and validity of the measurement model, we then proceed to the evaluation of the structural model and the estimation of the relationships between the variables in order to test the hypotheses. The fit of the structural model in PLS-SEM is measured through the SRMR (Standarized Root Mean Square Residual), considering that values below 0.08 imply a good fit (Hair et al., 2019a). In our case we have a value of 0.064 which implies a good overall fit of the model.

On the other hand, the R^2 value represents a measure of the predictive power of the model. It captures the combined effects of the exogenous latent variables on the endogenous latent variable, i.e., the variance of a dependent construct that is explained by all the antecedent constructs associated with it. These values range from 0 to 1. In our model we have an R^2 for the endogenous construct (Asset-light vs. Property) of 0.384 which implies a weak to moderate effect, according to Ringle at al. (2020).

The next step is to analyze collinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values to check if there are problems in the structural model between the variables. In our case, all values in table 4 are under 2, so they comply with the limit marked at 5, and even the one recently pointed out by Hair et al. (2019b) at 3.

Table 4. Variance Inflation Factor

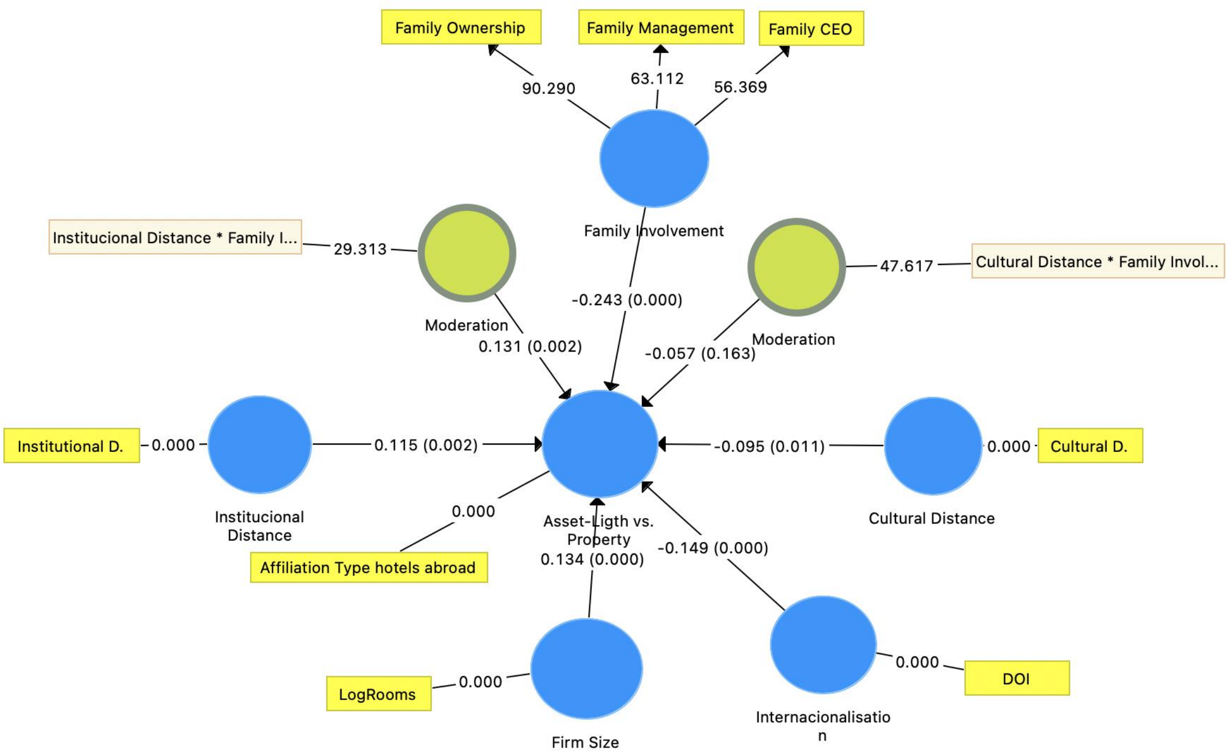
VARIABLE	VIF
Institutional Distance	1.632
Cultural Distance	1.623
Family Involvement	1.241
DOI	1.564
Firm Size	1.351
Moderation Effect 1	1.603
Moderation Effect 2	1.609

Source: author elaboration

4.2 Hypothesis testing

To find out whether the relationships between the constructs are statistically significant, bootstrapping has been performed with a confidence interval of 5% for 5,000 subsamples. The results of the path coefficients (magnitude of the relationship) and the p-value are shown graphically in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Results of the hypothesis test



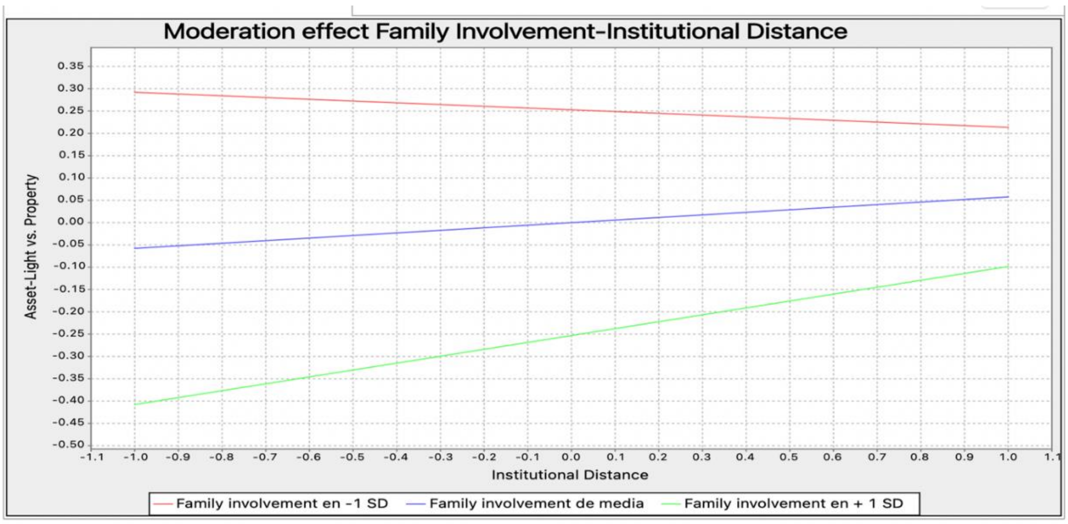
Source: author elaboration

As can be seen, institutional distance with the destination country shows a positive and significant relationship with the decision to opt for asset-light hotels in that destination in the case of Spanish hotel chains. This result implies that when institutional distance increase, Spanish hotel companies prefer lower commitment strategies into international markets, in line with hypothesis 1. Uncertainty influences the owners' decision about the new abroad hotels' affiliation as Almeida et al. (2020) and Andreu et al. (2020) found. As for the cultural distance, the relationship with the asset-light strategies is negative and significant, contrary to hypothesis 2. This means that the cultural distance with a given country decreases the possibility of opting for hotels under management, leasing or franchising. In these countries, Spanish hotel chains prefer to take ownership of the hotel. This result is consistent with those obtained in previous studies focused on the hotel sector such as Andreu et al. (2017b), León et al. (2011), Martorell et al. (2013), Pla and León (2002) or Ramón (2002). Cultural distance can make difficult to find a local partner and can generate costs when transferring resources and know-how to the partners and risk of opportunism. This may lead the company to prefer ownership hotel strategies. On the contrary, contractual agreements can be easier in countries where cultural distance with Spain is lower.

If we look at the family involvement construct, it shows a negative relationship with the use of asset-light strategies abroad. This may be due to the desire to maintain control of the international activity while safeguarding the family's reputation and legitimacy by assuming ownership of the hotels, in line with the ideas of Deephouse and Jaskiewicz (2013) and Dyer and Whetten (2006). This construct, also has the highest path coefficient, making it the variable that contributes most to explaining the choice of strategy.

As for the moderating effect of family involvement on institutional and cultural distance is only significative in the first case with a positive sign. This relationship suggests that family involvement increases the probability that Spanish hotel companies opt for asset-light agreements instead of ownership hotels abroad when institutional distance with a destination is high. Thus, hypothesis 3 is fulfilled. In relation to moderating effect on the cultural distance, hypothesis 4 is not supported. The figure 3 graphically check the moderating effect of the family involvement variable.

Figure 3. Moderating effect of Family involvement



Source: author elaboration

We can see in green that, when family involvement is high, the relationship between institutional distance and the use of asset-light forms is higher. Concretely, figure 3 shows that the relationship between institutional distance and the use of asset-light hotels is negative when the family involvement is low. In other words, when family involvement is low, Spanish hotel chains tend to opt more for ownership hotels in the destination country if the institutional distance is high. However, when family involvement increases, these companies prefer to take on hotels abroad under forms that involve lower resources commitment and risk. Therefore, FFs may behave in a more conservative and risk-averse way by investing fewer resources in those destinations that are institutionally more distant from Spain. As Briano et al. (2022) found in their study, FFs are more risk averse in the interest of preserving family wealth.

Finally, in relation to the control variables, the degree of internationalization and firm size were significant in the model and shows a negative and positive relationship, respectively, with the choice of asset-light strategies. Thus, Spanish hotel chains with higher ratio of international rooms opt to a greater extent for owned hotels, perhaps because of that greater experience abroad that gives them more capacity to commit more resources in international markets (Martorell et al., 2013). While size of the firm points in the opposite direction and makes hotel chains with more rooms in total choose asset-light hotels that allow the company to grow abroad at a lower investment and risk, and in a faster way (Andreu et al., 2017b).

5 Conclusions

In recent years, hotel chains have increasingly opted to asset-light growth strategies that do not involve increasing their portfolio of real estate assets and thus their fixed costs. These strategies have certain advantages over growing through hotel ownership, such as a lower commitment of resources and greater speed. However, few studies have focused on them. This suggests the need to pay more attention to them in relation to internationalisation strategies, especially as this trend is expected to increase after the COVID-19's crisis.

In this paper we have analysed the relationship between destination uncertainty, marked by institutional and cultural differences, and the decision to the affiliation of international hotels through asset-light agreements versus assume ownership in the case of Spanish hotel chains. In addition, we have included the family involvement variable as a possible moderator, since the Spanish hotel sector is characterised by a large number of FFs. In this regard, we have combined the ideas of institutional and stewardship theories. Although the results show that family involvement is positively related to assuming ownership of the hotels abroad, probably due to the greater desire to control the international activity, in highly uncertain environments, FFs opt to a greater extent for asset-light strategies. I.e., family involvement moderates the choice of asset-ligth strategies in order to reduce the uncertainty's impact. Thus, Spanish hotel chains with high family involvement opt to a greater extend for asset-light strategies in international markets when institutional differences are high. This may be due to a more risk-averse and protectionist behavior for the continuity of the firm in this context. This leads them to undertake strategies that are less irreversible and involve less investment. Our paper, therefore, contributes to provide new empirical evidence on the type of affiliation choice by hotel chains abroad, focusing on an interesting but under-studied strategies in the internationalisation research: asset-light forms (Almeida et al., 2022). In addition, it also provides new evidence on the influence of the family character on this decision in international markets. Few studies have analysed the effect of countries' institutional differences on the international strategy of FFs (Wrigh et al., 2014).

With regard to the practical implications, this study can help managers of hotels FFs to focus on the different institutional and cultural contexts of the international destinations, given that the environment of the destination country is a variable that influences the decision about assuming the ownership versus contractual agreements. It can also help the administrations and the government of the companies' home country to be concerned about adapting regulations or fostering certain conditions that facilitate the internationalisation of these FFs in less similar destinations from an institutional and cultural point of view. As Nguyen et al. (2018) point out, government decisions, in the form of policies and regulations, shape the business environment by setting the rules of the game, which impacts firm behavior.

As for the limitations of our study, can be pointed that it is based on secondary data sources. This prevents us from knowing the true risk aversion of managers and the reasons behind their affiliation decisions in situations of uncertainty generated by institutional and cultural differences in the destination country. In this sense, it would be necessary to collect primary data. Besides, our paper is focused on a single sector in a specific country, so the results cannot be extrapolated to other sectors or other countries.

In future research we aim to analyse the relationship between these strategies and the performance of Spanish hotel chains (Blal and Bianchi, 2019; Sami and Mohamend, 2014; Sohn et al., 2013). Previous studies recognise that hospitality firms embracing asset-light strategies will minimize the negative impact of economic slowdowns, such as the current one (Seo et al., 2021). Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the influence of other characteristics of family firms such as personal objectives, ownership concentration, the generation that runs the firms, etc., which could also be relevant to explain the decisions undertaken by these firms (Alayo et al., 2022; Peng and Jiang, 2010).

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