

VYING FOR AND FORGOING VISIBILITY: FEMALE NEXT GEN LEADERS IN FAMILY BUSINESS WITH MALE SUCCESSORS

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the identity work undertaken by female next generation to navigate (in)visibility in family businesses with male successors. To enhance understanding of gendered identity work in family businesses, we offer important insights into how female next generation use (in)visibility to establish legitimacy and exercise power and humility in partnership with male next generation in their family business.

Design/methodology/approach – This empirical qualitative paper draws upon in-depth interviews with 14 next generation female leaders.

Findings – Our study offers a model to show how female next generation establish their legitimacy amongst male next generation in power via a careful balancing act between vying for visibility (trouble) and forgoing visibility (exclusion). These female next generation gained acceptance by endorsing their own leadership identity and exercising humility in partnership or by endorsing their brother's leadership identity and exercising power in partnership.

Practical implications – This study highlights the need for the incumbent generation to prepare successors, regardless of gender, via equal opportunities for business exposure and leadership preparation. This study also shows that vocalising female-centric issues and highlighting hidden power imbalances should be led by the entire management team and not simply delegated to a “family woman” in the management team to spearhead.

Originality – This study advances understanding of gender dynamics and identity in the family business literature by identifying specific strategies utilised by female next generation to navigate (in)visibility in family businesses with male successors.

Keywords: Gender, family business, identity work, (in)visibility, succession.

Paper type: Research paper

INTRODUCTION

Women's invisibility or absence from leadership positions in family business has long been acknowledged (Campopiano *et al.*, 2017). Whilst women have risen in prominence within the family business, there is still evidence of how gender biases and norms impact successor choice (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; Bennedsen *et al.*, 2007; Calabrò *et al.*, 2018) and women's roles and involvement within such entities (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Curimbaba, 2002; Vershinina *et al.*, 2019). In order to navigate such biases and norms, family business women often conceal their femininity or identities as leaders/successors and use this concealment to enhance their sense of belonging (Stead, 2017) and to exert influence and lead "from the shadows" (Hytti *et al.*, 2017, p.680). This not only allows female next generation to navigate gendered norms and expectations of the family business but is also a legitimacy building practice (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; McAdam *et al.*, 2021; Xian *et al.*, 2021).

Although women in family business research has recently experienced a rapid growth in scholarly interest (Campopiano *et al.*, 2017; Sentuti *et al.*, 2019), there has been limited engagement with gender theory and specifically gender as a social construct or practice within this context (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; 2018; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017). By focusing on gender practices and dynamics, this paper answers calls for greater engagement with gender theory in family business research (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2014; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017), in order to advance understanding of how women navigate gendered dynamics in the everyday reality of their family businesses (Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017).

Within the wider gender and management field, scholars have highlighted the importance of identity work for women as they manage and negotiate their social identities

in organisations (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Individuals engage in identity work to “fashion both immediately situated and longer-term understandings of their selves” (Brown, 2017, p.297). In a family business context, daughters “need to engage more strongly in identity work” than sons (Hytti *et al.*, 2017, p.680) as they often encounter cultural and familial norms, which can result in the preference for male successors and the exclusion of daughters from leadership and succession (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; McAdam *et al.*, 2021; Wang, 2010).

Moreover, next generation females from the family often face the contradictory position of being highly visible due to their gender and highly invisible due to their perceived incompatibility with the taken-for-granted male leadership norm (Gherardi and Perotta, 2016). These female leaders must learn to navigate between states of exclusion (invisibility) and difference (visibility) in order to gain acceptance (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Stead, 2013). Whilst current literature recognises that family business women use gendered identity work to establish legitimacy (Hytti *et al.*, 2017; McAdam *et al.*, 2021), we know relatively little of how this works in a family business context where female next generation are exposed to states of heightened visibility (difference) and invisibility (exclusion) as they operate alongside male next generation.

In addressing this gap, and answering the call for greater engagement with gender theory in family business research (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2014; Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017), we integrate three analytical concepts— identity work, gender practices, and (in)visibility—to answer the following research question: *How do next generation female leaders in the family use gendered identity work to navigate (in)visibility when next generation male leaders are also directly involved with the family business?* In seeking to address our underpinning research question, an in-depth qualitative strategy was undertaken in the Republic of Ireland, which

resulted in empirical evidence from 14 next generation female leaders in family businesses where male next generation are also present.

This paper makes the following theoretical contributions. First, we advance understanding of how female next generation navigate (in)visibility in family businesses, particularly those in which male successors are also present and the male leadership norm is dominant (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; Vera and Dean, 2005). Specifically, we develop a model to show how female next generation can operate in a state of heightened invisibility (exclusion) or visibility (trouble), both of which can serve to undermine how they are seen and accepted as leaders of their family business. Acceptance and legitimacy for these female next generation lies not in vying for *or* forgoing visibility but in balancing *both*.

Second, we contribute to the emerging literature on gendered identity work in family business by shedding light on the “drivers and processes guiding women into the leadership of their family business” (Akhmedova *et al.*, 2020, p.8), particularly from an identity perspective (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, the findings show that gender and familial roles and practices can compound these states of (in)visibility. For instance, stereotypical gender beliefs may heighten their visibility (due to the salience of their gender identities that clash with leadership norms) as well as deepen their invisibility (due to the implicit unquestioned acceptance of male leadership norms). Thus, we expose the underlying processes that guide female next generation towards or away from leadership in family businesses with male next generation.

Third, we contribute insights regarding “the everyday reality” of the gender dynamics experienced by next generation female leaders (Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017, p.229) by understanding how women navigate gendered dynamics not only during pivotal moments (e.g., business entry and succession) but also in their daily lives in the family business (Hytti *et al.*,

2017). Our findings, thus, showcase the power dynamics underlying sibships (partnerships between siblings), which we argue may require more concentrated identity work than inter-generational partnerships, due to rivalry and differential treatment based on gender norms and birth order.

This paper begins with a review of the key literatures and constructs underlying our conceptual framework i.e., gender practices, identity work, gendered identity work in the family business and (in)visibility in the family business. This is followed by details of the rationale underlying our methodological decisions. Next, we present our empirical evidence, which is followed by a discussion of how these insights enhance current understanding. Finally, we discuss the contributions to theory, implications for practice and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Practices

Central to current conceptualisations of gender is the notion that gender is done, accomplished or performed (Ahl, 2006). Specifically, doing gender comprises “socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.126). Importantly, individuals are held accountable to the cultural standards of conduct applied to their perceived sex category (West and Zimmerman, 1987; West and Zimmerman, 2009).

Gender practices “are available – culturally, socially, narratively, discursively, physically and so forth” – for individuals to comply with or resist (Martin, 2003, p.354). Individuals practice or do gender often quickly and non-reflexively as they go about their daily lives (Martin, 2003; 2006). An individual is considered to be “doing gender well” when they

act in accordance with their perceived sex category (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, p.220). However, some scholars have argued for a shift in focus from the reproduction and maintenance of gender difference (i.e. doing gender) to its erasure or “undoing” (Butler, 2004).

According to Kelan (2010), undoing gender may feature as doing gender differently, which Mavin and Grandy (2013, p.235) claim entails going “against perceived sex category and expected gender behaviour”. Thus, individuals do gender differently through concurrent and alternative expressions of femininities and masculinities (Kelan, 2010; Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2013; Nentwich and Kelan, 2014). Here, gender as multiplicity, “where binaries are disrupted and displaced by practices and performances” (Linstead and Pullen, 2006, p.1292), becomes key to realising the possibilities of gradually unsettling the gender binary through doing gender differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; 2013).

For instance, women may do gender differently by enacting alternative masculinities or femininities, the latter of which may be considered “the *wrong* kind of feminine” (Mavin and Grandy, 2012, p.225, our emphasis) such as ‘girliness’. Thus, individuals are still constrained by the gender binary (West and Zimmerman, 2009); if their gender performances violate their perceived sex category, and socially accepted gender behaviour, they may be penalised (Messerschmidt, 2009) and encounter difficulties in crafting their identities (Mavin and Grandy, 2012). Gender practices are closely related to identity work, or individual-level identification processes (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; Nentwich and Kelan, 2014; Pullen and Simpson, 2009), as both are deemed to be “complex, contradictory, fluid and indefinite” in nature (Mavin and Grandy, 2013, p.248).

Identity Work

Within the last decade, there has been considerable attention paid to how individual-level organisational identities are constructed and negotiated (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Brown, 2017;

Caza *et al.*, 2018). Many of these studies draw on the concept of identity work (Brown, 2019) which has been used as a “key explanatory concept” (Brown, 2017, p.297) to understand individual-level identity construction in organisations (Koerner, 2014). In keeping with the social constructionist tradition, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p.1165) provide an alternative definition of identity work which “refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Watson (2008, p.127, original emphasis) claims that this conceptualisation of identity work emphasises “the *self* or ‘internal’ aspect of identity” and that a stronger acknowledgement of the external or social aspect of identity is needed. Thus, in alignment with a discursive approach (Brown, 2017), this study understands identity work as involving:

“The mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives” (Watson, 2008, p.129).

With this understanding, identity work is framed “as a coming together of inward/internal self-reflection and outward/external engagement – through talk and action – with various discursively available *social identities*” (Watson, 2008, p.130). Individuals draw, in varying degrees, from “the multiplicity of discourses and social identities” (Harrison and Leitch, 2018, p.141) to develop a relatively cohesive and unique self-identity (Watson, 2008). Identity work tends to be associated with tensions and uncertainty as individuals navigate conflicting representations of who they are with who others believe them to be (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Watson, 2008).

Scholars generally agree that certain episodes, in particular “transitions, unexpected events, contradictions, and tensions” (Koerner, 2014, p.67), may provoke concentrated identity work among individuals in an organisational context (Caza *et al.*, 2018). This is particularly

relevant to women leaders whose “gender-related social identity” (Watson, 2008, p.139) may clash with the dominant cultural ideas and beliefs that associate leadership with men (Ely *et al.*, 2011). This equally applies to a family business context where daughters may “need to engage more strongly in identity work” than their male counterparts to navigate gendered norms and biases (Hytti *et al.*, 2017, p.680).

Gendered Identity Work in the Family Business

A growing number of studies have explored gendered identity work within the family business context (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; McAdam *et al.*, 2021). Such studies have paid particular attention to succession, as the primary event or episode, that triggers concentrated identity work amongst daughters in the family business (Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Mussolino *et al.*, 2019). The identity work of women in family business is recognised as relational and undertaken in interaction with multiple stakeholders, such as incumbents, siblings in the business and non-family employees (Hytti *et al.*, 2017; McAdam *et al.*, 2021). These studies have uncovered a multitude of identity work stratagems and processes deemed pertinent to shaping the various familial and gendered identities assumed by women in the family business.

Essers, Doorewaard and Benschop (2013), for instance, found that migrant female business owners strategically manoeuvre between conflict and compliance with regard to familial norms. These women operate on a continuum from conflict oriented identity work to compliance with familial norms on gender and ethnicity, or in some cases detach themselves from family control to “surpass the poles of conflict and compliance” (Essers *et al.*, 2013, p. 1657). In a succession context, daughters were found to construct identities as family business leaders by tempering disruption and switching identities (i.e. concealing their leader identity and enacting a strong ownership identity) across various contexts (Hytti *et al.*, 2017).

Further, Mussolino *et al.* (2019) adopted self-positioning theory to explore how daughter successors in male dominated industries construct their identity post-succession in relation to their predecessor fathers. Daughters, depending on whether they were accepted by or imposed upon organisational members, identified or positioned themselves as close to or distant from their father's leadership style (Mussolino *et al.*, 2019). Byrne *et al.* (2019) uncovered how male and female successors in family business do gender (both masculinities and femininities) and how this influences their legitimacy as CEOs. Interestingly, the study shows that both men and women engage in "gender gymnastics", by enacting masculine (entrepreneurial, authoritarian and paternal) and feminine (relational, individualised and maternal) identities to achieve legitimacy (Byrne *et al.*, 2019). Notably, the process is more convoluted for women whose maternal identity actively competes with the CEO identity (Byrne *et al.*, 2019). In father-daughter businesses, McAdam *et al.* (2021) show that daughters co-construct a legitimate successor identity with fathers whilst also developing independently and heightening their own visibility in the family business.

Despite this important work, there is still a gap in understanding as to the "drivers and processes guiding women into the leadership of their family business" (Akhmedova *et al.*, 2020, p.8), particularly from an identity perspective (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, understanding how women navigate gendered dynamics not only during pivotal moments (e.g., business entry and succession) but also in their daily lives in the family business (Hytti *et al.*, 2017), is a missing perspective that this paper intends to address.

(In)visibility in the Family Business

(In)visibility, as a theoretical lens, recognizes the ways in which gender is rendered visible or invisible, and how women leaders must learn to navigate between states of exclusion and difference in order to gain acceptance (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Stead, 2013). Women in the family business are synonymous with invisibility due to their historically low prevalence in leadership positions (Dumas, 1989; Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1985; Salganicoff, 1990). Although women have been supporting family businesses for centuries (Minoglou, 2007), the roles they have played are often understated and underappreciated with “low or no physical visibility in the workplace, sharing a lack of acknowledgement, title and compensation” (Gillis- Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990, p.153).

Daughters in family businesses with brothers often operate from a position of exclusion and have been termed “invisible successors” in the literature (Dumas, 1989; 1992; Xian *et al.*, 2021). Women with brothers generally only have a chance at assuming leadership of the firm if they are the eldest child (Curimbaba, 2002; García-Álvarez, López-Sintas and Saldaña Gonzalvo, 2002) or have a brother who lacks interest or chooses to leave the business (Constantinidis and Nelson, 2009). Even older and more qualified daughters can be left with secondary roles whilst their brothers are positioned as dominant leaders (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Stavrou, 1999). Daughters, thus, may need to work harder than their male counterparts to prove their ability and increase visibility (Vera and Dean, 2005). Daughters have also sought to heighten their visibility by building trust with employees and introducing ways to professionalise the business, as well as engaging in intentional visibility by performing mainly temporary or hidden roles in support of their male siblings (Xian *et al.*, 2021).

More recently, family business women’s (in)visibility has taken on a broader and more dynamic conceptualisation (Stead, 2013), with researchers claiming that (in)visibility can evolve as women move in and out of the business, of formal and informal job roles, and even of various identities (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017). Invisibility

can even be a state that some women seek to avoid confrontation with male family members (Barrett and Moores, 2009), ascertain an important role in the family business (Hytti *et al.*, 2017), or conceal their femininity or identity as an entrepreneur/leader (Stead, 2017). Family business women can then use their invisibility to exert influence and build power (Hamilton, 2006; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017). This redefinition of invisibility allows our view of family business women to shift from always “victims who are forced to operate in a secondary position” (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014, p.376) to agentic individuals who can, within limits, shape their social worlds and identities (Nulleshi and Kalonaityte, 2022; Watson, 2008).

In the same vein, women in family business are also highly visible due to the gendered norms of the family. The status quo of male leadership in family business goes unnoticed and unquestioned (Gherardi and Perotta, 2016), whilst any deviation from the norm, such as a daughter succeeding the business, is highly visible and deemed odd or unusual (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Stead, 2013). Their heightened visibility as female family members can limit them to playing stereotypical gendered roles, such as nurturer, peacekeeper and emotional leader of the family business (Jimenez, 2009; Karataş-Özkan, Erdoğan and Nicolopoulou, 2011; Salganicoff, 1990; Ward, 2011). Further, predecessors may perceive their daughters, more so than sons, as needing protection from the cut and thrust of business life (Vera and Dean, 2005; Wang, 2010). This heightened level of visibility, however, can be used to confer advantage. For instance, Hytti *et al.* (2017) found that by adopting a feminine leadership style (i.e. making visible their femininity), daughters were able to temper the disruption caused by their involvement in a male-dominated industry.

Navigating between states of visibility and invisibility is a precarious pursuit for female family members in next generation leadership positions where male leaders are also present in the family business. If their leadership identity is invisible, females will continue to operate from a position of limited power and disadvantage, however their concealment or invisibility is

needed to avoid family disharmony and secure their belonging in the family business (Stead, 2013; Stead, 2017). Conversely, if their gender identity is invisible then female next gen may be perceived as failing to fulfil familial norms with regard to gendered roles (Mavin and Grandy, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2009), however an overtly or highly visible gender identity constrains them to stereotypical representations that run counter to the leadership norm (Carli and Eagly, 2015). This study seeks to understand how next generation female leaders in the family use gendered identity work to navigate (in)visibility when next generation male leaders are also directly involved with the family business.

METHOD

As individuals we are agentic and capable of shaping and constructing our social world; however, we do so within institutional structures and “frameworks of meaning handed down to us by previous generations” (Burr, 2015, p.211). Qualitative research allows us to tap into these taken-for-granted meanings, and better understand how our participants experience their realities (Rynes and Gephart, 2004). Given that our research question is focused on gender and identity work processes experienced by women in a family business context, an exploratory qualitative inquiry, following an in-depth interview strategy (García and Welter, 2013; Lewis, 2016), was deemed appropriate.

The empirical setting of this study was the Republic of Ireland. Family businesses are a prevalent form of organisation worldwide; in Ireland, there are 160,700 family businesses which represent 64% of Irish enterprises and employ 938,000 people (O’Gorman and Farrelly, 2020). Family businesses, however, continue to experience a gender gap, with 35% of female next generation family members reporting that their male counterparts are more likely to be expected to run the business (PwC, 2022). Ireland fares slightly better on gender diversity worldwide with women representing an average of 28% of management team members

compared to 24% globally, and 27% of next generation members working in family business compared to 23% worldwide (PwC, 2019). Although an encouraging statistic, Ireland still has a long way to go to bridging the gender gap in family businesses, with patriarchal norms still shaping the leadership of these prominent forms of enterprise.

Sampling and Data Collection

In keeping with our underpinning research question, we purposefully selected female participants: who were, or recently have been, managers and/or directors in a business “in which majority ownership or control lies within a single family and in which two or more family members are or at some time were directly involved in the business” (Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1985, pp.4-5), including a male family member of the same generation who has, or recently has been, a manager and/or director.

The decision regarding sample size evolved as data collection got underway. Given the subjective and complex nature of identification processes (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008), which we seek to uncover, a smaller sample (less than 20 participants) was sought to achieve greater depth and intensity, via in-depth interviews, which is preferable to being “extensive with intent to be convincing, at least in part, through enumeration” (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, p.494).

Furthermore, the specific sampling criteria (i.e. a male family member of the same generation who has, or recently has been, a manager and/or director) resulted in a sample that was limited and relatively homogenous, which justifies the use of a smaller sample size (Guest *et al.*, 2006). A detailed description (including birth order and positions of family members) of the 14 female next generation participants is provided in Table 1. Further description of the participants included in this study can be found in the vignettes in Appendix 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

In keeping with a feminist approach, our chosen data collection method was in-depth semi-structured interviews (Leavy and Harris, 2019). Each interview commenced with a series of open-ended questions (beginning with “perhaps you could start with a brief history of your family business”; “In your experience, what role (if any) did gender play in preparing next generation for leadership of your family business?”; “What challenges have you faced in being seen as a leader/manager of your family business? Have any of these challenges resulted from being a woman?”). The entire round of 14 interviews yielded 17.3 hours of recordings and 302 pages of transcription. The average interview time was 1 hour and 14 minutes. The interviews were conducted within a four month period during 2019.

Data Analysis

In analysing the interviews, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol was employed. The first step was to become familiarised with the data through transcription, reading and re-reading. The second phase involved inductively generating codes within each individual transcript using the computer data analysis software package – NVivo 12 Pro. Once the data was imported, a phase of initial coding was conducted. This process of initial coding was conducted across the entire data set and generated 52 initial codes. The third phase was focused on searching for themes. From the initial coding phase, the research team was taking note of patterns across codes which may be indicative of themes. This process led to the identification of eight themes and 34 sub-themes. The fourth step in analysis was reviewing the themes at the level of both the coded segments and the overall data set. During this phase, ambiguities and inconsistencies emerged, which led to the reworking and combining of themes and recoding and removal of coded extracts. The fifth step in analysis involved defining and refining the themes that will feature in the findings. It was also important to link these themes back to the overarching research question. At this juncture, a data structure map with two themes

(aggregate theoretical dimensions) and six sub-themes (theoretical categories) was developed (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

FINDINGS

In this section, we present our findings, interspersed with power quotes, which represent the most compelling and convincing data extracts (Pratt, 2008). Further illustrative quotes can be found in Appendix 2. The three main themes—*Too Much Invisibility*, *Too Much Visibility* and *Balancing (In)visibility*— showcase the gendered identity work needed to navigate (in)visibility as a female next generation in a family business that features male next generation leaders. How these practices allowed female next generation to navigate from a place of exclusion or trouble to a place of acceptance as a next generation female leader is discussed next.

Theme 1: Too much Invisibility – Exclusion

A cohort of female next generation in this sample either were never considered or properly groomed for succession and were thus “invisible successors” (Dumas 1989; 1992). This was most apparent among female next generation whose firms were in a post-succession phase and whose brothers were Managing Directors (see Table 1). Those few women who were asked to consider succession were highly reluctant to assume the role, considering their brother to be the better fit, as exemplified by Brigid: “*I suppose the ‘Irishness’ of the eldest son does still play a part. So I suppose I was lucky in that I did not want to be the CEO of the company.*”

In most of these cases, sons were already in the business for many years and/or operating in an area of strategic importance such as operations and sales. Hence, when it came to

succession, the male counterpart, was identified as the most suitable and experienced candidate. In the case of Saoirse, *“He'd become more on the sales side and more on the operational side anyway. So it felt like a more natural fit that he would take over the whole company...It wasn't something that I ever wanted anyway.”* Female next generation were able to minimise their exclusion from succession by claiming it as a choice rather than a result of deep-seated familial and gender norms that preserved male leadership dominance in the family business.

From their early socialisation in their family businesses, women were not groomed for succession and were aware that male successors were primed to take over. Saoirse, for instance, reflected: *“I do wonder if it was now, and we were only growing up now, would there have been more encouragement [of her to be involved in the family business].”* Saoirse, unlike her two younger brothers, who worked continuously in the family business, worked for many years outside the family business before joining the family business in a temporary role. This situation of joining the family business later in a temporary or project-based role (Xian *et al.*, 2021) was a common feature found among these women.

There was also evidence of different expectations being applied to female next generation than to their male counterparts, which contributed to their sense of invisibility and exclusion. Bronagh, for instance, did not experience the same career development journey in the family business as her brother. *“With my eldest brother coming in... he did like six months on the floor and then was made a director whereas I'm like longer in it but I'm working my way up.”* Niamh also experienced a difference in treatment than that of her brother who eventually took-over. *“The only way I can describe it is that he [father] probably did try to protect me more from overwork or from this, that or the other. I think he did look on [it as] this was his daughter as opposed to his son, who was well able.”* Although Niamh appears to opt out freely of succession, her choice was constrained by gender and familial practices that serves to maintain the male leadership norm and the invisibility of the daughter successor.

Theme 2: Too Much Visibility – Trouble

There were also instances of female next generation, either intentionally or unintentionally, becoming highly visible in the family business. These instances of high visibility were most evident in pre-succession firms where female next generation were possible candidates for succession (see Table 1). For instance, the initial response to female next generation members joining the family business was one of surprise or even dismay in the case of Raonaid:

“I remember always thinking ‘no I don’t want to be involved’. And then I kind of changed my mind, you know, and then it was like, [eldest brother] was coming from ‘What? You just suddenly change your mind?’.”

Raonaid did join the family business as a Project Manager (a temporary role designed for her) but experienced a tumultuous working relationship with her eldest brother, so it was decided that she should step out of the business. *“[Brother] was like, ‘because let’s face it, long-term it’s not good that we’d work together’.”* Raonaid’s claim to leadership in a family business with male next generation leaders directly upset the gender and familial practice of primogeniture and led to trouble and her expulsion from the business.

Female next generation also claimed heightened visibility by vocalising new ideas with regard to the business. Some of these ideas challenged established and accepted ways of doing business, which prompted backlash from male next generation leaders, as exemplified by Roisin:

“I was implementing this profit system and [brother] wasn’t so keen on it. He was very traditional, pen and paper, [and he said] ‘that’s worked fine for us, why are you changing this?’ So I was up a lot against some aspects of it”.

The trouble associated with vocalising ideas was also evident in Raonaid’s case when she proposed that her family’s hospitality business host a large promotional event. *“I was like [brother] I actually really need to talk to you about that.’ And he was like ‘no because you’re*

gonna just try and convince me'.” Female next generation in these instances were perceived to be meddling, and thus their proposed ideas and improvements for the business were easily dismissed.

Another instance when female next generation were highly visible was when they disrupted the status quo. For instance, Brigid overhauled the norm of late afternoon work meetings (that spill into the evening and disrupt her childcare schedule) with her CEO brother and mostly male senior management team. *“It's now half six and at seven o'clock you might still be there going: ‘We still haven't come to the answer that we need to come to. Can we decide?’.”* Brigid needed to flag this deep-seated gendered norm of unsociable work hours that failed to account for care-taking and family life. This was similar for Roisin who worried about disrupting the status quo of long working hours. *“Maybe they [brothers] wouldn't be forthcoming and say ‘No you go home’. My dad would be ‘Oh my God [Róisín] get out, it's five o'clock’. Whereas the guys are just workaholics.”* As evidenced here, male next generation members were perceived as “workaholics” (aligned to the norms of ideal workers) which clashed with the maternal/care-giving role of these female next generation. These women were also conscious of the trouble associated with challenging this norm and referred to *“working late”* and *“pick[ing] up any emails when the kids are asleep.”*

Theme 3: Balancing (In)visibility – Acceptance

The data showed that women were not always operating in extreme states of heightened visibility (trouble) or invisibility (exclusion). In fact, many of the women described their relationship with the male next generation as harmonious or well-balanced. As inferred from this data, a cohort of these women achieved this balance by exercising power in partnership with male next generation, whom they endorse as successor. Though male next gen were

recognised as the CEO, female next generation utilised their influence to effect change. Orlaith, whose brother was Managing Director (MD), described how she provided a counterbalance (not substitute) to her brother's leadership.

"He'd be more direct and just wants things done. And then I'll be the one putting the flowers around it trying to go 'will we do it this way just to make sure that they take it well and they do it nicely?'"

Niamh also described a similar dynamic with her brother (CEO), as exemplified in one situation where employees grew frustrated at his continuous refusal to purchase a coffee machine. *"My thoughts on it was 'listen, if it's something that's really important to them, it's not going to cost the earth, let's just—for morale purposes and whatever – go with it'. So anyway, he [brother] gave in eventually."* Though these were minor instances of influence, they allowed female next generation to exert power and enhance their visibility and voice within the business.

Power in partnership was highly evident among female next generation with younger brothers in senior positions (see Table 1). These women mostly described their working relationship in terms of "equality" and "partnership". For instance, Saoirse described the work dynamic between her and her two younger brothers (one of whom was MD) as follows: *"I see it more as—for staff, he's obviously the boss. But I really see the running of the business as equally between the three of us."* A similar dynamic existed between Brigid and her younger brother as managing director. *"[Younger brother] still runs [stuff] past me just to make sure, 'well what do you think?' Now, not everything. But 90 per cent of the stuff."*

Brigid recognised that this dynamic only worked in so far as her brother's role as a leader was unequivocally recognised by staff. *"We'll have the discussion offline. So then whenever we come back with a decision [brother]'s coming back with the decision. It's not 'we decided'."* As this data shows, female next generation could operate power through partnership with male next generation, and this balance between visibility and invisibility (of outwardly

endorsing the male next gen and inwardly influencing decisions) allowed female next generation to gain acceptance.

Another cohort of women had to reduce the heightened visibility associated with being potential successors and possible threats to male leaders. Caoimhe, for instance, was highly visible as the owner's daughter and had to work on establishing a positive relationship with the male non-family General Manager.

“It was about learning how to work with each other. Was he threatened by me coming in? Possibly yes, but...it became quite clear ‘well no, no I’m not this...I don’t want this role. I’m very happy and I’m very clear about what my role is and what my strengths are’. And [...] that’s why we work so good together now.”

Caoimhe endorsed her own leadership role whilst acting with humility by learning “how to work” with the male manager i.e., respecting the boundaries of both their roles. Similarly, Roisin had to exercise humility in establishing a working dynamic with her two brothers when first entering the family business. *“What I learned straight away is you keep them informed with everything [...] There are no solo runs here. Everything is very much team-based.”* For Roisin, it was necessary to balance the decision-making authority conferred on her as a leader with the humility needed to form a successful partnership with her brothers and gain acceptance.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of our data shows that next generation female leaders use various gendered identity work strategies to navigate (in)visibility in family businesses where male successors are present. Those female next generation in a state of heightened invisibility opted out or were discounted from succession, were not groomed for succession, and were treated differently than the male next generation. Their invisibility as business leaders/successors (Dumas 1989; 1992; Xian *et al.*, 2021) meant they were not encouraged to prepare for, nor socialised for succession,

which may explain their ambivalence towards family business succession (Wang, 2010). These female next generation described being treated differently to their male counterparts, thus demonstrating how predecessors still (un)consciously apply familial and gender norms to successor candidates (Vera and Dean, 2005; Wang, 2010) that inadvertently preserve the invisible male leadership norm of family businesses (Gherardi and Perotta, 2016). The invisibility of their status as prospective successors, in turn, led to older daughters operating in secondary roles to their younger brothers (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Stavrou, 1999) as well as women joining the family business in temporary, part-time or support roles (Xian *et al.*, 2021). Thus, we postulate that a heightened level of invisibility amongst female next generation may lead to their exclusion, which undermines how they are seen by themselves and others as leaders of their family business.

There were also female next generation operating in a state of heightened visibility due to their consideration for or interest in succession, their vocalization of ideas with regard to the business and their disruption of the status quo. Vocalising new ideas with regard to the business was an important way for female next generation to demonstrate their value and heighten their visibility in the family business (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; Vera and Dean, 2005). Female next gen also disrupted the status quo by raising issues around work-life balance/unsociable work hours as a way to reveal the hidden gendered norms and “invisible power relations” (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011, p.478) operating within their family business. The visibility of their status as mothers/carers when disrupting the status quo, or leaders when vocalising ideas and claiming interest in succession, troubled the work norms and practices that had been endorsed by males in power. If female next generation were perceived to be a threat either to male next generation’s position of power or ways of doing business then they could be accused of meddling and even required to depart the family business. Furthermore, if female next generation were not aligned to ideal successor norms of long working hours, then they could be perceived as a poor fit for

leadership. Thus, we argue that a heightened level of visibility amongst female next generation may lead to trouble, which undermines how they are seen by themselves or others as leaders of their family business.

Female next generation were not always operating at pole ends of extreme visibility (trouble) or invisibility (exclusion). Striking a balance between both states involved certain deliberate practices where those who endorsed males as leaders also exercised power and those who endorsed themselves as leaders also exercised humility. Exercising power in partnership with male next generation, through enacting either minor or major decisions, was a way for female next generation to exert influence and lead “from the shadows” (Hytti *et al.*, 2017, p.680). By maintaining the outward impression of the male-in-power as sole decision maker, female next generation were able to challenge male family members in a way that reduced the possibility of confrontation (Barrett and Moores, 2009). These dynamics mimicked the notion of “*osmotic credibility*” (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; McAdam *et al.*, 2020), where the status of the male as visible leader confers legitimacy on decisions taken by the duo or partnership.

Exercising humility in partnership with male next generation, through respecting the boundaries of their own roles and those of males in power, was a way for female next generation to temper the disruption of their highly visible presence (Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017). By demonstrating humility (i.e. willingness to adapt and build trust with males in power), female next generation were able to gain acceptance. We argue that sibships (partnerships between siblings) may be more problematic than those partnerships between father and daughter, for instance, due to the underlying rivalry and differential treatment based on gender norms and birth order. Thus, more concentrated identity work is needed by female next generation to attain legitimacy, which lies not in vying for *or* forgoing visibility but in balancing *both*.

The present study advances current research by uncovering the gendered identity work practices employed by female next generation in order to navigate (in)visibility in family

businesses where male successors are also present. Current research recognises that family business women move in and out of visibility as they transition in and out of the business, of formal and informal job roles, and even of various identities (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017). Research also shows the females are more likely to become successors if suitable male candidate(s) are not present in the family business (Curimbaba, 2002; Garcia Alvarez *et al.*, 2002, Haberman and Danes, 2007) and can feel less visible in comparison to their brothers (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; Vera and Dean, 2005). Gendered identity work is a process that women in family business use to navigate gendered and familial norms and be perceived as legitimate by family and non-family business stakeholders (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; McAdam *et al.*, 2021). Despite this, we know relatively little of how this works in a family business context where female next generation are operating in heightened states of (in)visibility due to the presence of male heirs.

By combining three concepts — identity work, gender practices and (in)visibility — this study explains the process of gendered identity work undertaken by female next generation in order to navigate (in)visibility when next generation male leaders are also directly involved with the family business, which is depicted in our model of gendered identity work for navigating (in)visibility (Figure 2). If female next generation are operating in a state of heightened invisibility then this can lead to exclusion. Conversely, if female next generation are operating in a state of heightened visibility then this can lead to trouble. It is important to note that gender and familial roles and practices can compound these states of (in)visibility. For instance, stereotypical gender beliefs may heighten their visibility, if their gender identities are perceived to clash with leadership norms (Carli and Eagly, 2015), as well as deepen their invisibility, by further embedding and normalising the precedent of male leadership (Gherardi and Perotta, 2016). To avoid the extremes of either pole, female next generation will attempt to strike a balance where acceptance from male next generation and other stakeholders can be

found. As such, legitimacy lies not in vying for *or* forgoing visibility but in balancing *both*. These findings and model, thus, support and expand upon the importance of (in)visibility and gendered identity work in general for female next generation, and in particular for those who operate in family businesses where male successors are present.

Insert Figure 2 about here

CONCLUSION

In addressing our key research question, we make the following theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the body of work that explores the construction of women's (in)visibility in family businesses (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017; Xian *et al.*, 2021). Whilst previous research recognises that women's (in)visibility can evolve over time as women move in and out of the business, of formal and informal job roles, and even of various identities (Cesaroni and Sentuti, 2014; Hytti *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017), we know relatively little of how this works in a family business context where female next generation are exposed to states of heightened visibility (difference) and invisibility (exclusion) as they operate alongside male next generation. Our study offers a model to show how female next generation establish their legitimacy amongst male next generation in power via a careful balancing act between vying for visibility (trouble) and forgoing visibility (exclusion). These female next generation gained acceptance by endorsing their own leadership identity and exercising humility in partnership or by endorsing their brother's leadership identity and exercising power in partnership.

Second, we contribute to the growing literature on gendered identity work in family business (e.g., Hytti *et al.*, 2017; McAdam *et al.*, 2021)

and the call for further research on “drivers and processes guiding women into the leadership of their family business” (Akhmedova *et al.*, 2020, p.8), particularly from an identity perspective (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). This is of particular importance in family businesses where hidden gendered norms and “invisible power relations” exist (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011, p.478) and where female next generation are operating in heightened states of (in)visibility (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Stead, 2013). Our study exposes the underlying processes (i.e. the gender norms and familial practices) that compound the (in)visibility experienced by next generation female leaders, which can drive them away from leadership (i.e. opting out or exiting) in family businesses with male next generation.

Third, we contribute insights into “the everyday reality” of the gender dynamics experienced by next generation female leaders (Nelson and Constantinidis, 2017, p.229). Although it is recognised that gendered norms, such as primogeniture, continue to influence next generation leadership of family businesses (Calabrò *et al.*, 2018; Wang, 2010), there is still a limited understanding of how women navigate gendered dynamics not only during pivotal moments (e.g., business entry and succession) but also in their daily lives in the family business (Hytti *et al.*, 2017). Our study offers insights regarding the gender and power dynamics underlying sibships (partnerships between siblings), which we argue may require more concentrated identity work than inter-generational partnerships, due to rivalry and differential treatment based on gender norms and birth order.

This study also brought to light the following practical contributions. Our findings indicate the need for the incumbent generation to ensure successors, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities for business exposure and leadership preparation. Furthermore, this study found that female next generation played an important role in vocalising female-centric issues and highlighting hidden power imbalances. However, practices introduced to support work-life

balance and career progression need to be formalised and led by the entire management team and not simply delegated to a family woman in the management team to spearhead.

We will now set forth the limitations of this study and avenues for future research. Although the focus of this study was to amplify the voices and experiences of female next generation, which is necessary in supplementing the dominant male informant group in family business research (Heinonen and Hytti, 2012), it is recommended that future research should also incorporate the perspectives of male family members, perhaps through the use of joint interviewing as advocated by Watson (2009). Despite the provision of rich insights from this qualitative study, the empirical base was cross-sectional in nature. Given the processual and contextual nature of identity, future studies of female next generation's gendered identity work in the family business would benefit from a longitudinal investigation drawing upon a range of data sources such as field observations, archival data and real-time video diaries (Brown, 2017). The setting of this study is limited to a single cultural context, the Republic of Ireland. Studies in other cultural contexts – particularly non-western societies – would add contextual richness to our findings. In light of these avenues for future research and the important theoretical insights extended by this study, we advance knowledge of an underexplored area of family business research.

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