Career orientation of family members in family businesses: a choice or an obligation?

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates whether family members choose to join the family business out of personal interest or perceived obligation, drawing on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and socioemotional wealth (SEW) theory.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten family business members.

Findings – Results show that career orientation ranges from voluntary choice to obligation. Some participants join the business out of alignment with personal goals, while others are influenced by family expectations, emotional ties and legacy concerns. Subjective norms and SEW significantly shape decision-making.

Originality/value – This study extends TPB by integrating emotional and relational dynamics from SEW theory, offering a richer understanding of career decisions in family firms through qualitative insights.

Keywords Career choice, Family business, TPB, Socioemotional wealth, Succession, Qualitative study

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

There is much research on managerial behaviors within family businesses (Songini *et al.*, 2024; Yilmaz *et al.*, 2024; López-Fernández *et al.*, 2016). Family businesses represent approximately 90% of all businesses worldwide (Quinn *et al.*, 2018) and play a significant role in the economic growth of countries (Pejic Bach *et al.*, 2018) and several issues have been studied within this context due to the complexity of their management style. First, ownership and management are held by family members (Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2018) and then, as the business matures, it may no longer be limited to the first generation, which can lead to conflicts of interest (Meckling and Jensen, 1976; Mustapha and Che Ahmad, 2011). Lastly, there is the issue of succession, where founders must ensure the business's longevity, meaning transitioning to the second or third generation (Baltazar *et al.*, 2023).

Several factors can hinder the succession process in family businesses, such as succession planning issues, incompetent successors or family rivalries (Dyer, 1986; Handler, 1994; Hugron and Dumas, 1993; Lansberg, 1999; Morris *et al.*, 1997; Botella-Carrubi and González-Cruz, 2019). Indeed, numerous studies define effective succession as: the positive performance of the business after succession, the viability of the company and the satisfaction of stakeholders involved in the succession process (Cabrera-Suarez, 2005; Sharma and Nordqvist, 2008; Samei and Feyzbakhsh, 2015).

Thus, the succession phase requires a legitimate successor, though their competency is often less important than their ability to manage various organizational aspects (Kay *et al.*, 2024). Incompetence of successors often leads to conflicts and rivalries but several studies (Barach and Ganitsky, 1995; Cabrera-Suárez *et al.*, 2001; Cadieux, 2007) have shown that successors' skills and capabilities depend on how well their predecessors train and prepare

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them (Cabrera-Suarez, 2005). Indeed, many authors suggest that predecessors need to acquire a set of skills themselves in order to pass them on to the successor.

The preparation of the successor for leadership often begins in childhood. Haldin-Herrgard (2011) described a concrete example of a family member who took over the family business at a young age. The successor expressed that the knowledge transfer process had originally started when she was three years old, playing with her dolls under her father's desk. Even at that young age, she was already acquiring both know-how and interpersonal skills.

Indeed, the continuity of a family business beyond the second generation often proves to be challenging. There are several factors that motivate family members to pursue careers within the family business and these can depend on the family business's reputation, family solidarity or the attachment between family members and the business. However, some individuals may choose not to work with their families because they envision themselves in other positions known as "organizational identification," which involves studying family members' perceptions of their business (Hatch and Schultz, 2002).

The interplay between personal agency and perceived obligation remains insufficiently understood—particularly through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). In family business contexts, career decisions are rarely based solely on individual preferences; instead they are deeply shaped by subjective norms, emotional ties and cultural expectations, which can significantly alter the predictive power of TPB constructs. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study captures nuanced, context-specific dynamics—such as intergenerational pressure and the emotional cost of non-conformity—often overlooked in quantitative TPB applications. This approach not only reinforces the relevance of TPB in complex social environments but also extends its explanatory capacity by integrating insights from the theory of socioemotional wealth, offering a timely and necessary contribution to both theoretical and practical understanding of succession in family firms.

In this paper, the focus is on the career aspect of family members. Researchers agree on the importance of preparing successors and paying attention to their skills, particularly know-how and interpersonal abilities. However, this study delves further into the personal career motivations of the successor and addresses the following questions:

(1) Does the successor take over by choice or out of obligation?

(2) What factors does the successor consider in making this choice?

2. An overview of the literature

2.1 Career choice

The career choice of a generation depends on several factors, including their desire for success, intellectual freedom and their ambition to grow and progress (Brown, 2004). Newer generations tend to choose freedom over security, which explains their preference for not joining the family business. Nevertheless, what motivates them most is the opportunity to face challenges, seize new opportunities and make social contributions (Allen *et al.*, 2004).

Being raised in a family where parents serve as both managers and owners of a business creates a unique environment that shapes its members' career intentions. Children who grow up within a family firm, where control and operations are managed by the family with a focus on continuity across generations (Chua *et al.*, 1999) often experience early exposure to both the demands and rewards of an entrepreneurial path (López-Fernández *et al.*, 2016). These early family-influenced experiences significantly impact the development of beliefs, attitudes, personality traits and career intentions (Schröder *et al.*, 2011) and research suggests that when parents act as positive entrepreneurial role models, children from business families may be more inclined toward establishing their own ventures than those from non-business backgrounds (Kolvereid, 1996). Family members, especially parents, can also act as influential figures (Bandura, 1997), with their dual roles as supportive parents as well as managers of the family's core assets and legacy. As Bandura (1997) notes, this dual role may shape children's perceptions of control and self-efficacy in the entrepreneurial sphere.

In summary, students from family business backgrounds come from a unique familial setting that can shape their future career intentions, and upon joining the family firm often encounter an organizational environment often marked by concerns for legacy, governance structures tied closely to specific individuals and a culture centered around the owner's influence. Therefore, this paper proposes that the intention to succeed in a leadership role within the family business will appeal primarily to individuals with certain levels of perceived behavioral control and specific attitudes.

Career intentions and aspirations among next-generation family members considering roles within the family business are shaped by a complex interplay of familial, personal and contextual factors. Stavrou and Swiercz (1998) emphasize the decisive influence of family-related dynamics, showing that behaviors associated with family membership can often discourage successors from joining the business. Particularly, when family interactions are marked by pressure, conflict or rigid expectations, the perceived attractiveness of succession diminishes. While their findings highlight the potentially inhibiting role of family, they also open up the question of how such dynamics could alternatively foster identification with or commitment to the family enterprise—depending on their personal experience.

Expanding on the importance of family influence, Carr and Sequeira (2007) focus specifically on early exposure to the family business and its role in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. Drawing on a modified TPB (Ajzen, 1985) and a symbolic interactionist framework, they argue that hands-on experiences during formative years serve as a critical foundation for entrepreneurial self-concept development and their research introduces a more positive perspective on familial involvement, contrasting with Stavrou and Swiercz's emphasis on constraints. This suggests that early engagement, when framed supportively, may actually enhance the intergenerational transmission of entrepreneurial motivation.

Similarly, Zellweger *et al.* (2011) underscore the role of psychological factors—namely entrepreneurial self-efficacy and the desire for independence—in shaping career decisions and find that next-generation members exposed to entrepreneurial environments within their family business context are more likely to internalize these traits, leading to a higher likelihood of opting for succession. This builds on Carr and Sequeira's notion of the developmental impact of early exposure but shifts the emphasis toward internal drivers and perceived agency. Their findings suggest that it is not only the presence of a family business background that matters, but also how individuals interpret and assimilate these experiences into their own career narratives.

Finally, Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund (2013) add a developmental and psychological dimension by examining internal conflicts experienced by adolescents from family business backgrounds. These individuals often face tensions between personal career aspirations and a sense of familial obligation, because, as both family insiders and potential successors, they struggle to make autonomous career decisions. The study highlights the crucial role of parental support in navigating this tension, reinforcing the importance of emotional and relational factors in career planning. By doing so, it bridges the prior studies' focus on external influences and internal motivations, pointing to the need for a holistic understanding of succession that accounts for both rational choice and emotional alignment.

These findings align with previous research highlighting the importance of early socialization in shaping entrepreneurial intentions among family business successors. A study of Moroccan community by Ibouder *et al.* (2022) emphasizes that early exposure to the family business—through informal participation, observation and shared narratives—plays a crucial role in transmitting entrepreneurial values and a sense of responsibility toward the family firm. This process of socialization not only fosters practical familiarity with the business but also reinforces cultural expectations tied to familial duty and continuity. The authors show that such exposure, particularly within tightly knit cultural contexts, creates a strong emotional connection to the business and can influence successors' perception of their future role—often blurring the line between personal ambition and inherited responsibility. This paper's findings echo this, as many participants involved from a young age expressed both a strong attachment to the family business and a feeling of inevitable commitment towards it.

Existing family business literature largely focuses on career intentions of adolescents from family business backgrounds. Eckrich and Loughead (1996) show that next-generation family members often prioritize family needs over their personal ones, which can delay their vocational identity formation. According to Murphy and Lambrechts (2015), family business background influences career choices. This papers' findings correlate with Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermunds' (2013) that family obligations motivate the next generation. However, while our study confirms previous research findings, it goes further by exploring the impact of family business background on the career paths of the next generation beyond adolescence.

By focusing on actual career behavior rather than intentions, this study reveals that a family business background continues to influence career paths of the next generation as they move into adulthood. It was found that some individuals alter their careers later in life to better serve the needs of the family business which highlights that career decisions are not limited to adolescence but can occur at any stage of life. Given the pivotal role of the next generation in family businesses, this research is important, as succession choices may emerge at various life stages. Additionally, the study highlights the family business as a key area for career exploration, often beginning as the next generation contributes to the business. This involvement, which appears inevitable for many of our participants, offers valuable insights into family business dynamics. While the literature review focuses on family business studies, the study's discussion also draws on broader career and family-helping literature to support our findings. Table 1 summarizes the main findings from the prior literature that form the background of this research.

2.2 Career choice and theory of planned behavior

The TPB (Ajzen, 1985) can be used to examine the career intentions of family members. It highlights three main factors that influence behavioral intentions: attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. In the context of family businesses, perceived behavioral control (e.g. the perception of accessibility to a career within the family business) and family social norms can have a significant impact on career choices.

Attitude toward a behavior reflects an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing a specific action and a stronger positive attitude often increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior (Verma and Chandra, 2018). In the context of career choices within family businesses, a founder's negative attitude toward succession—stemming from fears of irrelevance, rivalry with successors or denial of mortality (Davis and Harveston, 1998)—can hinder preparation and development for the next generation. Conversely, positive attitudes may encourage effective succession planning and support younger family members in their career paths.

Subjective norms refer to the social pressure individuals feel to act in certain ways (Yadav and Pathak, 2017) and in family businesses, the approval of key stakeholders—family members and others close to the founder—is vital for succession success (Sharma, 2004). Even non-owners may act as "psychological owners," deeply connected to the business through cultural ties or financial dependence. Their acceptance of a successor can strongly influence succession outcomes, while rejection can lead to hostility, complicating the successor's role and career path within the business.

Perceived behavioral control refers to the resources and opportunities an individual feels they possess to accomplish a behavior, and in family businesses, nurturing successors and ensuring resource availability are crucial for successful transitions (Ajzen, 1991). Businesses

Table 1. Summary of the literature background

Studies	Key objectives and findings
Brown (2004)	Identifies factors influencing career choices of the new generation, including the desire for success, intellectual freedom and ambition for growth. Highlights a tendency to prefer freedom over security, which explains why some may choose not to join the family business
Allen *et al.* (2004)	Emphasizes that younger generations are motivated by challenges, new opportunities and a desire to make social contributions, which can influence their decision to pursue careers outside the family business
Chua *et al.* (1999)	Describes how being raised within a family firm exposes children to the demands and rewards of entrepreneurship, with family-controlled businesses focusing on continuity across generations. These early experiences shape beliefs, attitudes, personality traits and career intentions
Stavrou and Swiercz (1998)	Explores factors influencing next-generation family members' decisions to take on leadership roles within family businesses. Identified reasons for joining or declining based on family, market and personal dimensions, with family dynamics notably affecting the likelihood of succession
Carr and Sequeira (2007)	Examines how prior exposure to family business influences entrepreneurial intentions. Using a revised TPB and symbolic interactionist perspective, it found that early family business experiences are crucial in fostering entrepreneurial intent across generations
Zellweger *et al.* (2011)	Identifies entrepreneurial self-efficacy and independence as key factors influencing career paths, especially succession choices. It suggests that experiencing a family business environment as an entrepreneurial setting impacts career preferences in the next generation
Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund (2013)	Investigates the balancing act for next-generation family members between personal career interests and family business roles. The authors find that family business adolescents are motivated by both personal ambition and family duty. They highlight the importance of parental support in the career planning of the next generation

Source(s): The author

with low adaptability may see succession as problematic, requiring significant time and resources, while adaptable firms view it as a growth opportunity, leaving more resources for innovation (Sallay *et al.*, 2024). A founder's perceived control impacts their intention and willingness to pursue internal succession, shaping the successor's career path.

For a family business to transition successfully to the next generation, strong relationships among family members are essential. Trust, respect and effective communication between the founder and successor play a key role (Deng and Ren, 2024). Factors including commitment, loyalty and shared values strengthen these relationships, while issues such as sibling rivalry or conflicts can hinder them (Birgach *et al.*, 2020). The unique culture of family businesses fosters deep interpersonal trust, which becomes a critical factor in ensuring smooth transitions and sustaining the business (Pahnke *et al.*, 2024).

This study explores the career decisions of individuals working in family businesses, focusing on their motivations, satisfaction levels and the benefits associated with their roles. It examines personal profiles (educational background, position in the company) and delves into the reasons for joining the family business, whether by choice or obligation. Key areas include emotional and financial satisfaction, perceptions of remuneration compared to external opportunities and additional advantages provided by the business. This investigation highlights how family dynamics and personal aspirations influence career satisfaction and decision-making in family businesses.

2.3 Family members career choice and socioemotional wealth

Recent advancements in family business research underscore that one key distinguishing feature of family-owned firms is their pronounced motivation and commitment to preserve and transmit socioemotional wealth (SEW) across generations (Berrone *et al.*, 2012; Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2011; Zellweger *et al.*, 2011). Central to the SEW framework is the premise that family firms pursue a plurality of goals, extending beyond purely financial outcomes. In particular, the preservation of a family's socioemotional attachment to its firm often constitutes a primary strategic objective (Berrone *et al.*, 2012; Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, family firms are inclined to evaluate strategic decisions through the lens of their potential impact on SEW. When confronted with a trade-off between an option that promises financial returns but may erode SEW, and an alternative that safeguards SEW despite uncertain economic benefits, family firms are predisposed to prioritize the latter.

This study proposes that the career choice of family members may differentially influence the salience of the various dimensions of SEW, thereby shaping the dominant reference point that informs strategic decision-making throughout the their professional lives.

Succession represents one of the most critical and complex challenges confronting family firms (Le Breton–Miller *et al.*, 2004), largely due to the inherently long-term orientation that characterizes strategic decision-making in these organizations (Kallmuenzer *et al.*, 2018; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Miller *et al.*, 2008). The succession process is shaped by the extent of next-generation involvement and by successors' perceptions of the benefits and outcomes experienced by their predecessors (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Hernandez-Perlines *et al.* (2021) indicate that a strong long-term orientation is positively associated with the development of entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors within family firms (Eddleston *et al.*, 2012).

Career choices within family firms are often closely intertwined with the preservation of SEW. Among the existing contributions, the conceptualization of SEW by Berrone *et al.* (2012) stands out as the most widely cited, owing to its integration with various theoretical frameworks. In their seminal work, Berrone *et al.* (2012) delineate five core dimensions that collectively capture the essence of SEW: family control and influence, identification of family members with the firm, binding social ties, emotional attachment of family members and the renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession. These dimensions are encapsulated in the FIBER model and this framework was subsequently employed by Cennamo *et al.* (2012) to investigate how SEW influences the proactive engagement of family firms with their stakeholders. Furthermore, entrepreneurial orientation in family firms is shaped by both economic and non-economic considerations (Pejic Bach *et al.*, 2018), with SEW emerging as a pivotal non-economic driver (Hernandez-Perlines *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, Jaskiewicz *et al.* (2015) underscore SEW as one of the most salient factors in explaining entrepreneurial behavior within family businesses.

3. Methods

A qualitative approach was conducted to study the career choices of family members within their family business. Several studies have focused on examining succession within family businesses and their findings highlight the challenges of successfully managing the process, particularly in terms of preparing successors to take over (Baltazar *et al.*, 2023). In this study, the focus is on the career choices of family members, addressing the question of whether continuing a career within the family business is perceived as an obligation or a choice, specifically what are the factors that drive family members to decide to pursue their careers within the family business?

The research was conducted in the Moroccan context, primarily because family businesses represent the most predominant form of enterprise in Morocco (BDO-ANPME, 2021) [1]. These businesses operate in various sectors, with 54% in the service sector and 23% in the trade sector. Furthermore, Morocco is characterized by significant cultural diversity, which can provide valuable insights into the career choices of family members, potentially influenced by the strong family values that are a hallmark of the country.

3.1 Study population and data collection procedure

The data were collected between August and November 2024 and the study includes ten family members, both men and women. Table 2 details the respondents' characteristics, including their age, position and number of years in the company. Family members of different ages were interviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of their career choices, including those at the beginning of their careers and others who have spent several years in the company. Interviews lasted 40–90 min and were conducted face-to-face and recorded on a dictaphone after obtaining interviewees' permission form.

The interviewees were primarily leaders or co-leaders of the companies and all had familial relationships with the founder. The length of the interviews was dependent on availability — some leaders were more available, while others could not exceed 40 min. Moreover, interviews were guided and follow up was undertaken to ensure precise answers. Some interviews took place in a formal setting in the leaders' offices, while others were conducted in a more informal context outside the office environment.

Interviews are the most commonly used data collection technique by researchers (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2008) where the primary objective of the researcher is to gather a set of information through a face-to-face conversation that results in verbal communication. Thus, the data collected from an interview not only provides the researcher with a general understanding of the respondent's thoughts but also insights into the reality of the subject matter (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2008).

We developed the first version of our interview guide based on an in-depth literature review, which enabled us to create a set of open-ended questions. These questions were designed to allow respondents the freedom to express themselves based on their experiences, within the framework of a set of themes guiding their responses. The ultimate goal is to explore the main factors that family members consider when contemplating to working in the family business.

The selection of interview questions was guided by the aim of capturing the multidimensional factors influencing career choices in family businesses, in alignment with the core constructs of the TPB—namely, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The interview guide is organized into six thematic sections, each corresponding to one or more TPB dimensions, allowing a comprehensive exploration of how intentions to join the family business are formed (see Appendix for the full structured interview guide).

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents

Respondent	Age	Position in the company	Years in the family business
Respondent 1	28	Junior manager	5
Respondent 2	35	Operation director	10
Respondent 3	42	CEO	20
Respondent 4	24	Trainee	2
Respondent 5	34	Lawyer	6
Respondent 6	38	Head of sales	15
Respondent 7	50	Senior consultant	10
Respondent 8	26	Marketing coordinator	3
Respondent 9	45	HR director	10
Respondent 10	35	Junior manager	8

Source(s): The author

Theme 1: perceptions of the family business (Q1–Q2). These questions aim to elicit attitudinal beliefs by exploring how the respondent perceives the family business in terms of values, reputation and emotional significance. According to TPB, positive or negative evaluations of the behavior (working in the family business) directly influence intention.

Theme 2: personal experiences and connection with the business (Q3–Q4). This section addresses the development of behavioral beliefs through early exposure, shaping the respondent's familiarity and comfort with the idea of working in the firm—factors that reinforce or weaken attitudes and perceived behavioral control.

Theme 3: motivation and career choice (Q5–Q7). These core questions directly target all three TPB constructs.

(1) Q5 probes attitudes (motivators and deterrents).

(2) Q6 explicitly tackles subjective norms, especially the tension between personal agency and perceived family expectations.

(3) Q7 offers insight into howperceived advantages/disadvantages inform attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Theme 4: role of predecessors in successor preparation (Q8–Q9). These questions are closely tied to subjective norms (family expectations and modeling behavior) and perceived behavioral control (acquisition of relevant skills), both of which influence the perceived feasibility of entering the family business.

Theme 5: factors influencing decision-making (Q10–Q11). These items are designed to uncover contextual variables and pressures (e.g. attachment, external opportunities, family expectations), mapping onto subjectivenorms and perceived control, while also identifying salient beliefs that drive intention formation.

Theme 6: future perspectives (Q12–Q13). These forward-looking questions invite participants to reflect on their behavioral intentions and the continuity of norms, helping to evaluate how current beliefs and perceptions translate into envisioned roles and advice to future generations.

3.2 Data analysis method

For this research, the adoption of thematic analysis, which involves identifying themes to structure the interview guide, was chosen. This approach focuses on identifying all ideas, words, phrases and recurrences related to a single theme across all respondents in the sample. A manual approach to coding and thematic analysis was utilized to generate initial codes and group them into conceptual categories and involved a detailed examination of the data and literature (cognitive skills approach) to identify patterns, connections and distinctions (Gibson and Brown, 2009). This methodology also enhanced the reliability of the data and allowed researchers to develop theoretical interpretations aligned with the collected information (Gibson and Brown, 2009).

3.3 Ethics statement

According to the governing institution policies, this study, which involved qualitative interviews with adult participants on non-sensitive topics, did not require formal ethics committee approval. Nevertheless, all participants were fully informed about the research objectives, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided their voluntary verbal informed consent prior to participation.

4. Findings

This study focuses on the career choices of family members within the family business. Based on an exploratory study, we aim to investigate the main motivations driving family members to choose to work in the family business. The study also seeks to determine whether this choice is a personal decision or an obligation. The data analysis is structured around five key themes: Perception of the Family Business, Involvement in the Family Business, Motivations to Pursue a Career, Personal Choice or Obligation and, finally, Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in the Family Business.

4.1 Perception of the family business

Based on the interviewees' responses, they perceive the family business as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it offers opportunities and stability, but on the other hand, it comes with significant expectations to grow the business over time and continue the work of the founders.

> It's both a blessing and a burden. While it has given us stability, it also imposes expectations. Respondent 3

> It's a double-edged sword. It provides financial security but limits freedom. Respondent 7

> For me, it's a source of stress. Its success or failure feels personal. Respondent 10

It still helps strengthen relationships among family members, who consider the family business a personal matter where emotions play a significant role.

> The family business is a symbol of pride and resilience. It embodies our family values and represents a source of legacy. Respondent 1

> The family business means unity. It brings us together and strengthens family ties. Respondent 6

> I see it as a monument to my grandparents' sacrifices. It's very emotional for me. Respondent 7

4.2 Involvement in the family business

This theme describes the involvement of family members in the family business and the study explored whether this involvement began at a young age or later in life. This is significant because the earlier family members are integrated into the business, the more likely they are to consider joining it in the future. Therefore, the age at which the interviewees became involved in the family business was crucial. The responses revealed two categories: those who were involved from a young age and others who joined later.

> I started young, helping out during summers and weekends with basic tasks. Respondent 1

> I was often in the shop with my parents, learning through observation. Respondent 2

> Yes, I worked in production during school breaks. It was hands-on learning. Respondent 5

> From childhood I was involved indirectly, listening to discussions at family dinners. Respondent 6

> As kids, we used to help with minor jobs like cleaning or sorting inventory. Respondent 9

Other families chose to integrate their children after they completed their studies.

> I joined only during my late teens, assisting in administrative tasks part-time. Respondent 3

> I never participated actively; my parents wanted me to focus on studies. Respondent 4

> I had no involvement until university, when I interned for a summer. Respondent 8

Indeed, the involvement of family members at a young age in the business has a positive effect on their careers as, on one hand, it motivates them to pursue their careers within the family business while on the other, it strengthens their attachment to the family and their desire to ensure the longevity of the business. Additionally, their integration into the business has taught them perseverance.

> These experiences made me value hard work and sparked my interest in succession. Respondent 1

> It motivated me to study business so I could contribute meaningfully later. Respondent 3

> It sparked pride and attachment to our family name, which fuels my desire to continue. Respondent 6

> The experiences positively shaped me. I learned the value of persistence. Respondent ?

4.3 Motivations to pursue a career

Family members have different motivations for joining the family business, ranging from the desire to ensure continuity over time to the simple need for financial stability. Some interviewees are driven by their aspiration for leadership, while others see their motivation rooted in the sense of responsibility they feel toward the business.

> Continuing the legacy of my family is my biggest motivation. Respondent 1

> The potential for leadership opportunities excites me. Respondent 2

> I'm motivated by financial stability and the prospect of working with family. Respondent 3

> I'm motivated by the sense of responsibility—it's about continuing a legacy. Respondent 4

Other family members find themselves in the family business out of obligation and feel demotivated, either because there is no balance between work and personal life or because they want to forge their own path but feel compelled to work in the family business.

> What demotivates me is the lack of work-life balance I saw in my parents. Respondent 5

> I feel demotivated because I want to explore my own path outside of family influence. Respondent 7

4.4 Personal choice or an obligation

Joining the family business can either be a personal choice—meaning that family members are genuinely convinced of their decision and express a desire to develop their careers within the family firm—or the result of pressure exerted by the founders, aiming to ensure the continuity of the business over time. In this study's interviews, only four respondents indicated that their decision was a personal one and that they had a genuine desire to join the family business.

> It's a personal choice for me; I've always wanted to continue this journey. Respondent 1

> It's more of a personal choice. My parents never pressured me into it. Respondent 4

> It's definitely my decision, but family pride influences that choice. Respondent 6

> It's a personal choice. I find fulfillment in the business's growth. Respondent 8

Nevertheless, six out of ten family members, representing the majority, responded that joining the family business is perceived as an obligation. While the response is the same, the reasons differ. Some joined the family business because it was expected by their family, others due to pressure from the founders. Another respondent mentioned that the family business is the pillar of their family, and they feel obligated to ensure its continuity over time. One respondent highlighted that it is a sacrifice they are willing to make for their family, viewing their work in the family business as a way to honor the family's sacrifices. It is therefore evident that the majority of family members feel compelled to join the family business and considering their personal desires ranks low on their list of priorities.

> I feel an obligation. It's unspoken, but I know what's expected. Respondent 2

> I think it's a mix of both—I'm inclined to do it, but family expectations play a role. Respondent 3

> For me, it feels like an obligation, especially as the eldest child. Respondent 5

> I feel obligated because the business is the backbone of our family's livelihood. Respondent 7

> I sometimes feel torn. My sense of duty conflicts with my desire for independence. Respondent 9

> For me, it's an obligation—it's about honoring my family's sacrifices. Respondent 10

4.5 Advantages and disadvantages to work in the family

Working in the family business offers several advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, respondents believe it provides a certain level of stability, flexibility, security, shared family history and the opportunity to strengthen family unity.

However, the respondents also highlighted disadvantages, such as potential conflicts between family members. They also emphasized the difficulty of separating family and work, noting that many conflicts may arise from role conflicts.

> The main advantage is job security; the disadvantage is lack of separation between work and family. Respondent 1

> An advantage is autonomy; a disadvantage is conflicts arising from family dynamics. Respondent 2

> A major advantage is trust in leadership; a disadvantage is work-life imbalance. Respondent 7

> Pros include unity; cons involve a lack of boundaries in personal and professional life. Respondent 10

A reanalysis of the interview data reveals that cultural norms and family structures play a crucial role in shaping the perceived obligation of family members to join the family business. In many cases, the decision to enter the firm is not solely based on individual agency, but rather is embedded in a broader context of familial duty and intergenerational expectations. Respondent 1 explained, *"In our culture, saying no to your parents, especially about the family business, is seen as disrespectful. I didn't feel like I had a real choice."* This highlights how cultural values around filial piety and obedience can override personal preferences. Respondent 5 noted, *"My father built this company from nothing. Everyone expects me to continue what he started—even if I had other dreams."* In some family structures, particularly those characterized by centralized authority and hierarchical relationships, such expectations are further reinforced. As Respondent 3 put it, *"In our family, decisions are made at the top. If my father wants me in the business, I'm in the business."* These narratives underscore how family dynamics and cultural frameworks co-construct a sense of obligation that may blur the line between personal choice and familial duty.

Table 3 helps visualize both qualitative content and analytical categories and distinguish between individuals who view career orientation as a choice versus an obligation.

Ajzen's TPB (1985) posits that individuals' intentions to engage in a behavior (e.g. joining a family business) are shaped by three core components: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Starting with attitudes toward behavior, family members expressed mixed perceptions of the family business seeing it as a "double-edged sword" offering both security and emotional burden. These attitudes reflect the ambivalence individuals feel toward joining the family business, which directly affects their intention to do so. As Respondent 7 stated, *"It provides financial security but limits freedom."*

Table 3. Summary of the main results related to the career choice

Respondent	Perception of career choice	Main motivations/constraints	Final career orientation	Selected verbatim
Respondent 1	Obligation	Family expectations, preserving legacy	Joined family firm	"Saying no wasn't really an option in my case."
Respondent 2	Personal choice	Passion for the business, early involvement	Joined family firm	"I always wanted to work here, it feels natural."
Respondent 3	Mixed	Family tradition, external opportunities limited	Undecided	"I feel like I owe it to them, but I'm not sure it's what I want."
Respondent 4	Personal choice	Entrepreneurial autonomy, skill development	Started own venture	"They gave me the freedom to decide for myself."
Respondent 5	Obligation	Emotional pressure, inheritance logic	Joined family firm	"It's a legacy, not a job offer."
Respondent 6	Mixed	Respect for parents, career fit concerns	Tentatively involved	"I'm doing it for now, but I'm keeping my options open."
Respondent 7	Personal choice	Alignment with personal goals, pride in brand	Joined family firm	"It was my decision I love what we've built."
Respondent 8	Obligation	Lack of external opportunities, guilt	Joined family firm	"It was the only path I could take without hurting them."
Respondent 9	Mixed	Encouragement + some pressure	In transition	"It's complicated both sides are valid."
Respondent 10	Personal choice	Sense of purpose, positive role models	Joined family firm	"I saw how fulfilling it was for my parents."

Source(s): The author

Social pressure or family expectation to join the business is a strong subjective norm shaping respondents' decisions. For many, the perceived obligation comes not from personal desire but from familial expectations, often embedded in cultural norms of respect, duty, and sacrifice. Respondent 1 reflected, *'In our culture, saying no to your parents . . . is seen as disrespectful.'* This was echoed by Respondent 2 who said, *'It's an unspoken obligation.'*

Finally, early exposure and involvement from a young age enhanced family members' sense of competence and familiarity with the business, increasing their perceived control over whether they could successfully contribute to or lead the firm. As Respondent 1 stated: *"These experiences made me value hard work and sparked my interest in succession."*

These findings support TPB's premise that intentions are shaped by both internal beliefs and external pressures, and help explain why some family members perceive their career path as chosen, while others feel constrained.

The SEW framework (Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2007) suggests that family firms are primarily driven by the desire to preserve non-financial, affective value such as family legacy, identity, control and emotional attachment. This theory helps interpret motivations not just in economic terms but in terms of emotional and symbolic meaning.

Many respondents mentioned the importance of honoring family history, ensuring continuity and carrying forward the founder's efforts. These motivations align directly with the SEW emphasis on transgenerational control and identity.

> Continuing the legacy of my family is my biggest motivation. Respondent 1

> It's about honoring my family's sacrifices. Respondent 10

The emotional weight attached to the family business—seeing it as a "monument", a source of "unity" or a reflection of personal identity—reflects SEW's core focus on emotional bonds and family-centered identity in business decisions.

> It's very emotional for me. Respondent 7

> The family business means unity. Respondent 6

The perceived obligation to join the family firm due to family expectations, particularly in hierarchical or culturally normative family structures, further highlights the SEW focus on maintaining family control and meeting intergenerational expectations, even at the cost of individual career aspirations.

> If my father wants me in the business, I'm in the business. Respondent 3

These findings illustrate how socioemotional goals can override economic rationality or personal autonomy, shaping career decisions through deeply embedded family values and emotional investment.

This study provides rich empirical support for both TPB and SEW frameworks. TPB helps explain the decision-making process of individual family members balancing internal motivations and external pressures—while SEW offers insight into why family businesses exert such strong emotional and symbolic influence, leading some to perceive their involvement as a duty rather than a personal choice. Together, these theories allow for a comprehensive interpretation of career orientation in family firms as being influenced by both cognitive evaluations and affective commitments.

5. Discussion and implications

The primary objective of this research is to explore, in the field, the career choices of family members within the family business and it relied on several factors to identify the main motivations that drive family members to join a family business. In the literature review, it was found that family members prioritize the objectives of the family business and a family's background has a direct impact on the career choices of its members (Eckrich and Loughead, 1996). Indeed, these findings align with the contributions of Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund (2013) about family obligations motivating the next generation to join the family business.

In the interviews, it was discovered that family members are motivated to continue their careers in the family business through succession over time, leadership, financial stability and a sense of responsibility. However, studies by Zellweger *et al.* (2011) stated that career choices can also be driven by the need to achieve self-efficacy and a desire for independence.

This study highlights the significant influence of familial obligation and pressure on the career decisions of family members within family businesses and its findings demonstrate that the majority of participants did not join the family business as a matter of personal choice but rather a response to implicit or explicit expectations from their families. While some participants perceive their involvement as a way to honor family sacrifices or ensure the continuity of the family legacy, others experience a conflict between their sense of duty and their personal aspirations which underscores the need for family businesses to address these pressures and foster environments that balance organizational needs with the individual career goals of family members. Such an approach could help alleviate feelings of obligation and promote genuine engagement and satisfaction within the family business context.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study deepens the theoretical understanding of career choices within family businesses by emphasizing the duality of motivations—personal choice versus obligation—that shape successors' decisions. While previous research (Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund, 2013) highlighted the influence of family obligations on career intentions, these findings reveal that motivations exist on a spectrum. Some successors are intrinsically driven by personal ambition, leadership aspirations or a sense of fulfillment, while others feel compelled to join due to familial expectations, pressures or a perceived duty to honor the family legacy.

This dual perspective enriches the literature on career development in family businesses by showing how personal choice and obligation are not mutually exclusive but often intertwined. It extends the TPB (Ajzen, 1985) by illustrating how subjective norms (family expectations) can outweigh personal attitudes in shaping career decisions. Furthermore, it aligns with studies on entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Zellweger *et al.*, 2011), suggesting that while some successors are motivated by independence and self-efficacy, others are primarily driven by a sense of familial duty.

By focusing on actual career behaviors rather than intentions, this study underscores that the tension between personal choice and obligation evolves over time, with family dynamics, cultural norms and individual life stages playing pivotal roles. This insight contributes to a nuanced understanding of how successors navigate their career paths within the unique socioemotional context of family businesses.

This study contributes to TPB by illustrating how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are shaped by the unique social and emotional context of family firms. Simultaneously, the SEW perspective is extended by showing how emotional attachment, family legacy and intergenerational expectations can significantly influence the perception of career decisions as either a choice or an obligation.

By connecting these two frameworks, this study's contribution lies in showing that career decisions in family firms are not only rational or planned behaviors (TPB), but also deeply embedded in affective and identity-based motivations (SEW). This integrated lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how successors navigate the tension between personal aspirations and family expectations.

5.2 Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, this research provides actionable insights for family business leaders aiming to ensure effective succession planning and long-term sustainability. First, it highlights the importance of fostering transparent communication between generations to balance familial expectations and personal aspirations. Founders must actively cultivate an environment where successors feel empowered to choose their career paths based on intrinsic motivation rather than external pressures.

Second, structured early involvement programs can help successors acquire the necessary skills and emotional attachment to the business. These programs could include internships, mentorships and formal training to enhance leadership capabilities while maintaining flexibility for personal career exploration.

Lastly, the findings emphasize the need for family businesses to address potential conflicts arising from role ambiguity and familial dynamics. Professionalizing management processes and implementing clear role definitions can mitigate conflicts and foster a healthier work-life balance for family members while integrating family governance mechanisms, such as family councils or charters, can help navigate intergenerational expectations and strengthen cohesion. These implications offer a dual pathway for ensuring both personal career satisfaction and the continuity of the family business across generations.

This study advances the application of the TPB by contextualizing it within the unique setting of family businesses, specifically in relation to the career choices of next-generation members. While prior TPB-based research on career decision-making and entrepreneurship has predominantly relied on quantitative methods and emphasized individual cognitive determinants (e.g. attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control), this study's qualitative approach reveals the complex interplay between personal agency and familial expectations as the in-depth interviews uncover how family dynamics, emotional obligations and cultural norms reshape or override individual intentions—factors often underrepresented in traditional TPB models. Notably, the study introduces a nuanced understanding of *subjective norms* in family business contexts, showing that perceived pressure may not only influence but also deeply entangle with identity, legacy and emotional attachment. By doing so, this research offers novel insights into how TPB constructs operate in intergenerational family settings, where career decisions are rarely the outcome of isolated individual reasoning but are embedded in broader relational and historical narratives. This qualitative lens thus enriches the TPB framework by uncovering context-sensitive mechanisms that shape career intentions beyond rational evaluation alone.

Given the complex interplay between individual agency and familial or cultural obligations in career decision-making within family firms, several practical recommendations emerge. Families should foster open dialogue around career aspirations from an early stage, ensuring that successors feel empowered to express personal goals without fear of judgment or disappointment. Implementing structured mentoring programs, especially for reluctant successors, could help bridge generational gaps and gradually integrate younger family members into the firm in a way that aligns both personal and organizational values. Policymakers, particularly in regions where family businesses are economic cornerstones, should consider supporting such initiatives through tax incentives, training subsidies or public-private partnerships aimed at leadership development in family enterprises.

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study provides valuable insights into the career orientations of family members within family businesses, but it has several limitations. First, the research is based on a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample size (ten respondents), which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach or use larger, more diverse samples to validate and expand the results.

Second, the study focuses on the Moroccan context, where cultural and social norms may heavily influence the perceived obligations and motivations of family members. Comparative studies across different cultural and economic settings could provide a broader understanding of how cultural factors shape career decisions within family businesses.

Finally, this study primarily explores the motivations of family members at a single point in time. Longitudinal research could examine how motivations evolve throughout different life stages and how they are influenced by changes in the family business or broader economic conditions. Additionally, future studies could investigate strategies to balance personal aspirations and familial expectations, addressing how family businesses can create environments that foster both personal fulfillment and organizational sustainability.

Future research could extend this study by empirically examining specific mechanisms that influence successor engagement in family firms. For example, it would be valuable to investigate whether participation in structured mentoring programs enhances successors' commitment and satisfaction within the family business. In addition, future studies could explore whether the perception of autonomy in career choice mediates the relationship between perceived family pressure and long-term engagement. Finally, research conducted in collectivist cultural contexts could examine whether a strong sense of familial obligation increases the likelihood of joining the family firm, even when individual career preferences diverge. These directions could deepen our understanding of how family dynamics, mentoring practices and cultural values jointly shape successor outcomes in family businesses.

Note

1. The Barometer of Business Transfers in Morocco, 2021 Report.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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