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Vying for and forgoing visibility: female next gen leaders in family business with male successors

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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, the authors 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 – This 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 vocalizing 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/value – This study advances understanding of gender dynamics and identity in the family business literature by identifying specific strategies utilized 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; 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 organizations (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 Perrotta, 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 recognizes 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 literature 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 conceptualizations 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, 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 realizing 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 penalized (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 organizational 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 organizations (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 conceptualization of identity work emphasizes “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 organizational 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 recognized 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 *et al.* (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 organizational 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, individualized 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 *et al.*, 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 professionalize 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 conceptualization (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 Perrotta, 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-Ozkan *et al.*, 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, 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, 2016). 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), was deemed appropriate.

The empirical setting of this study was the Republic of Ireland. Family businesses are a prevalent form of organization 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.

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 h of recordings and 302 pages of transcription. The average interview time was 1 h and 14 min. 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 familiarized 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

Pseudonym	Title	Age	Industry	Birth order and positions of family members	Stage of succession
Raonaid	Project manager	35–40	Hospitality	Middle child; younger and older brothers are MDs in the business	Post-succession
Gráinne	Managing director	35–40	Transport	Middle child; older sister and younger brother are non-exec. directors	Post-succession
Saoirse	Exec. director	35–40	Machinery	Eldest child; one younger brother is MD and the other younger brother is an exec. director	Post-succession
Aoibhinn	Junior manager (director)	40–45	Healthcare	Eldest child; younger brother in the business. Non-family male is MD	Pre-succession
Bronagh	Commercial manager	25–30	Food Production	Youngest child; older brother is MD of the business	Post-succession
Caoimhe	Financial director	40–45	Machinery	Eldest child; younger sister and younger brother are executive directors. Father is MD	Pre-succession
Mairead	Senior commercial manager (director)	25–30	Textiles	Second youngest; younger sister, older brother and male cousins in business. Father is MD of the business	Pre-succession
Niamh	Senior manager (director)	35–40	Engineering	Eldest child; younger brother is MD of the business	Post-succession
Orlaith	Non-executive director	35–40	Healthcare	Youngest child; older brother is MD of the business	Post-succession
Róisín	Business Ops. Manager (director)	30–35	Food Production	Middle child; older brother, male cousin and younger brother in the business. Father is MD	Pre-succession
Eimear	Managing director (subsidiary)	40–45	Food Production	Eldest child; younger brother as executive director. Father is MD of group	Pre-succession
Ciara	General manager	45–50	Transport	Eldest child; two younger sisters and brother in business. Father is MD	Pre-succession
Brigid	Financial director	40–45	Transport	Eldest child; three younger brothers in business. One brother is MD	Post-succession
Shannon	Account manager	35–40	Food Production	Eldest child; younger sister in business and younger brother is non-exec. director. Father is MD	Pre-succession

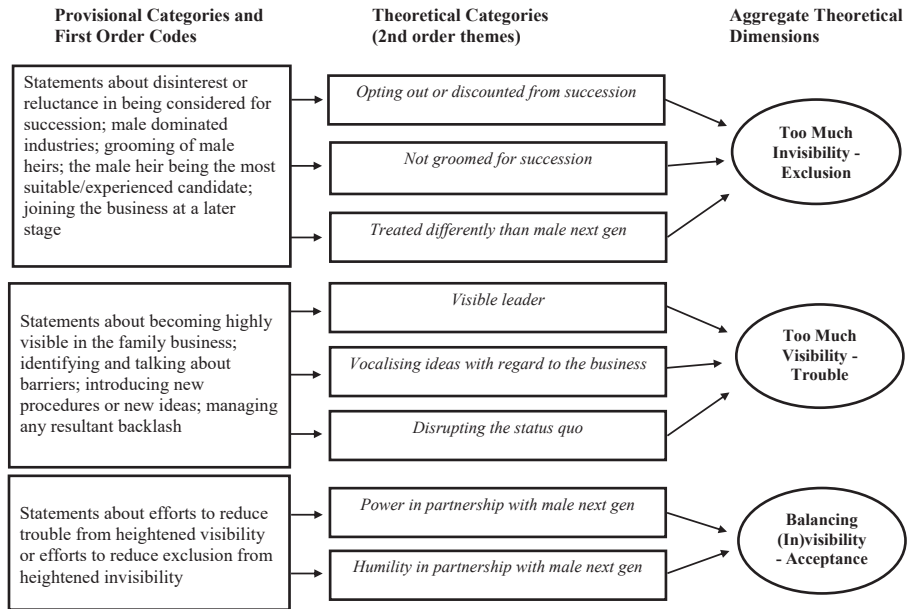
Source(s): Author’s own creation

Table 1.
Description of participants

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 three themes (aggregate theoretical dimensions) and eight sub-themes (theoretical categories) was developed (see [Figure 1](#)).

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



Source(s): Author's own creation

Figure 1.
Data structure

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 minimize 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 socialization 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 vocalizing 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 vocalizing 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 recognized as the CEO, female next generation utilized 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% of the stuff”.

Brigid recognized that this dynamic only worked in so far as her brother’s role as a leader was unequivocally recognized 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.

Vying for and
forgoing
visibility

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.

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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 socialized 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 Perrotta, 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. Vocalizing 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 vocalizing 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.*, 2021), 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 recognizes 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; García-Álvarez *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, 2016), as well as deepen their invisibility, by further embedding and normalizing the precedent of male leadership (Gherardi and Perrotta, 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

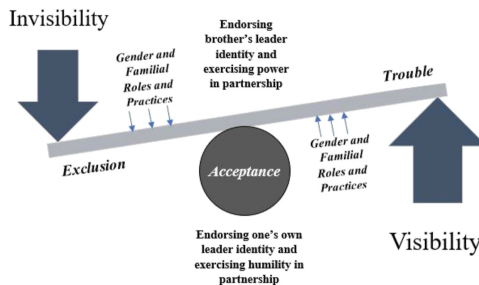
for female next generation, and in particular for those who operate in family businesses where male successors are present.

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 recognizes 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 recognized 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.



Source(s): Author’s own creation

Figure 2. Model of gendered identity work for navigating (In)visibility

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 vocalizing female-centric issues and highlighting hidden power imbalances. However, practices introduced to support work-life balance and career progression need to be formalized 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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Interviewee	Overview
Raonaid	Raonaid grew up working summers and weekends in her family’s hospitality business. Motivated by her involvement in the family business, she studied a business related degree at university. She worked for a number of employers before establishing her own business. In her early thirties, she left her business to seek new career opportunities, when her father offered her a part-time role in the family business. Seeing it as an opportunity to contribute to her family business, whilst also having the freedom to raise her young family, Raonaid agreed. Both her younger and older brother already worked for many years inside the business and were MDs of their respective businesses within the hospitality group. In terms of succession, it was decided that her brothers would have the family business and “arrangements would be made” for both her and her sister. Raonaid discontinued employment in the family business shortly before her participation in this study
Gráinne	Gráinne helped out in her father’s transport business from a young age. She joined the business formally in her late teens. Down the years, she underwent formal education and training and graduated through the ranks of the family business. In her mid-twenties, her father asked whether she would be his successor. She declined, as did her older sister, as they both felt that they would gain no respect from the male dominated workforce. Gráinne and her sister chose to support their younger brother in the role of CEO instead. After a few years, their brother moved on from leadership of the family business to build his career elsewhere and declared Gráinne as his successor of the family business. With certain reluctance, Gráinne agreed to undertake the role of CEO for a limited timeframe. Both her brother and sister are now non-executive directors of the family business
Saoirse	Saoirse worked during her school going years in the office of her family’s machinery business. Saoirse studied a business related degree in college and worked for a number of years outside the family business when her father asked her to join the sales team. Having never seriously considered working for the family business, Saoirse agreed to join but was apprehensive of her fit with the male oriented nature of the business. She spent a few years in the sales team before leaving to work outside the family business. Both her younger brothers were employed in the family business, with the eldest of the two working there continuously since college. In her early thirties, having returned home and needing a stop-gap, Saoirse re-joined the family business on a temporary basis but soon applied to a newly available managerial role, to which she was subsequently appointed. Saoirse and her youngest brother, who are both executive directors, support their eldest brother as Managing Director
Aoibhinn	Aoibhinn remembers from a young age helping out in her family’s healthcare business. Throughout her teenage years and twenties, Aoibhinn did various stints in administrative roles within the business. She did a business-related degree and worked abroad for a few years. Having returned home in her late twenties, she sought a formal position within the family business and was interviewed by the non-family MD for a sales administration role. The role allowed Aoibhinn to develop an intimate working knowledge of the business and to work closely with non-family colleagues with whom she shared an open office. Both Aoibhinn and her younger brother, who is a sales representative, are directors of the business. The non-family MD believes Aoibhinn would be a good fit as successor, however she is reluctant to undertake this role. She sees her brother as progressing towards senior management and wants to give him a chance to be considered
Bronagh	Bronagh did not work in her family business from a young age, unlike her older siblings who knew the business as a smaller scale operation. She had no intentions of joining and did a non-business related degree. After college, her father notified both her and her older brother of his intention to step down and checked whether either of them were interested in the business. Her brother, who was working in management, decided to join the business, but Bronagh delayed doing so as she believed she could add no value. Bronagh’s father convinced her that she did not need a business degree so she joined in her early twenties in a marketing role. She struggled in her first year with a lack of structure which led her to orchestrate her move into other parts of the business. Her brother is managing director of the business and Bronagh, who is now commercial manager, aspires towards a more senior role as commercial director

(continued)

Table A1. Vignettes

Interviewee	Overview
Caoimhe	Caoimhe worked summers as a teenager in the machinery business founded by her father. She trained as an accountant and worked for many years at an international firm. At her father's request, Caoimhe joined the family business as financial director. She found the transition into the family business daunting due to the lack of structure around her role. Both Caoimhe's younger sister (also a director) and younger brother (a manager based in another company location) work for the business and are shareholders. In terms of succession, Caoimhe believes she is the likely successor. Her father still remains as managing director but his focus is on R&D, whilst the day-to-day running is left to Caoimhe, her siblings and the non-family male general manager, with whom she has a positive working relationship
Mairead	Mairead joined her large family business as one of a fourth generation cohort comprised of her and her two male cousins, older brother and younger sister. She completed a business degree and accrued five years' work experience, which included 2 years at a large multinational company. Mairead had no plans to join the family business until her father suggested the idea but exerted no pressure. She joined the family business in her late 20s as a Regional Commercial Manager. Mairead is the first female family member to join the family business (at least at board level). Succession planning is underway but there has been no formal discussion to date. Of the cohort, Mairead is most closely aligned to her older male cousin, who is also a Regional Commercial Manager, and imagines that they will both seek a senior position (as a Commercial Director or Sales Director)
Niamh	Niamh was involved from a young age in her family's third generation engineering business. Whilst she was more office based, her younger brother accompanied her father on site visits growing up. She studied a business degree at university and worked outside the family business for three years. While working, her father asked her to consider doing a course to assist the family business to which she agreed. Following completion of the course, Niamh joined the business full-time but was a little concerned initially about specializing in an area that was not of huge interest and had no obvious route to management. Her brother also joined the business full-time but was focused on the operational side. Retiring from the family business, their father asked both children about each undertaking the CEO position on a rolling basis, however Niamh was adamant that her brother should succeed. Niamh's brother is now CEO and she supports him in her role as a senior manager and director
Orlaith	Orlaith fondly remembers helping out as a child in her father's healthcare practice. As an adult, she became qualified and worked outside the family business for a few years. During this time, her father was expanding the business by opening new practices. Orlaith's older brother joined the family business first and was followed by Orlaith two years after. Their father retired from practice at the time but maintained involvement as managing director. Both siblings ran their own practices with Orlaith's brother becoming more aligned to the strategic side and Orlaith focusing more on the day-to-day operations. In terms of succession, Orlaith's brother assumed the top spot as managing director. In the same period, Orlaith took a two-year career leave for personal reasons, before returning to the business in a part-time role whilst completing a diploma. She deliberately stepped aside from management to focus on raising her young family. Orlaith, who is also a director, intends to take on a full-time executive role in the future
Róisín	Róisín worked weekends as a kid in her family business. It was always her intention to work elsewhere so that she might eventually bring a new perspective to the family business. She completed a finance degree and gathered over a decade of outside experience. Both her younger and older brothers worked in the business during this time. For five years, Róisín provided consultations to the family business whilst working full-time outside. As this became too demanding, Róisín gradually moved into the family business, starting one day a week before joining full-time as Business Operations Manager. This role was designed to oversee the departments that support the core businesses run by her two brothers. Róisín also has an older male cousin who is general manager and her father is managing director, although he is less focused on the day-to-day operations. In terms of succession, her father is in the process of transferring a portion of shareholding to Róisín (equal to that of her brothers). Róisín envisions a shared leadership arrangement between her and her two brothers or sees herself as successor rather than her father choosing between two equally capable sons

Table A1.

(continued)

Interviewee	Overview
Eimear	Eimear's family business was founded by her grandparents and grown by her father and aunt who each manage two separate businesses within the group. Eimear remembers her brother and male cousins working in the factory growing up, whilst she had minimal involvement as the work never enthused her. She qualified as an accountant and worked for an international firm for almost a decade. During her career, she was always aware of dealings in the family business, and took leave from her employment on two separate occasions to work at the family business. Eimear had just finished a career break, when her father asked her to run a newly purchased business under the family group. Having always wanted to run a business, Eimear agreed. Her father is group CEO and her aunt and brother are also group executive directors. There has been no formal discussion about succession but Eimear assumes the previous generation will want to retire in the near future. She sees herself as the likely CEO, given that her brother is not interested in the role, or else as a Co-CEO with her brother
Ciara	Ciara was only a teenager when she first joined the family business in a formal position. As was normal at the time, she left school in her teens and did not attend university. She worked in the office of her family business for a few years, before moving to another similar company where she worked for six years. At her father's request, she re-joined the family business where she has remained for close to 30 years. As general manager, Ciara is based in the office and works closely with her younger brother who is the garage and fleet manager. Their father is still managing director and Ciara's two younger sisters work in administrative office positions. Ciara claims they have spoken about succession but nothing formal has been agreed. None of the current generation have shareholding in the business and her father has no plans for retirement
Brigid	Brigid always worked summers and weekends in her father's transport business. In college, she studied a business degree and expected to join the family business following her qualification. However, her father told her to work elsewhere and gain valuable experience that she could bring back to the family business. She worked outside for six years before her father asked her to return to help grow the business to the next level. Brigid joined with no specific title or role but worked around the different departments. Her younger brother (next in line) also obtained relevant education and experience and joined the business two years after Brigid. Their two youngest brothers already worked in the business as operatives and were not expected to gain external experience. Brigid's parents began succession planning, of which she had little involvement, and her brother was appointed CEO whilst shares were split equally
Shannon	Shannon says passion for her family's food production business was instilled in her from early youth. The business founded by her grandfather is now third generation with her father at the helm. By way of education, Shannon obtained a Master's in business studies and a project management certification. She had no intentions of joining the family business and worked in both the private and public sector. In her early thirties, Shannon was searching for new job opportunities when she suggested to her father that she would work on improving the family business website. Gradually she took on more responsibilities and began full time employment with the family business. Shannon has a wide ranging remit, however her main responsibilities are account management, project management and marketing. Shannon is the eldest of her family, and her sister and eldest brother are company directors. She does not see herself or her sister as CEO but expects one of her brothers to undertake the role or, if not, an external CEO overseen by the siblings as board members

Source(s): Author's own creation

Table A1.

Appendix 2

Table A2.
Thematic evidence –
illustrative quotes

Illustrative quotes	Sub-themes	Themes
<p>"He [father] did ask me when I was about 24 or 25, before [younger brother] took the role of CEO, would I take up that role. But I felt, to be honest with you, it's an industry- it's very male-driven [...] and I was so young that I knew I just wouldn't get the respect from the males [...]. So, I didn't have the confidence back then to be able to take on that role." (Grainne)</p>	<p>Opting out or discounted from succession</p>	<p>Too Much Invisibility – Exclusion</p>
<p>"... I wanted to give [brother] a chance. I think it's just because of the sequence of age that I was here first in one way. And that the role I had was just overall, whereas [brother] came in as a sales rep and he can only show himself as a sales figure cause there is only so much you can sell. So you know he hasn't got to show his talent." (Aoibhinn)</p>	<p>Not groomed for succession</p>	
<p>"There was very little discussion... So I think it was more or less said 'Thinking that [your brother] might be the CEO, are you OK with that?'. And I said 'yeah, I am, because it's not something that I'd want.'" (Brigid)</p>	<p>Treated differently than male next gen</p>	
<p>"It was kind of a sexist thing... the boys would work in the warehouse... I think if I asked when I was 15 'Can I work in the warehouse?' he'd [i.e. dad] be like 'No way. You're not working there.'" (Saoirse)</p>	<p>Visible leaders</p>	<p>Too Much Visibility – Trouble</p>
<p>"I did some hours here and there, some summers, a couple of hours in the office, but I would never have done the proper full blown work that all the guys [brother and male cousins] did." (Eimear)</p>	<p>Vocalizing ideas with regard to the business</p>	
<p>"I don't know, it's being a male or what it is. He was made to go down onto the floor for six months so he had to work on the cold store line which is the best thing ever." (Bronagh)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"I might have to do things a little bit differently [than a man]... there are people who would query your decisions because you are a woman." (Caoinnhe)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"Sometimes that can be a little bit more difficult when, you know, especially when there's somebody who's maybe 20 years your senior and they've been here for 40 years and you're kind of reprimanding them... I don't want them to think 'Oh who does she think she is?'" (Saoirse)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"At the time, it was getting very busy, I said 'Guys, this is nuts, I'm doing quotes by day, I'm doing tenders at night, you know'. I said 'can we get someone in the sales admin to do the role with me?' And I always remember [non-family male CEO] kind of going 'do you think there's a full-time job in it?'... So I said 'let's get someone in and see how it goes'. And now we've got two people in sales admin and I'm still pretty busy doing what I do. So they kind of went 'Wow, we just didn't realise'." (Aoibhinn)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"Neither of them [brothers] have worked outside the family business... where[as] I actually have worked in different places. So I have the two sides you know. And often I do kind of say things like 'well in other businesses they would do it this way'; and they kind of look at me kind of blank-faced because they've never experienced that. So they might be a little bit more blinkered, a little bit more insular, maybe, than I would be." (Saoirse)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"You know it's the voice of the women in the company as well that I think is required and maybe without that they wouldn't have that consideration [with regard to raising female centric issues]" (Roisin)</p>	<p>Disrupting the status quo</p>	
<p>"[flexibility for staff is] something that I like to think that we brought in here because we know what it's like juggling things as women because no matter what you say it falls back on our plate" (Caoinnhe)</p>		

(continued)

Illustrative quotes	Sub-themes	Themes
<p>“When [younger brother] took on the role I was delighted because it was a weight off my shoulders. . . . And I’m sure [older sister] felt probably exactly the same way. We worked very closely then as a sibling partnership the three of us working together supporting [younger brother] in his role” (Gráinne)</p> <p>“I’d say to him [brother] ‘gosh I don’t know about that. Do you think we should do that?’ You know we’d go off and have a separate conversation about something and we’d work it out and we’d say you know may be this time we’ll not do it for whatever reason or we ‘let’s go for it.’” (Brigid)</p> <p>“It’s like we’ve shared the responsibility between the three of us and we certainly support [younger brother] in all decisions.” (Saoirse)</p> <p>“Sometimes I would make decisions and, I’d know, I’d have it filtered to a fine art as to the guys would have no problem with this.” (Róisín)</p> <p>“We both understand how the other thinks and we have totally different skill sets. So that is how it works. He’s totally into sales and new product development and relationships with customers and everything. I don’t like any of that. And then I deal with, say, more operational side, HR side, IT side, all the accounting side. The stuff he just does not like so.” (Eimear)</p>	<p>Power in partnership with male next gen</p> <p>Humility in partnership with male next gen</p>	<p>Balancing (In)visibility – Acceptance</p>
<p>Source(s): Author’s own creation</p>		

Table A2.