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Children-in-law and Conflictual Dynamics in the Business Family

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Abstract This study explores the emotional and relational experiences of in-laws in family businesses—an under-researched area in the family business literature. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), the research investigates whether in-laws working in Italian family SMEs experience a recurring pattern of perceived exclusion, identity frustration, and career dissatisfaction. Based on survey data collected from 158 in-laws working in Italian family firms, the study identifies a multifactorial configuration comprising five interrelated factors: perceived unfair treatment by the founder and siblings-in-law, identity frustration, career dissatisfaction, and intention to leave the family business. These factors are significantly and positively correlated, and all are negatively associated with self-categorization as a family member. Gender differences also emerged, with sons-in-law reporting higher frustration and stronger self-categorization compared to daughters-in-law. By applying SIT to intra-family dynamics, this study extends existing theory to examine how ambiguous identity and group membership shape in-law experiences. The findings highlight the need for more inclusive governance and integration strategies in family firms to prevent disengagement and conflict.

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PALABRAS CLAVE
Dinámicas de la empresa familiar, Integración de familiares políticos, Teoría de la identidad social, Dinámicas conflictivas.

Familiares políticos y dinámicas conflictivas en la familia empresaria

Resumen Este estudio explora las experiencias emocionales y relacionales de yernos y nueras de familias empresarias empresas familiares, un ámbito poco investigado en la literatura sobre empresa familiar. Partiendo de la Teoría de la Identidad Social (SIT), la investigación analiza si miembros políticos que trabajan en pymes familiares italianas experimentan un patrón recurrente de exclusión percibida, frustración identitaria y descontento profesional. A partir de los datos de encuesta de 158 personas con este perfil que trabajan en empresas familiares italianas, el estudio identifica una configuración multifactorial compuesta por cinco factores interrelacionados: percepción de trato injusto por parte del fundador y de los hermanos políticos miembros de la familia, frustración identitaria, insatisfacción profesional e intención de abandonar la empresa familiar. Estos factores están significativamente correlacionados entre sí y todos se asocian negativamente con la autoidentificación como miembro de la familia. También se observaron diferencias de género: los yernos reportaron mayores niveles de frustración y una autoidentificación familiar más fuerte que las nueras. Al aplicar la SIT a las dinámicas intrafamiliares, este estudio amplía el marco teórico existente y examina cómo la ambigüedad en la identidad y la pertenencia al grupo afecta la experiencia de los miembros políticos. Los resultados subrayan la necesidad de estrategias de gobernanza más inclusivas y de mecanismos de integración para prevenir el conflicto y el desapego en las empresas familiares.

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1. Introduction

Family businesses operate at the intersection of relational and organizational logics (Lansberg & Astrachan, 1994; Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). While the term "family business" is widely explored, the concept of a "business family"—a family involved in business through blood or marriage—remains under-conceptualized (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Labaki et al., 2013). This distinction is especially salient when considering the position of in-laws, whose legal and psychological membership in the family is often contested (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004).

In the Italian context, in-laws are employed in approximately 30% of family SMEs (Biasetti et al., 2009), yet their roles remain largely invisible in research. Their presence evokes ambivalence, especially amid high divorce rates, leading some families to view them as temporary or risky actors (Gersick et al., 1997; Lansberg, 1999). In-laws often perceive themselves as marginal or excluded, experiencing a lack of psychological belonging despite formal ties. Psychological literature underscores their search for validation and recognition (Saviet & Greif, 2021; Willson, Shuey & Elder, 2003), while also pointing to identity tensions and intergenerational conflict (Mismetti et al., 2023; Santiago, 2011).

Despite their relevance, the experiences of in-laws in family firms are rarely theorized or empirically investigated. Current literature tends to treat their struggles—unfair treatment, career limitations, exclusion from decision-making, identity conflict, and intentions to leave—as isolated issues (Greif & Woolley, 2021). Even if these experiences may form an interrelated psychological condition, no existing research has investigated them as a **'syndrome'**, i.e., a constellation of associated but distinct emotional and relational factors[1] (Calvo et al., 2003).

This study addresses a significant gap in the family business literature by investigating whether in-laws working in Italian family SMEs experience a recurring pattern of exclusion, frustration, and relational tension. It also examines whether this condition is linked to a lack of self-categorization as a family member, a central concept in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While prior research has explored issues of organizational exclusion and justice (Colquitt et al., 2001; 2013), little attention has been given to how in-laws' identity experiences contribute to systemic tensions within business families.

Guided by SIT, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their perceived group membership, influencing both behavior and well-being (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), this study offers a novel application of the theory to the context of business families. In these settings, the founder often embodies the organizational identity (Dyer, 1986; Ferrari, 2019a), while in-laws may struggle to gain recognition beyond their marital role (Saviet & Greif, 2021). When recognition is denied, this can result in psychological strain, marginalization, and relational conflict (Waldkirch, 2015).

Building on these insights, the study explores whether five key factors—perceived unfairness by the founder and siblings-in-law, identity frustration, career dissatisfaction, and intention to leave—are interrelated and underpinned by processes of social identity exclusion. However, reflecting the exploratory nature of this research, the study does not assume that all in-laws necessarily desire managerial roles, nor that feelings of exclusion universally result in conflict. Instead, it investigates how in-laws who perceive themselves as part of the business family experience emotional and relational challenges, which may vary across family cultures, governance models, and levels of involvement (Carmon et al., 2010; Waldkirch, 2015).

To explore these dynamics, the following research questions (RQs) guide the empirical investigation:

> *RQ1: To what extent do in-laws perceive themselves as family members within the business context (i.e., self-categorization)?*
> *RQ2: How do in-laws perceive their treatment by the founder/entrepreneur, and does this perception relate to feelings of fairness or exclusion?*
> *RQ3: How do in-laws experience their relationships with siblings-in-law, and do they perceive these interactions as equitable?*
> *RQ4: Do in-laws feel that they are recognized and valued as individuals beyond their marital role, or do they experience identity frustration?*
> *RQ5: In cases where in-laws are involved in the business, do they experience limitations in career advancement or role marginalization?*
> *RQ6: Under what conditions do in-laws report a desire to withdraw or leave the family business?*

Based on a quantitative survey of 158 in-laws working in Italian family SMEs, the findings reveal strong, positive correlations among the five factors, confirming the existence of a multifactorial pattern of perceived exclusion and frustration. Moreover, all these factors were found to

1. Notably, the use of *syndrome* does **not** imply pathology, disorder, or illness, but follows established scholarly precedent in management studies, such as Kaye's (1992) seminal work on the "kid brother syndrome," which referred to a recurrent relational pattern within family firms. In this vein, the present research identifies a similar multifactorial structure characterizing in-laws' experiences of emotional and identity-based exclusion.

be negatively associated with self-categorization as a family member, supporting the central role of identity dynamics. The analysis also uncovered significant gender differences: sons-in-law reported higher levels of frustration and marginalization due to limited career opportunities, alongside stronger self-categorization as family members, whereas daughters-in-law appeared less affected, reflecting differing social expectations regarding their role within the family business.

This study makes several contributions. First, it empirically identifies and validates a previously underexplored pattern of *in-law marginalization dynamics*, characterized by interrelated perceptions of exclusion, identity frustration, and career dissatisfaction. Second, it positions **SIT** as a valuable framework to interpret identity-based conflict in family firms, expanding its application to intra-family relationships (Ferrari, 2025a). Third, the findings emphasize the importance of inclusive and fair organizational practices, suggesting that businesses must recognize and integrate in-laws to preserve emotional investment and reduce conflict. Finally, the study contributes to the emerging literature on micro foundations in family business research (De Massis & Foss, 2018; Ferrari, 2019b; Picone et al., 2021) by showing how individual identity dynamics can influence broader organizational outcomes.

2. Theoretical Background

Family business research has long acknowledged the complexity of roles at the intersection of kinship and organization (Lansberg & Astrachan, 1994; Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). The role of in-laws remains under-theorized and varies widely across contexts—while some are integrated into management or ownership, others are intentionally excluded due to cultural or strategic reasons (Gersick et al., 1997; Rosso, 2024). This study adopts an exploratory approach to examine how in-laws who are involved in the business perceive their roles, and whether their emotional experiences relate to self-categorization as family members (Saviet & Greif, 2021; Santiago, 2011).

Recent work has renewed attention on conflict in organizations. Alvarado and Euwema (2024), similarly to Ferrari (2006; 2019b), identify four levels of conflict—intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup—emphasizing their interconnectedness. Intrapersonal conflict reflects internal tension; interpersonal conflict involves dyadic disagreements; intragroup conflict arises within teams or families; and intergroup conflict occurs between subgroups, such as branches of a family business. These dimensions are especially relevant to understanding in-law dynamics.

SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offers a valuable framework for analyzing these conflictual dynamics. According to SIT, individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and the emotional value they assign to this belonging (Tajfel, 1981). In the context of family businesses, children-in-law often face challenges in fully integrating into the family group, as their status—whether as family members or outsiders—remains ambiguous. This uncertain identity can lead to exclusion, frustration, and strained relationships. For instance, when in-laws perceive their contributions as undervalued or their identity as not fully recognized, it can lead to feelings of injustice and marginalization, intensifying identity-based intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. The utility of SIT in family business research is well-established (e.g. Ferrari, 2025a). It has been applied to study issues of discrimination and identity, showing that perceptions of organizational justice and shared group identity enhance commitment and reduce conflict among non-family employees (Ferrari, 2025; Carmon et al., 2010). For children-in-law, SIT provides a robust theoretical lens to understand how their sense of belonging—or lack thereof—affects their relationships with family members and their role within the business. While some limitations exist, such as its reliance on subjective perceptions, SIT remains a promising approach for examining the intricate identity dynamics of in-laws in family firms (Waldkirch, 2015).

2.1. Conceptual foundations: Five interrelated factors

The literature suggests that in-laws in business families face a range of psychological and relational challenges, including perceived unfairness, strained interpersonal relationships, and unfulfilled identity aspirations. While these dynamics have often been examined independently, this study argues that they are in fact interdependent and recurring. To describe this pattern, the study adopts the term *syndrome* —used here in its academically neutral and descriptive sense to refer to a constellation of related but distinct phenomena that tend to co-occur (Calvo et al., 2003). The five key factors are:

1. Perceived unfair treatment by the founder/entrepreneur. **SIT** offers valuable insights also for understanding the socialization challenges faced by non-family members, particularly in-laws, within family businesses. According to SIT, individuals derive part of their identity from their social groups, influencing their behavior and interactions within the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In family business contexts, the founder, as the central figure, embodies the family identity and exerts considerable control over the business culture (Dyer, 1986; Ferrari, 2019a; 2023). This can create competition between in-laws and their parents-in-law, as in-laws may vie for resources, attention, and support for their spouse (Garcia et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2010).

As newcomers, in-laws may struggle to integrate fully, often viewed as outsiders by the founder and thus facing exclusion or marginalization (Friedman, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1994). The founder's attachment to the family business, coupled with concerns about preserving its legacy, can heighten tensions, as in-laws may be seen as potential disruptors (Gersick et al., 1997; Lansberg, 1999). In-laws frequently perceive themselves as undervalued, feeling they are treated less favorably than biological members (Poza & Messer, 2001; Schulze et al., 2003). This sense of inequity can undermine interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2001; 2013), leading to interpersonal conflicts as in-laws challenge the founder's authority to assert their identity and gain acceptance.

2. Strained relationships with siblings-in-law. SIT posits that individuals derive part of their identity from their social groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel, 1981). In family firms, in-laws often enter as outsiders, while siblings-in-law form the in-group, which can result in tension and intergroup conflict (Ferrari, 2006; Greif & Woolley, 2021; Willson et al., 2003). In-group members may see in-laws as threats to their social hierarchy, leading to exclusion from decisions and information, thereby fostering feelings of isolation among in-laws (Friedman, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1994; Saviet & Greif, 2021). Additionally, competition for resources and influence within the in-group can exacerbate conflicts, as brothers- and sisters-in-law may view in-laws as competitors for authority and career advancement (Lansberg, 1999; Sharma, 2004). Furthermore, differing loyalties and priorities between in-laws and siblings-in-law, such as family unity versus personal or spousal interests, can lead to intragroup conflicts within the business (Alvarado & Euwema, 2024; Gersick et al., 1997; Schulze et al., 2003). The emotional bonds between siblings, formed from childhood, further contribute to the psychological distance and mistrust towards in-laws, complicating their integration into family dynamics (Kidwell et al., 2013; Poza & Messer, 2001). These dynamics can diminish the perceived fairness and interactional justice among in-laws (Colquitt et al., 2001; 2013).

3. Frustration over career limitations. Research suggests that family businesses often display favoritism toward family employees, giving them preferential treatment and securing privileges that reinforce socio-emotional wealth (SEW) (Cruz et al., 2014; Ferrari, 2019; 2025; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Kellermanns et al., 2012; Samara & Arenas, 2017; Zientara, 2017). This favoritism creates a workplace environment where in-laws, despite their legal ties to the family, are perceived and treated as outsiders. As a result, in-laws often face limited career advancement, leading to psychological consequences such as frustration and resentment.

SIT explains these dynamics, as it emphasizes that individuals' self-concepts are deeply shaped by their group memberships, which influence behavior and emotional well-being (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In-laws who identify as integral to the business may still find themselves confined to peripheral roles due to their non-blood-related status, undermining their professional identity and sense of belonging (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This exclusion often worsens through social comparison—when in-laws observe central, influential roles being given to family members or even non-family employees, they perceive inequity, leading to deeper resentment. Thus, SIT highlights how intergroup conflictual dynamics in family businesses can perpetuate in-laws' marginalization, limiting their career paths and fostering negative emotions.

4. Identity dissatisfaction. Alderson (2015) notes that the acceptance of in-laws as true family members in family businesses is often contradictory. **SIT** helps explain the frustration in-laws feel when they are recognized only in relation to their marital status, rather than as individuals. Family psychology suggests that in-laws are often primarily categorized by their in-law status, rather than their own skills or identities, which limits their personal recognition and can lead to frustration and *intrapersonal* conflict (Greif & Woolley, 2021; Saviet & Greif, 2021; Willson et al., 2003).

In the business context, this limited recognition compromises their sense of belonging, as they are not fully valued for their unique contributions (Marler et al., 2019). When in-laws identify with the business family, they seek validation, but their self-esteem can suffer if they are valued only through their marriage connection rather than their professional achievements. This gap between their personal identity and the imposed family role intensifies frustration. Furthermore, social comparison within the family business can deepen feelings of inequity if in-laws perceive other family members are more valued for their contributions, leading to resentment (Greif & Woolley, 2021; Waldkirch, 2015).

5. Intention to leave or 'betray' the family business. Finally, research shows that non-family members in family businesses often face disparities in career growth, training, and salaries, leading to a higher intention to leave (Ferrari, 2025; Kim & Marler, 2022). This aligns with psychological findings that lack of such appreciation within family businesses can lower in-laws' self-esteem and motivation, pushing them to find fulfillment outside the organization. Preserving employees' emotional investment is crucial, as it enhances engagement, resilience, and organizational citizenship behaviors, and supports well-being (Beer, 2023; Lee & Ok, 2012; Ngo et al., 2023; Shulga & Busser, 2024).

When individuals feel excluded or inadequately integrated into a group, their loyalty and commitment wane, increasing their likelihood of leaving or undermining the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers et al., 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Kidwell et al. (2013) illustrate that failure in socialization can even lead family members to act against family interests, displaying opportunistic behavior that harms the business. Thus, fostering inclusion and recognition is essential for retaining and motivating all members.

These five factors, though distinct, are often observed together in in-laws' experiences and thus form the basis of a conceptual **syndrome**—a pattern of interrelated factors pointing to deeper psychological and relational exclusion (Calvo et al., 2003; APA, 2013).

2.2. Hypothesis development: Social identity theory and the syndrome

SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides conceptual scaffolding to connect the five factors described above. According to SIT, individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group memberships. When group boundaries are ambiguous or when group members feel excluded, psychological distress can ensue (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers et al., 1999).

In the context of family businesses, in-laws occupy a liminal space: formally included through marriage but often excluded in terms of psychological recognition and strategic involvement (Alderson, 2015; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). When they are denied full membership, their social identity becomes fragmented, leading to emotional withdrawal and conflict (Carmon et al., 2010; Waldkirch, 2015).

The first hypothesis focuses on the internal structure of the proposed syndrome:

> *H1: Among in-laws who are involved in the family business, the five factors—(1) perceived unfair treatment by the founder, (2) perceived unfair treatment by siblings-in-law, (3) identity frustration, (4) career dissatisfaction, and (5) intention to leave—are expected to show significant and positive correlations, indicating a recurring pattern of interrelated emotional and relational experiences.*

The second hypothesis examines the etiological mechanism underlying the syndrome, which is the in-law's failure to self-categorize as a family member:

> *H2: The self-categorization of in-laws as family members is negatively correlated with all five factors constituting the syndrome. That is, lower levels of perceived family identity are associated with higher levels of injustice, frustration, and intention to leave.*

Together, these hypotheses aim to empirically validate the notion that in-laws' experiences of exclusion, injustice, and identity fragmentation are interrelated and rooted in the failure of social identity integration.

3. Research

3.1. The research context

Italy serves as an ideal setting for this research due to its strong tradition of family-owned businesses, cultural emphasis on family ties, and unique socio-economic dynamics. Family businesses dominate the Italian economy, accounting for over 85% of private firms (AIDAF, 2024), with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) particularly reliant on familial relationships. Within this context, in-laws play a significant role, often comprising up to 30% of employees (Biasetti et al., 2009), yet their ambiguous status as "outsiders" by birth and "insiders" through marriage makes their position particularly complex. Italian culture's emphasis on tradition and hierarchical family structures (CENSIS, 2024) amplifies expectations placed on in-laws while also fostering implicit exclusion. Founders' authority and rigid family boundaries can lead to perceptions of unfairness, identity struggles, and relational tensions. These dynamics are further heightened in SMEs, where informal governance and reliance on personal relationships can exacerbate exclusionary practices. By focusing on Italy, this research provides a culturally relevant yet globally applicable exploration of identity, fairness, and relational challenges. It offers insights into dynamics that resonate in family-centric economies worldwide, particularly in multi-generational family businesses.

3.2. Sampling process

This study employed a **non-probability purposive sampling** strategy, targeting Italian family SMEs that included at least one son- or daughter-in-law working in the firm. The data collection was conducted in collaboration with the national young entrepreneurs' association "Gruppo Giovani Confindustria," which provided access to a broad network of family firms. An initial email

was sent to 1,200 family businesses within the association's database. This first wave aimed at identifying firms meeting the following three criteria: (1) a single family owns at least 50% of the business, (2) the family retains control over strategic decision-making, and (3) at least one in-law (son- or daughter-in-law) is actively involved in the business.
From this screening, 265 firms met the criteria and were contacted in a second round to obtain consent from the in-laws to participate in the study. Among these, 192 in-laws agreed to receive the questionnaire. After administering the anonymous survey via Qualtrics, 158 complete and valid responses were collected, yielding a response rate of 82.3% based on the final pool of eligible participants, but approximately 13.2% relative to the original list of firms contacted. Data collection took place between January and March 2024.
It is important to note that the sampling process may involve self-selection bias, as participation depended on the willingness of both firms and in-laws to engage with the topic. In-laws experiencing stronger emotional responses—either positive or negative—may have been more inclined to participate. This potential bias is acknowledged in the limitations and suggests that the findings reflect the experiences of those in-laws who are more involved or invested in their roles within the family firm.

3.3. Variables and measuring tools

Each variable in the study was measured using either validated instruments (e.g., Colquitt et al.'s interpersonal justice scale (2001); Ellemers et al.'s self-categorization scale (1999)) or ad hoc 3-item scales developed for this research. For all scales, higher scores indicate greater intensity of the measured construct—for instance, higher scores on the identity frustration scale reflect stronger feelings of being recognized only as a spouse, while higher scores on the interpersonal justice scales indicate more positive perceptions of fair treatment. Responses were collected on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree / To a very small extent; 6 = Strongly agree / To a very large extent), and internal consistency was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha. Example items for each scale are provided in the manuscript, while full instruments are not included due to copyright restrictions.

Independent variable
Self-categorization (SC): Measured using the Italian version of the 3-item subscale by Ellemers et al. (1999), capturing perceived psychological inclusion in the family. *Example item:* "I feel part of the family involved in the business." *Cronbach's a = 0.77*

Dependent variables (five syndrome factors)
Perceived unfair treatment by the founder (TUF): Measured using the interpersonal justice subscale from Colquitt (2001), adapted for family business settings. *Example item:* "To what extent has the founder treated you with respect?" *Cronbach's a = 0.77*
Perceived unfair treatment by siblings-in-law (TUBS): Measured using the same Colquitt (2001) interpersonal justice scale, adapted for sibling-in-law interactions. *Example item:* "To what extent have your siblings-in-law treated you with respect?" *Cronbach's a = 0.77*
Career frustration (CF): Measured with a 3-item ad hoc scale focusing on perceived limitations and marginalization in career roles. *Example item:* "I feel that my career prospects in the family business are limited compared to other family members." *Cronbach's a = 0.85*
Identity frustration (IF): Measured with a 3-item ad hoc scale assessing the perceived lack of recognition beyond marital status. *Example item:* "I often feel that my personal identity is overshadowed by my role as an in-law." *Cronbach's a = 0.87*
Intention to leave (ITL): Measured with a 3-item ad hoc scale examining the willingness to exit or disengage from the business. *Example item:* "Have you ever seriously considered leaving the organization?" *Cronbach's a = 0.91*

Control variables
The following control variables were included: Gender of the in-law, gender of the founder/incumbent, generation of the owning family, firm size, sector, number of family members active in the business, and age of the respondent.
In this research, *gender* refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors and identities of women, men and gender-diverse people that occur in a historical and cultural context and may vary across societies and over time. Gender influences how people view themselves and each other, how they behave and interact and how power is distributed in society. Table 1 presents a synopsis of the variables used in the study.

Table 1. Description of variables used in the

study

Variable	Description	Measurement
Self-Categorization (SC)	Perceived belonging as a family member within the business	3-item scale (Ellemers et al., 1999)
Perceived Unfairness by Founder (TUF)	Perceived unfair treatment by the founder/entrepreneur	4-item interpersonal justice scale (Colquitt et al., 2001) adapted to founder
Perceived Unfairness by Siblings-in-Law (TUBS)	Perceived unfair treatment by siblings-in-law	4-item interpersonal justice scale (Colquitt et al., 2001) adapted to siblings-in-law
Identity Frustration (IF)	Perception of being valued only through marital ties	3-item ad hoc scale
Career Frustration (CF)	Perceived limitation of career opportunities and peripheral roles	3-item ad hoc scale
Intention to Leave (ITL)	Desire or intention to withdraw from the family business	3-item ad hoc scale

3.4. Statistical approach

To assess the validity of the constructs and minimize bias, several statistical procedures were employed: **Common Method Bias (CMB)** was evaluated through Harman's single-factor test and a confirmatory one-factor model. **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** was approximated through a one-factor model assessing whether all six key variables (SC and the five dependent factors) represented distinct constructs. **Regression Analysis: linear regressions** were used to estimate the effect of SC on each of the five dependent variables (TUF, TUBS, IF, CF, ITL), while **controlling for individual- and firm-level characteristics**. **MANOVA and Post-Hoc Tests:** Additional multivariate tests (Pillai's Trace) were used to examine the influence of gender, generational position, founder's gender etc. **Correlation Analysis** was retained to assess the interdependence of the five factors, consistent with standard procedures in identifying syndrome-like patterns (APA, 2013; **Leucht, 2006**).
This multi-method approach ensures robustness and theoretical alignment with the study's goal of identifying a multifactorial pattern linked to social identity dynamics in business families.

4. Findings

To assess the potential presence of **CMB** in the data, multiple diagnostic tests were conducted. First, **Harman's single-factor test** indicated that a single factor accounted for **58.48% of the total variance**, exceeding the common 50% threshold and suggesting potential CMB. However, further inspection of the factor loadings revealed that **SC** —the independent variable—did not dominate the shared variance, showing a moderate loading of 0.405 alongside similarly weighted dependent variables.
Furthermore, a CFA approximation using a one-factor model revealed that SC loaded negatively (-1.03) on the latent factor, while all dependent variables loaded positively, suggesting SC is distinct from the shared method-driven variance. Taking together, while some common method variance is present, the pattern of results indicates that SC's role as a predictor is not artificially inflated by CMB, and its effects can be interpreted with greater confidence.
The most critical factor is the perception of being treated (un)fairly by the founder/entrepreneur – TUF (3.36/6), followed by frustration at their identity – IF (3.32/6), frustration for limited career and peripheral position in the business – CF (3,23/6), and finally relationship with brothers/sisters-in-law – TUBS (3.18/6, although not all have brothers/sisters – in-law active in the company). However, the descriptive statistics show a rather dispersed distribution, with a std deviation that is on average 35% of the mean itself. Therefore, the mean value of each factor is strongly affected by the extreme individual situations of the respondents (outliers). Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
TUF	158	0	3.300	1.080	1.000	6.000
TUBS	72	0	3.180	0.980	1.000	6.000
IF	158	0	3.320	1.080	1.000	6.000
CF	158	0	3.230	1.210	1.000	6.000
ITL	158	0	3.300	1.770	1.000	6.000
SC	158	0	3.620	1.290	1.000	6.000

TUF= perception of being treated (un)fairly by the founder/entrepreneur; TUBS= perception of being treated (un)fairly by the brothers/sisters in law; IF= frustration at their identity; CF= frustration for limited career and peripheral position in the business; ITL= intention to leave/ 'betray'; SC= self-categorization as family member

A MANOVA analysis was conducted using a series of Pillai's Trace tests to examine whether the main study variables varied significantly according to demographic and firm-level characteristics. The analysis revealed no significant differences for generation (p = 0.392), gender of the founder/incumbent (p = 0.762), firm size (p = 0.611), sector (p = 0.539), number of family members involved (p = 0.683), or respondent age (p = 0.474). The results showed statistically significant differences only between sons-in-law and daughters-in-law. Specifically, sons-in-law reported higher levels of perceived (un)fair treatment by brothers- and sisters-in-law—TUBS (3.3 vs. 2.8, p = 0.005)—and greater frustration due to limited career opportunities and a peripheral position in the business—CF (3.5 vs. 2.4, p < 0.001). Additionally, sons-in-law demonstrated higher levels of self-categorization as family members—SC (3.8 vs. 3.2, p = 0.002).

These results answer the RQs by showing that, within this sample of Italian family SMEs, all the constitutive factors of in-law marginalization dynamics are present with mean values systematically above the scale midpoint (3/6), suggesting a recurring pattern in some cases. The One-Sample Student's T-Test shows that the differences in means between the factors (TUF: t=39.182, p<.001; TUBS: t=40.188, <.001, IF: t=38.474, p<.001; CF: t=33.654, p<.001; ITL: t=23.425, p<.001) are significant, so the factors are statistically independent.

To test H1, a correlational analysis was carried out, which is reported in Table 2.

Table 3. General correlation matrix

Variable	TUF	TUBS	IF	CF	ITL	SC
TUF	—					
TUBS	0.458***	—				
IF	0.772***	0.478***	—			
CF	0.521***	0.583***	0.738***	—		
ITL	0.543***	0.297***	0.334***	0.202*	—	
SC	-0.794***	-0.356***	-0.557***	-0.312***	-0.386***	—

TUF= perception of being treated (un)fairly by the founder/entrepreneur ; TUBS= perception of being treated (un) fairly by the brothers/sisters in law; IF= frustration at their identity; CF= frustration for limited career and peripheral position in the business; ITL= intention to leave/'betray'; SC= self-categorization as family member

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

The five factors show a reciprocal and significant correlation. The probability that each factor is associated with all the others is therefore very high, and this confirms the multifactorial structure constituted by distinct but correlated factors in the in-laws sample. In this in-laws sample, the factors considered show systematically positive correlations with intensity ranging from a minimum of r=-0.202* between frustration for limited career and peripheral position in the business and intention to leave/'betray' to a maximum of r=-0.772*** between the perception of being treated (un)fairly by the founder/entrepreneur and frustration at their identity. H1 is thus supported.

Furthermore, all factors are significantly and negatively correlated with SC - self-categorization as a family member, ranging from r=-0.794*** of the correlation between SC and resentment to the founder/entrepreneur, to r=-0.312*** of the correlation between self-categorization and frustration for limited career and peripheral position.

To examine the predictive power of SC on key outcome variables, a series of simple linear regressions were conducted. SC was found to significantly and negatively predict all five outcome variables. The strongest relationship emerged between SC and TUF, with a regression coefficient of -0.66 and an R^2 of 0.63, indicating that SC alone explains 63% of the variance in TUF. Similarly, SC predicted IF with a coefficient of -0.47 and R^2 of 0.31. For ITL, PF, and TUBS, SC showed weaker yet still statistically significant effects, with R^2 values of 0.15, 0.10, and 0.13, respectively. All relationships were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. This result shows that H2 is also supported. Table 4 shows regression result.

Table 4. Results of the regression analysis

Dependent Variable	Regression coefficient (β)	R^2	RMSE	F-statistic	p-value
Perceived Unfairness by Founder (TUF)	-0.66	0.63	0.47	262.57	< 0.001
Identity Frustration (IF)	-0.47	0.31	0.61	69.34	< 0.001
Intention to Leave (ITL)	-0.39	0.15	0.72	27.91	< 0.001
Career Frustration (CF)	-0.39	0.10	0.79	18.32	< 0.001
Perceived Unfairness by Siblings-in-Law (TUBS)	-0.36	0.13	0.70	23.46	< 0.001

5. Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

This study provides empirical support for a recurring pattern of interrelated emotional and relational challenges experienced by in-laws in family businesses—defined here as in-law marginalization dynamics. Using correlational and regression analyses, the results confirm that five distinct factors—perceived unfairness by founders and siblings-in-law, identity frustration, career dissatisfaction, and intention to leave—frequently co-occur and are negatively associated with self-categorization as a family member, supporting both H1 and H2.

Strong correlations among the five factors (e.g., TUF and IF, r = 0.772***) support the existence of a multifactorial structure. While only 5% of respondents displayed high levels across all dimensions, a broader pattern of moderate frustration emerged, with mean scores exceeding the midpoint (3/6) for all variables. The findings reinforce prior work showing how exclusion from decision-making and recognition (Dyer, 1986; Greif & Woolley, 2021) can result in perceived injustice and emotional detachment (Colquitt et al., 2001, 2013). In-laws reporting conflict with siblings-in-law also tended to express stronger desires for validation from the founder, intensifying identity and career-related frustration. These results highlight how relational tensions operate in reinforcing cycles, undermining both emotional well-being and organizational commitment (Ngo et al., 2023; Schulze et al., 2003).

Findings related to SC reveal that in-laws who fail to perceive themselves as true family members are more likely to experience marginalization and dissatisfaction, supporting H2. SC was found to strongly and negatively predict all five outcome variables, with particularly strong effects on perceived unfairness from founders (R^2 =

0.63) and identity frustration (R^2 = 0.31). These results align with the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which emphasizes the psychological costs of ambiguous group membership and the protective role of strong identification. Notably, only 15% of respondents reported high levels of family identification, reinforcing the idea that most in-laws remain in a liminal identity space (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Alderson, 2015).
This ambiguity contributes to internal tensions (intrapersonal conflict) and external conflict, such as strained interpersonal and intragroup dynamics, as previously suggested by Alvarado and Euwema (2024), Ferrari (2006; 2025). The findings suggest a negative cycle, where lower self-categorization amplifies perceptions of exclusion and frustration, which in turn erode organizational commitment and increases the intention to exit (Kidwell et al., 2013; Shulga & Busser, 2024). At the same time, in line with the assumptions of SIT, which acknowledges that group identification is dynamically shaped by social experiences (Tajfel, 1981; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), the data also suggest a reverse pathway may exist. Additional analyses were conducted to explore whether the five negative experiences might in turn predict SC as an outcome. Results revealed that perceived unfairness by the founder (TUF) was the only factor to show a strong and significant predictive power on SC (R^2 = 0.63, β = -0.66, $p <$ 0.001), while the other variables (TUBS, IF, CF, ITL) displayed weaker associations and higher residual errors. This suggests that while SC acts as a protective factor, particularly in shielding against unfairness and frustration, direct experiences of exclusion—especially when involving the founder—may critically undermine identification.
These findings point to a vicious cycle, whereby low identification heightens vulnerability to perceived injustice and marginalization, while perceptions of unfair treatment, particularly by key authority figures, further weaken in-laws' identification with the family business. This reinforces the view of SC and exclusion dynamics as mutually reinforcing processes within the social fabric of the business family, consistent with the SIT's emphasis on the fluidity and situational sensitivity of group identification processes.
Gender emerged as the only significant moderator in MANOVA analyses. Sons-in-law reported higher career frustration (3.5 vs. 2.4, $p < 0.001$), stronger feelings of exclusion from siblings-in-law (3.3 vs. 2.8, $p = 0.005$), and higher levels of self-categorization (3.8 vs. 3.2, $p = 0.002$). These results reflect differing role expectations and socialization: sons-in-law are more likely to seek career recognition, while daughters-in-law often assume supportive roles and report lower identity tension (Faniko et al., 2022; Mismetti et al., 2023). As such, unfulfilled aspirations among sons-in-laws intensify feelings of injustice and emotional detachment.
Drawing from Alvarado and Euwema's (2024) framework and from the SIT, this study identifies multiple levels of conflict: intrapersonal (identity tensions), interpersonal (differential treatment), intragroup (exclusion by core family members), and intergroup (us vs. them dynamics). In-laws' ambiguous group status exposes them to systemic exclusion, which manifests across these levels. These dynamics reinforce a cycle of marginalization, especially when informal power structures and blood-based alliances dominate family firm governance, fostering family cohesion (Ferrari, 2019; 2019b).
By applying the SIT across these interconnected levels, the study offers a comprehensive explanation for how in-laws' perceived lack of belonging escalates into broader relational and organizational tensions—highlighting the need for inclusive practices and recognition to prevent disengagement and conflict.

5.2 Contributions

5.2.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the growing literature on family business dynamics by advancing both theoretical understanding and empirical investigation of in-law integration. First, it introduces the concept of in-law marginalization dynamics, a multifactorial pattern characterized by identity frustration, perceived injustice, role dissatisfaction, and withdrawal intention among in-laws involved in the family business. Rather than pathologizing these experiences, the study treats them as a recurring configuration of interrelated challenges—reflecting deeper relational and psychological dynamics within family firms.
Building on **the SIT** by Tajfel and Turner (1986), this study provides a novel application of this framework to analyze in-laws' subjective positioning within the family business system. It reveals how the lack of clear group membership can produce identity tensions and emotional detachment, especially when in-laws are not recognized as legitimate organizational insiders. The study demonstrates that **low self-categorization as a family member significantly predicts** in-laws' perceived injustice, identity dissatisfaction, and intent to exit—offering robust support for SIT in intra-family organizational settings.
Second, the findings address the call for **micro-foundational perspectives** in family business research (De Massis & Foss, 2018), showing how individual-level psychological mechanisms—such as

perceived fairness and identity integration—can shape organizational outcomes. This adds depth to the concept of *familiness* (Habbershon et al., 2003) by illustrating how the failure to integrate in-laws into the family's psychological and social fabric can undermine cohesion and compromise the firm's competitive advantage.

Third, the study contributes to the research on organizational conflict by empirically mapping multi-level tensions involving in-laws—ranging from intrapersonal struggles to intragroup and intergroup dynamics (Alvarado & Euwema, 2024; Ferrari, 2006; 2025). By applying the SIT across these levels, it connects individual identity processes with broader organizational behavior, enriching our understanding of conflict escalation and resilience in family businesses.

Fourth, the research expands the gender in family business literature. By identifying significant differences between sons-in-law and daughters-in-law—particularly regarding career frustration and self-categorization—the study underscores how gendered expectations shape in-law experiences. Sons-in-law reported greater frustration over marginal roles and a stronger desire for inclusion, while daughters-in-law reported lower identity strain, consistent with traditional role assignments (Faniko et al., 2022; Mismetti et al., 2023). This insight supports further integration of gender-sensitive approaches into the study of business family dynamics.

Finally, the study revisits the classic theme of outsider/insider boundaries (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009), suggesting that even legal or marital ties do not guarantee psychological integration. In-laws often operate in liminal zones, and their unrecognized contributions may generate a sense of "earned but denied" membership—contributing to disengagement, hidden resentment, or even strategic opposition (Kidwell et al., 2013; Lefkowitz, 2023). By framing these dynamics through SIT and organizational justice theory, the study encourages a re-evaluation of inclusion practices in family governance and HR.

5.2.2 Managerial implications

The findings carry important practical implications for family business owners, managers, consultants, and other stakeholders. First, they shed light on a category of employees—sons-and daughters-in-law—who are often formally involved but psychologically excluded from the core family group. This exclusion can result in reduced emotional investment, latent conflict, and ultimately, higher turnover risk. Family business owners should recognize that informal power structures and exclusive decision-making norms may unintentionally marginalize in-laws, creating systemic tension that undermines long-term stability.

To counter this, leaders should consider implementing inclusive onboarding processes for in-laws, clearly communicating expectations and offering opportunities for professional growth. Simple measures such as formal mentoring, transparent performance evaluations, and role clarity can help align in-laws' self-perception with organizational expectations, reducing ambiguity and emotional strain. Additionally, offering strategic roles or projects that acknowledge in-laws' individual skills—rather than treating them solely through their marital ties—can enhance their identity satisfaction and loyalty to the firm.

Second, the research is particularly relevant for succession planning and governance design. Many conflicts linked to in-laws stem from unclear boundaries regarding leadership roles and influence. Establishing explicit policies around participation, voting rights, or succession criteria can mitigate hidden resentment or perceived favoritism. While some firms opt to exclude in-laws entirely from ownership or leadership, this study suggests that such exclusion may backfire unless accompanied by transparent rationale and alternative forms of inclusion or compensation (Rodríguez-García & Menéndez-Requejo, 2023; Rosso, 2024).

For managers, the results emphasize the need to monitor signs of disengagement among in-laws—such as withdrawal, silence in meetings, or informal complaints—and treat these as indicators of deeper identity-based tensions. Proactive engagement strategies, including regular check-ins, career development conversations, and team integration efforts, can reduce marginalization and foster long-term commitment.

Consultants and family business advisors can use this study's validated framework to develop diagnostic tools for identifying in-law-related relational risks. These tools can inform interventions such as mediation, facilitated conversations, or family governance training that emphasizes emotional intelligence and inclusive leadership.

Finally, policy makers and industry associations supporting family businesses—especially in economies dominated by SMEs—may consider promoting guidelines and training focused on relational inclusion and identity management. Addressing these subtler dimensions of family business functioning can enhance not only organizational resilience but also intergenerational continuity and emotional well-being.

In summary, the study offers a practical roadmap for fostering healthier, more inclusive family business environments where in-laws can thrive—not only as contributors but as valued members of the organizational family.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study offers important insights into the emotional and relational experiences of in-laws in family businesses, but it also carries several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the sampling method involved a non-probability purposive approach, in which in-laws were recruited through their participation in selected family firms. While this strategy allowed for targeted access to a specific respondent group, it also introduces a potential self-selection bias. In-laws who chose to participate may have stronger emotional reactions—positive or negative—than those who declined, possibly skewing the results toward more engaged or dissatisfied individuals. The response rate among eligible participants was high (82.3%), but participation was contingent on the willingness of both firms and in-laws, which may limit the representativeness of the sample. Second, although several procedural and statistical checks were performed to reduce common method bias (e.g., Harman's single-factor test, CFA), the use of self-report measures collected through a single survey instrument does create potential for bias due to shared method variance. Future studies could benefit from triangulating survey data with interviews, observational data, or third-party evaluations (e.g., founders, HR managers). Third, the cross-sectional design of the study limits its ability to assess causality. While associations between variables are significant and theoretically grounded, the directionality of influence (e.g., whether identity frustration leads to lower self-categorization or vice versa) remains to be confirmed through longitudinal or experimental research designs. Fourth, this study focused on SMEs to maintain a simpler relational structure. However, examining more complex family business contexts, such as cousin consortia with multiple family lineages (Gersick et al., 1997), could reveal further relational dynamics. Future research should investigate the syndrome's presence and dynamics in such multi-lineage settings. Fifth, the study is situated within a specific cultural and organizational context—Italian family SMEs—where familial involvement is often high and traditional role expectations may persist. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other national or organizational contexts with different governance structures, cultural norms, or gender dynamics. Cross-cultural replications or comparative studies would help assess the robustness of these dynamics in diverse environments. Sixth, while the study addresses gender differences, it does not fully explore the intersection of gender, power, and generational position in shaping in-law experiences. Further research could expand on how these factors interact, particularly as more family firms transition to inclusive or multigenerational leadership models. Finally, the cross-sectional design of this study prevents establishing the directionality of the observed relationships. While both theoretical assumptions and empirical analyses suggest potential reciprocal influences between SC and the five negative experiences, future research employing longitudinal or cross-lagged designs would be necessary to clarify the temporal sequencing and explore possible feedback loops between identification and experiences of exclusion and frustration.

In sum, while this study provides a theoretically grounded and empirically supported contribution to the understanding of in-law dynamics in family businesses, its findings should be interpreted with caution and contextual sensitivity. Future research is encouraged to build on this foundation with broader samples, multi-method designs, and refined constructs that reflect the full diversity of roles and experiences within business families.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Ethical statement

The author confirms that the data collection for the research was conducted anonymously and there was no possibility of identifying the participants.

Declaration on the Use of Generative AI in the Writing Process

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the writing or editing of this manuscript. All content was solely produced by the author, based on his original research, analysis, and interpretation.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in 'OSF' at https://osf.io/g74bv/?view_only=c4a1e177069e44a39bef636474bfe73b

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