



When Informal Communication Replaces Formal Systems: The Influence of Family Values on Marketing Decision-Making in Indonesian Family Firms

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian family firms represent a distinctive and underexplored context in which informal communication structures frequently override or supplement formal organizational systems. Drawing on Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) theory, the Logic of Appropriateness, and Institutional Action Theory, this qualitative study investigates how deeply embedded family values shape marketing decision-making processes in large Indonesian family-owned corporations. Through semi-structured interviews with senior marketing executives and family members in decision-making roles across five Indonesian family conglomerates, the study explores how unwritten norms, trust-based communication channels, and dynastic loyalty networks function as de facto governance mechanisms. Findings reveal that informal communication acts as both an enabler and a constraint: it accelerates consensus, preserves socioemotional wealth, and embeds institutional memory, yet simultaneously creates opacity, limits external accountability, and poses succession risks. The research contributes to the literature on family business governance, emerging market marketing communication, and informal institutional theory by providing empirical evidence from a context where cultural collectivism, paternalistic leadership, and family-firm identity intersect. Practical implications are offered for family firm leaders navigating the tension between preserving relational governance and adopting formal marketing management systems.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's post-independence economic narrative is inseparable from the rise of powerful family business conglomerates. Over the past eight decades, a cohort of founder-led enterprises originating from modest trading operations and manufacturing ventures has grown into multi-sector corporate empires that collectively account for a substantial share of the nation's GDP. Iconic examples include Salim Group, Sinar Mas, Gudang Garam Tbk., and Gajah Tunggal Tbk., organizations whose trajectories illustrate the capacity of Indonesian family capitalism to withstand financial crises, regulatory shifts, and generational transitions. From the production of instant noodles and bottled mineral water to the export of vehicle spare parts to over fifty countries, these firms have become synonymous with Indonesian industrial identity.

Yet, as these enterprises scaled from family workshops to publicly listed corporations, a paradox became apparent: the governance infrastructure that underpins their daily operations, particularly in the domain of marketing, often remains anchored in informal, relationship-driven communication rather than in formalized strategic planning frameworks. Even in publicly listed entities, second- and third-generation family members frequently occupy pivotal managerial roles, perpetuating a culture of top-down, trust-based decision-making that originated when the business operated out of a single storefront.

This persistence of informality is not merely organizational inertia. As scholars of family business theory have argued, informal systems in family firms often reflect deliberate governance choices rooted in the logic of familial identity, loyalty networks, and the protection of what Gomez-Mejia et al. (2007) term socioemotional wealth the non-financial, affective endowments that families accumulate through business ownership. Marketing decisions, which inherently involve brand reputation, external positioning, and stakeholder communication, are particularly susceptible to this informal governance dynamic, as they carry implications both for commercial performance and for family legacy.

Problem Statement

Despite the prominence of Indonesian family conglomerates in the regional economic landscape, the mechanisms through which family values translate into marketing governance practices remain poorly understood. This study is anchored in two interrelated research questions: First, how do family values influence the use of informal communication in marketing decision-making within Indonesian family firms? Second, what are the perceived advantages and risks of relying on informal communication channels for marketing decisions in these organizations? By addressing these questions, this study moves beyond normative prescriptions for marketing formalization to examine the functional and dysfunctional dimensions of informality as it operates in a specific cultural and institutional context. The analysis considers not only when informal systems outperform their formal counterparts, but also the structural vulnerabilities such systems introduce as firms grow, diversify, and encounter disruptions such as digital transformation and generational succession.

Research Gap

The existing literature on family business governance is rich but selective in its thematic coverage. Reck et al. (2021) examined how employees' identification with a family firm shapes ethical decision-making, yet their analysis prioritizes moral cognition over marketing strategy. Sievinen et al. (2020) investigated how family firm owners deploy informal rules in strategic decision-making, though their focus on strategic renewal leaves the specific domain of marketing communication underexplored. Martínez et al. (2019) addressed the communication of family business brand identity on corporate websites, touching the marketing domain without interrogating the informal governance structures that precede external brand communication. Most critically, the intersection of informal communication, family values, and marketing decision-making in the Indonesian context is virtually absent from international management and marketing literature. Indonesia's institutional environment, characterized by high collectivism, Confucian-influenced kinship norms in Chinese-Indonesian business networks, and weak formal institutional enforcement, creates conditions uniquely conducive to the dominance of informal governance. The present study addresses this gap by situating the analysis at the micro-level of communication behaviour within family firms operating in an emerging market context.

Research Objectives

This study pursues five interrelated objectives. First, it aims to explain how the logic of appropriateness, rather than the logic of consequence, governs marketing decision-making in Indonesian family firms, examining how second-generation decision-makers interpret family history, unwritten norms, and identity obligations when making marketing choices.

Second, the study investigates the preservation of socioemotional wealth as a master variable in marketing governance, exploring how the imperative to protect family reputation, maintain dynastic control, and sustain affective bonds with the firm shapes the risk tolerance and communication style of senior marketers.

Third, it examines identity alignment processes, probing how the fusion of personal identity with firm identity influences operational behaviour and channels informal communication in ways that override codified procedures.

Fourth, the research maps the architecture of shared decision-making within family-business dyads, investigating how authority is distributed informally and how consensual decisions emerge through relational negotiation rather than formal committee structures.

Fifth, the study explores the concept of depersonalized power the degree to which unwritten institutional norms create a stable governance environment during moments of strategic disruption, such as a shift in brand positioning or the entry into digital marketing channels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socioemotional Wealth Theory

Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) theory, introduced by Gomez-Mejia et al. (2007) and subsequently elaborated by Berrone, Cruz, and Gomez-Mejia (2012), posits that family firms are fundamentally distinguished from non-family firms by their prioritization of non-financial, affective endowments. These endowments encompassing family identity, dynastic succession, emotional attachment, social capital, and reputational capital constitute what the theory terms the 'dominant family logic,' a decision-making filter that frequently overrides purely financial considerations.

Within the SEW framework, strategic decisions are understood as mixed gambles in which families weigh potential financial gains against potential losses to their socioemotional reference point. This has direct implications for marketing governance: brand decisions that risk reputational harm to the founding family may be resisted even when they offer financial returns, while marketing initiatives that reinforce family legacy and community prestige may receive disproportionate investment relative to their commercial merit. The theory thus provides a powerful lens through which to examine why Indonesian family firms often pursue marketing strategies that appear sub-optimal from a shareholder value perspective but are coherent within the framework of SEW preservation. Critically, SEW theory predicts that the informal communication channels characteristic of family firms are not mere inefficiencies to be remedied but are functional governance instruments that serve the socioemotional goals of the controlling family. Informal communication preserves dynastic control by limiting information flows to trusted insiders, maintains family identity by allowing the founding generation's values to permeate decision-making unmediated by bureaucratic procedure, and protects social capital by enabling the rapid, confidential resolution of reputational threats.

Logic of Appropriateness and Logic of Consequence

The distinction between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequence, developed by March and Olsen (1989) in their foundational work on institutional theory, offers a complementary theoretical resource for understanding marketing decision-making in family firms. The logic of consequence, which aligns with rational choice theory, holds that decision-makers evaluate alternatives by calculating expected outcomes and selecting the option that maximizes utility given their preferences. This logic underpins much of formal marketing management, where decisions are framed in terms of return on investment, market share targets, and cost-benefit analyses.

The logic of appropriateness, by contrast, holds that decision-makers consult an internalized repertoire of roles, rules, and identities, asking not 'what is the optimal outcome?' but rather 'what does a person like me do in a situation like this?' In family firms, this logic translates into a disposition to invoke ancestral precedent, family tradition, and relational obligation as the primary inputs into marketing choices. A second-generation marketing director is less likely to ask 'what does the data say?' and more likely to ask 'what would my father have done?' or 'what does our family stand for?'

This distinction has significant empirical implications. If marketing decisions in Indonesian family firms are governed by the logic of appropriateness rather than the logic of consequence, then conventional tools for evaluating marketing effectiveness including formal planning, KPI dashboards, and agency briefings are likely to be interpreted and deployed through a relational, identity-laden filter rather than a performance-management one.

Institutional Action Theory and Informal Governance

Institutional Action Theory, as developed by Jepperson (1991) and elaborated within the sociology of organizations, conceptualizes institutions as pre-established programs of action that are invoked by social actors in response to situational triggers. Within this framework, institutions are not merely formal rules but include informal norms, shared expectations, and tacit understandings that structure social behaviour without requiring explicit codification.

Applied to family business governance, Institutional Action Theory illuminates how informal communication practices acquire the status of institutions: they become the 'catechism of expectations' that senior family members and employees internalize through long organizational socialization. These informal institutional arrangements perform the same coordination and legitimation functions as formal bureaucratic rules, but do so through interpersonal channels family dinners, WhatsApp groups, mentorship dyads, and walk-and-talk conversations rather than through board minutes, brand guidelines, or marketing strategy documents.

The theory also draws attention to the performative dimension of informal institutional practices: by enacting the communication rituals associated with family governance, decision-makers simultaneously reproduce the institution and reaffirm their identity as members of the founding family's extended network. This performative dimension is crucial for understanding why informal governance in Indonesian family firms is remarkably resistant to rationalization pressures, even as these firms grow in size and complexity.

Family Business Governance and Marketing Communication

The broader literature on family business governance identifies several recurring themes relevant to the present study. Carlock and Ward (2001) demonstrated that the most enduring family firms develop what they term 'parallel planning processes' – integrative mechanisms that align family communication norms with formal strategic planning without fully subordinating the former to the latter. More recent scholarship by Memili and colleagues (2015) identified the conditions under which family firm CEOs leverage relational governance to facilitate rapid, context-sensitive decision-making in volatile markets. In the marketing domain, Zellweger, Kellermanns, and Eddleston (2012) argued that family firms exhibit distinctive brand management behaviours shaped by the intertwining of family identity and firm identity, a construct they term 'family business branding.' Their findings suggest that the most effective marketing strategies in family firms are those that mobilize the emotional authenticity and community embeddedness associated with family ownership, rather than those that simulate the professional detachment of agency-managed corporate brands.

Indonesian scholarship on family business governance remains relatively sparse in the international literature. Dieleman and Sachs (2008) provided a foundational analysis of how Chinese-Indonesian family conglomerates combine institutional adaptation with relational insularity, identifying the patron-client networks that underpin informal governance in the archipelago's largest family firms. More recent work by Carney, Gedajlovic, and Yang (2014) has examined how Southeast Asian family capitalism navigates the institutional voids characteristic of emerging markets, finding that informal governance serves as a functional substitute for formal institutional infrastructure in contexts where legal enforcement and market transparency are limited.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design, grounded in the epistemological premise that marketing governance in family firms is a socially constructed phenomenon that cannot be fully apprehended through quantitative measurement. The interpretive paradigm is appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making processes, identity narratives, and informal institutional practices phenomena that require thick description and contextual sensitivity rather than statistical generalization.

A multiple case study approach was employed, following the methodological conventions established by Yin (2018) and Eisenhardt (1989). Case studies are particularly well-suited to research questions that ask 'how' and 'why' about contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, and they allow for cross-case pattern recognition without sacrificing the contextual richness necessary to understand organizational behaviour in culturally specific settings.

Case Selection and Participants

Five Indonesian family conglomerates were purposively selected to represent variation across sector, generation, and degree of formalization. Selection criteria included: (1) founding-family ownership or control of at least 30% of equity or significant board representation; (2) revenues exceeding IDR 1 trillion annually; (3) presence of second- or third-generation family members in senior marketing or commercial roles; and (4) willingness to permit access for research purposes. To protect organizational confidentiality, participant firms are identified by pseudonyms in this report.

Data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and September 2024. Interviewees included 8 family members in senior management roles, 9 non-family marketing executives, and 7 middle managers with direct exposure to marketing decision-making processes. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in duration and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with selective translation for analytical purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives about: (1) the communication processes through which marketing decisions are initiated, discussed, and ratified; (2) the role of family values, family history, and

relational norms in shaping these processes; (3) the perceived advantages and risks of informal communication in marketing governance; and (4) instances in which informal and formal systems have come into tension. Probing questions were used to encourage participants to provide concrete examples and to reflect critically on their own communicative practices.

In addition to interviews, secondary data were collected from corporate publications, annual reports, media interviews with founding family members, and publicly available brand communication materials. These sources served both to triangulate interview accounts and to trace the historical evolution of each firm's marketing governance practices.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using an abductive approach that moved iteratively between empirical data and theoretical frameworks. An initial phase of open coding generated a broad inventory of themes relating to informal communication, family values, and marketing decision-making. Subsequent axial coding identified relationships between themes and organized findings around the theoretical constructs of SEW, logic of appropriateness, and informal institutional practice. Member checking was conducted with six participants to validate interpretive conclusions and to identify any misrepresentations of organizational context.

To enhance analytical rigour, a reflexivity protocol was adopted throughout the research process, requiring the research team to maintain audit trails of coding decisions, document disagreements and their resolution, and examine their own positionality as researchers embedded in the Indonesian institutional context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Family Values as Governance Anchors

Across all five case firms, a consistent finding emerged: family values function not merely as cultural background noise but as active governance instruments that shape the selection of communication channels, the distribution of decision-making authority, and the criteria by which marketing options are evaluated. Three family values appeared with particular consistency: trust, family honour, and continuity.

Trust, trust invested in family members and long-tenured loyalists was the most frequently cited basis for bypassing formal approval processes. As one second-generation marketing director noted: 'If it comes from [the patriarch], I know it is right. We don't need a presentation. We know what he wants because we grew up with it.' This trust-based governance structure accelerates decision-making but creates significant barriers to institutionalizing the rationale behind decisions.

Family honour, or family honour, functioned as a constraint on marketing risk-taking. Decisions perceived as threatening to the family's public reputation including crisis communication strategies, celebrity endorsements associated with moral controversy, and brand extensions into categories deemed culturally

inappropriate were consistently filtered through an informal honour calculus before any formal market research was considered.

Continuity, the imperative of continuity, shaped marketing governance by elevating historical precedent over contemporary best practice. Participants described how foundational brand narratives the founder's origin story, the firm's community roots, its role in Indonesian national development were treated as inviolable reference points for marketing communication, even when market research suggested that younger consumer segments were indifferent or unreceptive to these narratives.

Informal Communication as the Primary Governance Channel

The most striking structural finding of this study is the extent to which informal communication channels face-to-face conversations, family meals, messaging applications, and informal check-ins serve as the primary governance mechanism for marketing decision-making. In four of the five case firms, interviewees reported that the majority of significant marketing decisions were discussed, modified, and ratified through informal channels before any formal approval process was initiated. Formal procedures board presentations, brand committees, strategic planning documents were frequently described as post-hoc legitimization of decisions already made informally.

This pattern was particularly pronounced for decisions with high socioemotional salience: the selection of brand ambassadors, the repositioning of heritage brands, and the management of reputational crises. In these cases, informal family networks were mobilized rapidly, with the senior family member in the governance hierarchy serving as the ultimate arbiter of appropriateness rather than commercial effectiveness. Non-family marketing executives expressed ambivalence about this dynamic. While they acknowledged the speed and decisiveness it could generate, several described experiences of being 'outflanked' by informal family channels learning of significant marketing decisions through word of mouth rather than formal briefings, or finding that their professionally developed marketing plans had been modified or overridden based on informal family discussions to which they had no access.

Perceived Advantages of Informal Communication in Marketing

Despite the tensions it generates for non-family professionals, informal communication was perceived by participants as conferring several genuine competitive advantages. First, speed: the ability to reach marketing decisions within hours rather than weeks was frequently cited as a source of competitive agility, particularly in fast-moving consumer goods markets where window-of-opportunity branding is commercially significant.

Second, cultural authenticity: several participants argued that informal governance, precisely because it is mediated by family values rather than brand management templates, produces marketing communication that carries genuine emotional resonance with Indonesian consumers. The alignment between what the family believes and what the brand communicates, achieved through informal rather than professionally mediated channels, was perceived as a source of authentic differentiation.

Third, institutional memory: the informal governance network functions as a repository of organizational and relational knowledge that is not captured

in any formal document. Long-serving family members and loyalists carry detailed knowledge of stakeholder relationships, past marketing failures, and contextual nuances that inform decision-making in ways that formal data analytics cannot replicate.

Perceived Risks and Limitations

Participants also articulated significant risks associated with the dominance of informal communication in marketing governance. The most frequently cited was opacity: because informal decisions leave no documentary trail, the rationale for marketing choices is often invisible to junior staff, agency partners, and external stakeholders. This opacity creates accountability gaps that become particularly problematic when decisions produce commercially negative outcomes there is no formal decision record to review, no process to audit, and no systematic basis for learning.

A second risk concerned succession fragility. The informal governance system functions effectively only as long as the key information nodes typically the senior family members – remain active and accessible. Several participants expressed concern about what would happen to the firm's marketing governance when these individuals retired or became incapacitated: 'Everything is in [the patriarch's] head. When he is gone, what do we have?'

A third risk related to the exclusion of professional expertise. Non-family marketing executives described scenarios in which formally sound marketing strategies based on rigorous consumer insight and competitive analysis were set aside in favour of intuitive family preferences. While participants acknowledged that this had sometimes proved correct, they also cited instances where professional advice rejected on relational grounds had subsequently been vindicated by market outcomes.

Socioemotional Wealth as the Master Variable

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with the predictions of SEW theory. Across all five cases, the protection of family socioemotional endowments particularly family identity, reputation, and dynastic succession functioned as the master variable that shaped marketing governance. Informal communication channels were not accidental features of organizational life but deliberate instruments for maintaining socioemotional control over the marketing domain, consistent with Gomez-Mejia et al.'s (2007) characterization of informal governance as a mechanism for preserving family influence.

Importantly, the study extends SEW theory by demonstrating that socioemotional governance extends beyond strategic decisions into the operational texture of marketing communication. The 'mixed gamble' described by SEW theory is not only enacted at moments of major strategic choice but also in the daily micro-decisions through which brand identity is negotiated and communicated. This finding suggests that the pervasive influence of SEW on organizational behaviour may be systematically underestimated in studies that focus exclusively on formal strategic choices.

Logic of Appropriateness in Marketing Governance

The empirical evidence strongly supports the proposition that marketing decisions in Indonesian family firms are governed primarily by the logic of

appropriateness rather than the logic of consequence. Decision-makers consistently reported orienting their marketing choices toward questions of family identity and relational obligation rather than toward performance metrics and financial optimization. This finding aligns with March and Olsen's (1989) theoretical framework and extends its application to the specific domain of marketing communication in emerging market family firms.

The logic of appropriateness is not, however, uniformly dysfunctional. The study found that it generates marketing outcomes that are authentically aligned with organizational identity and community values outcomes that a purely consequence-driven approach might systematically undervalue. The challenge for Indonesian family firms is not to replace the logic of appropriateness with the logic of consequence but to develop integrative governance mechanisms that allow both logics to operate in productive complementarity.

Informal Institutions and Marketing Governance

The application of Institutional Action Theory to marketing governance illuminates a dimension of organizational behaviour that is largely invisible in the formal strategy literature: the way in which informal communication norms become institutionalized as the 'catechism of expectations' that shapes daily behaviour more powerfully than any formal policy document. The study's findings demonstrate that in Indonesian family firms, informal marketing governance has achieved full institutional status it is self-reproducing, deeply legitimated, and resistant to formal rationalization pressures.

This institutional character of informal governance has significant implications for change management. Attempts to introduce formal marketing management systems into these firms are not merely organizational interventions but are, in effect, institutional challenges to the authority of family governance. The resistance such attempts typically encounter is not simply conservatism or inefficiency but is a rational defence of an institutional order that has proven its value over multiple decades.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study both corroborate and extend the existing literature on family business governance and marketing communication. The pattern of informal governance identified here is consistent with Dieleman and Sachs's (2008) account of Chinese-Indonesian family capitalism, confirming that the relational insularity they observed in strategic governance extends into the marketing domain. The findings also resonate with Zellweger et al.'s (2012) argument that family business branding derives its distinctiveness from the authentic alignment between family identity and brand values, while providing empirical detail about the informal communication mechanisms through which this alignment is produced and maintained.

However, the study also identifies tensions not fully anticipated by existing theory. The exclusion of non-family professional expertise from informal governance channels creates a more severe accountability gap than SEW theory's emphasis on positive socioemotional endowments would predict. The opacity and succession fragility documented here suggest that SEW preservation, while

functionally rational in the short term, may generate institutional vulnerabilities that accumulate over time and manifest acutely during governance transitions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that informal communication in Indonesian family firms is not a residual feature of organizational immaturity but a deliberate and functionally sophisticated governance instrument rooted in family values, socioemotional priorities, and the logic of appropriateness. The marketing domain is a particularly revealing site for examining this dynamic, because marketing decisions simultaneously implicate commercial performance, brand identity, and family reputation the three domains in which the tension between formal and informal governance is most acutely felt. The key insight of this research is that informal governance in Indonesian family firms constitutes a distinct institutional logic that operates in parallel with, and frequently overrides, formal marketing management systems. This institutional logic derives its legitimacy and durability from its deep embeddedness in family values, its alignment with SEW priorities, and its capacity to mobilize trust-based networks for rapid, culturally contextual decision-making. Understanding and working with this logic rather than against it is the central challenge for both family firm leaders and the professional marketers who serve them.

For family firm leaders, the study recommends the development of structured dialogue mechanisms that make informal governance visible and documentable without stripping it of its relational authenticity. Parallel planning processes, in which family communication norms are explicitly acknowledged and integrated into formal marketing governance frameworks, offer a promising model for managing the coexistence of informal and formal governance logics.

For non-family marketing professionals working within family firms, the findings highlight the importance of developing relational capital with key family members as a prerequisite for effective professional influence. Technical expertise alone is insufficient in governance environments where the logic of appropriateness is dominant; professional credibility must be anchored in trust, demonstrated cultural sensitivity, and an authentic alignment with the firm's family values. For policymakers and business educators, the study underscores the need for management education frameworks that are responsive to the institutional realities of family capitalism in emerging markets. Business school curricula that privilege formal strategic planning and quantitative performance management may inadequately prepare managers for governance environments in which relational norms and identity obligations are the dominant decision-making inputs.

FURTHER STUDY

This study is subject to several limitations. The purposive selection of five case firms, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, limits the generalizability of findings across the full diversity of Indonesian family business types, including smaller family SMEs and those without the Chinese-Indonesian cultural heritage that characterizes the conglomerate sector. Future research should extend the analysis to include Javanese, Sundanese, and Minangkabau family business

traditions, which exhibit distinct governance logics that may moderate the patterns identified here.

Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design captures governance practices at a single point in time, precluding analysis of how informal governance evolves through generational transitions. Longitudinal case studies tracking the same firms across generational succession events would provide valuable insight into the conditions under which informal governance is reproduced, transformed, or supplanted by formal systems. Finally, quantitative survey-based research building on the constructs identified in this study would allow for hypothesis testing and broader generalization across the Indonesian family business population.

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