

# **Articulating Values through Identity Work: Advancing Family Business Ethics Research**

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## **Abstract**

*Family values are argued to enable ethical family business conduct. However, how these arise, evolve, and how family leaders articulate them is less understood. Using an 'identity work' approach, this paper finds that the values underpinning identity work: (1) arise from multiple sources (in our case: religion, culture and sustainability), (2) evolve in tandem with the context; and, (3) that their articulation is relational and aspirational, rather than merely historical. Prior research mostly understood family values as rooted in the past and relatively stable, but our rhetorical analysis unlocks a more dynamic and promising research direction advancing family business ethics.*

## **Introduction**

The field of family business ethics is beginning to unpack the effect of family values on ethical behaviour (Vazquez, 2018), including caring about stakeholders (Cennamo et al., 2012), corporate social responsibility (Campopiano & De Massis, 2014), and the environment (Sharma & Sharma, 2011). Generally, however, family business ethics literature views these values as historical fixtures driving ethical business behaviour. We critique this notion and ask: what are the sources of family business values, how do they evolve, and how are they employed rhetorically by family business leaders? An identity work approach, interested in how individual actors shape organizational identities, is, we argue, well-suited to investigate this.

One area of identity work that is pertinent to business ethics is religion. Religious values can represent strongly held convictions influencing decision-making (Angelidis & Ibrahim, 2004; Werner, 2008). The scant research on religion in family businesses connects leader's values and organizational culture (Sorenson, 2013), and actions (Madison & Kellermanns, 2013). How religious values become part of a family firm's ethical identity and how they relate to other core values is not well understood, thus limiting our understanding of the moral sources of family business ethics (Kellermanns, 2013).

For questions related to the foundations of family business values, the role of the family business leader is crucial. Family leaders often have longer tenures, making them the visible carriers of values that can lead to (un)ethical business conduct (Zellweger et al., 2013). This is even more pronounced in certain cultures where the boundaries between personal and organizational identities fade, giving rise to such categories as the “Overseas Chinese family business” strongly influenced by family/business patriarchs (Redding, 1990; Weidenbaum, 1996). Indeed, research has shown the importance of the “founders imprinting process” (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) or how founders’ memories are used for organizational identity construction (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). However, little is known about how their ethical identities are communicated (Basque & Langley, 2018); let alone how this develops in multi-generational family businesses.

To study how family business leaders articulate ethical identities over time we follow a rhetorical history approach (Suddaby et al., 2010), examining two decades of external communications by a second-generation Malaysian family business leader. Our analysis shows how this leader’s identity work shaped his articulation of family business ethics while navigating the overlap between personal and organizational values. His own personal religious values (Christianity) selectively displaced and incorporated other core, cultural values held by the family (ethnic Chinese family business); he also adopted new corporate sustainability values and integrated them with personal religious ones. These values were articulated to legitimize business strategies in a changing context, expressing an aspirational, future oriented identity.

Our paper makes three theoretical contributions to the family business ethics literature. First, we adopt identity work theories as a novel approach, demonstrating that family leaders strategically tap into multiple layers of identity to articulate family business ethics. We identify

three modalities of identity work: *double identity work*, *harmonized identity work*, and *detached identity work*. For double identity work the core values are complementary and articulated at the same time, but without suggesting any congruence; whereas for harmonized identity work values are mentioned together and explicitly integrated. Detached identity work implies that there is no evidence of values occurring together. Second, we establish that these values can change (across time, space and audience) and have relational (self-other) and aspirational (present-future) dimensions. This reorients the current literature, which connects historical family business values too linearly to ethical organizational behaviour (e.g. Yuan & Wu, 2018). Third, our study offers insights into the ill-understood role of religion in family business (Kellermanns, 2013) as we reveal the powerful normative nature of religious values and show how the latter become part of a family business identity through the identity work of a strong second-generation family leader, even though religion was not part of the founder's legacy. For practitioners, our study shows that family leaders can mould family business ethics over time to stay aligned with internal beliefs and organizational contexts.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### *Identity work and religion*

Whereas identity work is now a leading perspective in organization studies (Winkler, 2018), it has not yet been applied to family business ethics research. Since identity work is shown to be intrinsic to processes of organizing (Brown, 2018), we argue that it is also constitutive of the process of (ethically) leading and (re)presenting a family business.

According to Brown (2017, p. 298) identity work “denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources”. An identity work

perspective focuses on the process of claiming identities and linking self-identity to social identity through sense-making (Visscher et al., 2018). This literature suggests that personal identities are continuously co-created (Brown, 2017; Corlett et al., 2017), fluid and socially constructed (Ybema et al., 2009), and can involve the (re)authoring of the self as moral being (Clarke et al., 2009). Anyone can have multiple identities, which may conflict (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) or shift vis-à-vis others (Beech, 2008), based on active agency and context (Watson, 2009). Thus, people can simultaneously identify and dis-identify with a particular identity (Beech et al., 2012) or experience anxieties between current and aspirational identities (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

Identity work thus tries to understand how identities are ‘worked on’ by social actors focusing on multiple “means by which individuals fashion immediately situated and longer-term understandings of their selves” (Brown, 2017, p. 297). A core aspect of “the process of identity work is therefore, identification – viewing and incorporating the essence of an identity target as self-defining” (Van Grinsven et al., 2020, p. 6). Research has shown that identity work is revealed, amongst others, through language (Brown, 2017). Family leaders, as narrators, make important statements about themselves and the organizations they lead, in particular when they discuss personal and organizational ethics. Such narratives are both “expressive and constitutive” of identities (Bardon et al., 2017, p. 943).

Notwithstanding religion’s continued importance in most societies, there is not enough understanding of the interaction between religion and organizations (Tracey, 2012) and “how religion fits into the theoretical landscape of business ethics” (Van Buren et al., 2019, p. 2). What we know is that religion can be a source of moral norms offering affective experiences and ethical authority (Lam & Hung, 2005) shaping executive (Delbecq, 1999) and strategic leadership (Phipps, 2012). Religion is thus likely to impact personal and organizational approaches to ethics

(Van Buren et al., 2019). Research on the actual effect of personal religiousness on business practices has however, resulted in ambiguous answers (see Calkins, 2000; Melé & Fontrodona, 2017; Weaver & Agle, 2002) with no clear association between high religiosity and high (or low) business ethics (Longenecker et al., 2004; Rashid & Ibrahim, 2008).

How religion, leadership, and business ethics feed into each other in family businesses is unexplored terrain (Kellermanns, 2013). One of the few studies in this field indicates that family influence plays a role in fostering religious/spiritual expression in the business (Paterson et al., 2013). This warrants further research.

### *Family business, ethics and values*

Family businesses are organizations where individuals related by family ties exert substantial influence, through ownership or through important management positions (Konig et al., 2013). This influence has financial and socio-emotional aspects (e.g. Cennamo et al., 2012) and functions as a conduit for family values shaping business ethics. Family business ethics, which we define as the system of moral principles that govern the family business, is an emerging field of scholarship that links founding family influence to business behaviours (e.g. Vazquez, 2018). The advances made so far lie in comparing the influence of values in family firms versus non-family firms (e.g. Duh et al., 2010) and recently also among different types of family businesses (e.g. Dou et al., 2018), suggesting that family ownership has an effect on an organization's (un)ethical behaviour (e.g. Ding et al., 2016; Van Gils et al., 2014).

Sorenson (2013, p. 117) positions that “values help members of social systems agree on what is important” and they “provide a basis for policies, practices, and expected social behavior”. The unique feature of family businesses is that business identity to a large extent is located in and

co-created through family values (Anglin et al., 2016) and the potential alignment of family and business values (Binz Astrachan et al., 2017), thus straddling multiple levels of analysis: individual, family and corporate. The family business literature has generally assumed that family values are relatively unambiguous and have a profound and lasting effect on the business (e.g. Bingham et al., 2011; García-Álvarez & López-Sintas, 2001; Yuan & Wu, 2018).

But how these family values come about and how they are related to business ethics is still largely undocumented. Scholars have noted that family business ethics research is theoretically fragmented (Binz Astrachan et al., 2017), and that identity theory could be a promising angle to advance it (Knapp et al., 2013; Vazquez, 2018). Following Sorenson (2013), we see a way forward in focusing on family leaders' narratives as these transmit values. It is precisely in how leaders present their organizations that we can witness the rise, evolution and articulation of values, thus capturing the underexplored boundary work between individual, family and corporate identities in family businesses. There is some agreement that family business leaders have a unique role in instilling ethical organizational principles (Sorenson, 2013). As argued by Zellweger et al. (2013, p. 231), two conditions underpin this: first, the family shapes the organizational culture, and secondly, family leaders "tie their family's identity to the identity of the firm". This identity overlap "creates a level of affect and concern for the firm and its perception in the public that is absent among other controlling actors" (ibid). This suggests that the identity work of the family business leader is crucial.

#### *Rhetorical identity work by family business leaders*

In summary, the identity work literature suggests that organizational identities are not historical fixtures but are constantly (re)authored by individuals in a social context (Brown, 2017; Watson,

2009; Winkler, 2018; Ybema et al., 2009), which is hitherto missing in the family business literature. The situation in family businesses where long-term family leaders, and their personal or family values, strongly impact business ethics (Zellweger et al., 2011), provides a unique setting, but family business scholars to date cannot clearly link family values to ethical business outcomes (Vazquez, 2018). The identity work perspective suggests another way forward: better understanding the process of articulating ethical identities, which can clarify the underpinning values and how they might evolve. We suggest religion is a compelling source of values and ethical identity (Van Buren et al., 2019) and, in line with family business research, we call for a focus on the family leader who has significant discretion (Carney, 2005). Taking our inspiration from the identity work literature, we argue that family leader narratives are important (ethical) identity carriers for organizations. By exploring how values are actively (re)authored through the identity work of a family business leader, we offer a novel theoretical angle to advance the family business ethics literature.

## **Methodology**

### *Research design and context*

We use a case study design as qualitative studies can achieve significantly greater depth and illuminate understudied mechanisms (Davis & Marquis, 2005) including (ethical) identity work by family business leaders. The single case study, which we employ here, is particularly suitable for exploring organizational change (Pettigrew, 1990). Our aim is to generalize our insights from one family business case into explanatory frameworks that can inform and re-direct family business ethics research.

Our case is the Malaysian YTL Group, established in 1955 by Yeoh Tiong Lay, an ethnic Chinese entrepreneur who passed away in 2017. From a small construction firm, YTL grew into one of Malaysia's largest conglomerates, with substantial investments abroad (2017 revenue: US\$ 3.4 billion). In 1988, the oldest son, Francis Yeoh, took over as managing director, and he has been the spokesperson for YTL ever since; he is also a prominent figure in Malaysia. YTL suits our research purpose as Francis Yeoh increasingly advocated YTL as an ethical family business, linking it to his strongly held Christian beliefs. He "ascribes the phenomenal success of his group to the blessings of God" and sees Christ as "his advisor" (Wong, 2008, p. 170).

#### *Data sources*

We used 89 speeches and 199 media excerpts by Francis Yeoh from 1993 until 2016. Covering over 20 years, the data set allowed us to track variation and evolution over time (Basque & Langley, 2018). Company representatives gave us a CD containing a set of speeches and media articles in 2010, but these are also available on the corporate website, from which we sourced more recent years. To contextualize Yeoh's communications, we read the father's autobiography "The Yeoh Tiong Lay Story", the annual reports, and books on the Malaysian historical economic context.

The use of (historical) narratives to investigate how business leaders "promote conceptions of identity likely to resonate with audiences" (Basque & Langley, 2018, p. 4) is well established in organizational identity research (Zundel et al., 2016; Anteby & Molnár, 2012); and recently also emerged in family business research (e.g. Sinha et al., 2019). We follow this tradition of rhetorical analysis and apply it to business ethics (see Werner, 2008). Our data do not represent *actual business behaviour*, but rather the narrated image the family business leader projects to the

outside world; this is precisely what we aim to explore. Hence, we cannot make statements on whether YTL actually behaved ethically; we shall return to this in our suggestions for future research.

### *Analytical strategies*

Before the actual analysis, we merged the speeches with those sections from the media material in which Francis Yeoh was directly quoted, making sure we only captured his narratives. All the excerpts were individually identifiable for source, date and location. The narratives displayed considerable variation (long/short speeches and quotes for national/international audiences on various topics) but generally contained rich details.

Our data analysis followed Bryman's (2008) strategies for qualitative research: selection, reduction, visualisation, explanation, and theoretical generalization. This was carried out in four stages. In stage one, which was exploratory, we used a basic thematic approach while reading through the data. Both authors separately generated a list of themes that projected the ethical identity of YTL. We converged on three core themes (i.e. selection) that represented sources of values explicitly linked to an ethical family business identity: religion (Christian identity); culture (ethnic Chinese family business identity); and sustainability (global corporate social responsibility identity).

In the second stage, we read through the data set again several times in order to highlight keywords for each theme. Keywords selected included 'faith' and 'God' for religion, 'ethnic', 'family', and 'China' for Chinese, and 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)', 'environment' and 'climate' for sustainability (i.e. reduction). We also ran a word frequency count, which illustrated significance and salience (see Anteby & Molnár, 2012 on quantifying qualitative data).

Religion came out strongest across all the files (1832 times), with the keyword ‘God’ being mentioned most frequently; followed by sustainability (407 times) with keywords ‘environment’ and ‘climate’ as most used; and Chinese (274 times) with ‘family’ as the highest scoring keyword. We concluded that religion was the most important source of identity.

In the third stage, we delved deeper into the content and context of the data using a narrative lens. When we tell stories we perform our (preferred) identities (Riessman, 1993) and thus we asked: ‘why was the story told that way’? Our data set, consisting of family leader ‘talk’, lent itself to such a critical inquiry. We first developed a descriptive chronological narrative of identity work and queried our data constantly on how the different identity sources arose, how they differed over time, and how they related to one another. When we placed the communications in the socio-economic context, it materialised that audience (business or non-business), location (Malaysia, regional, global) and moment in time (events in Malaysian history and in the family business) had a strong bearing on what family business identities were (de)emphasized.

In the fourth stage, we moved to an explanatory process (i.e. explanation). For instance, we asked why the ‘talk’ in the UK was so different from speeches given in Malaysia, why some underpinning values had synergies, while others were rarely mentioned side by side. This led to the labelling for varieties of value synergy from which we developed our theoretical contribution of different identity work modalities; double identity work, harmonized identity work and detached identity work (i.e. theoretical generalization; see Yin, 2009).

## **Findings**

Table 1 summarizes the presence and articulation of the three identities, some extracts from our database, and the narrative and contextual analysis (i.e. data visualisation).

“Table 1: please see appendix”

*Yeoh introduces religiously inspired values (1988-2003)*

To appreciate the impact of Francis Yeoh as YTL’s second leader, it is useful to briefly reflect on the role of the founder, his father Yeoh Tiong Lay, who referred to himself as a “businessman rather than a moralist”. In his autobiography he did not mention religion or Christianity but, as an ethnic Chinese, he displayed a strong passion for Chinese culture, education, hard work and honesty, and he placed great emphasis on his family, all of which are considered to be important Confucian values. The father did not (re)present his business as explicitly ethical, but in the epilogue of his self-published autobiography we found a reference to business ethics:

“Finally, my hope now is that later generations of the Yeoh family will continue to be nurtured with the good old Confucian (or universal) values, as well as a philosophy of life and work culture that will bring immense benefit unto themselves and the world at large.”

(The Yeoh Tiong Lay Story, 2003, p. 268)

Son Francis Yeoh (hereafter Yeoh) joined the company in 1978 after completing an engineering degree in London and took over as YTL’s managing director in 1988. Yeoh continued to reference ethnic Chinese family business values including hard work, the importance of education, trust in business, joint decision-making, and passing on family wealth through primogeniture (Table 1). The ethnic identity narrative emphasizes a ‘migrant’ background that is linked to entrepreneurship

and success. But the presence of ethnic Chinese family business identity in speeches and interviews fades over time, with peaks in 1994 and the early 2000s.

In 1994, Yeoh discussed his Chinese roots in a Boston Globe interview, which coincided with a book on Asia's ethnic Chinese tycoons, placing YTL in this category ("The whole construction industry in Malaysia came from Fujian"). In the early 2000s more direct references occur ("a Chinese enterprise is by definition a family business within the migrant tradition"). Also, we saw the Chinese legacy was often used to describe YTL's roots and more often outside Malaysia (Table 1 under context), coinciding with YTL's strategy to invest overseas (UK). This outward looking focus was coupled with an 'ethnic Chinese business success' narrative: "in the East, business is dominated by the Chinese enterprises - by definition family businesses. It is a collective effort passed from one generation to another" (2002 Forbes global CEO forum in Hong Kong).

These narratives need to be interpreted in a broader external context. YTL emerged in a predominantly Malay and Muslim country where Prime Minister Mahathir (1981-2003; re-elected in 2018) implemented policies to reduce the importance of the ethnic Chinese minority in business (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). "Chinese" family business values carried (partially) a negative connotation and were sometimes associated with cronyism (YTL had been accused of being close to Mahathir). In the global environment the opposite happened. The concept of a successful, pan-Asian "ethnic Chinese family enterprise" was increasingly popularized in media and academia (e.g. Gomez, 2012). This explains why the identity 'talk' where Yeoh identifies as (ethnic) Chinese is targeted at non-Malaysian business audiences (see Table 1).

Meanwhile, Yeoh introduced Christianity (religion) as a new type of identity for the YTL Group. Yeoh, as the first in many generations, converted to Christianity when he was a teenager.

He emphasizes concepts such as faith, care, love and stewardship in the speeches and links them to religion. “The prevailing ethos of our Forum will be a belief in the restorative powers of faith, hope and love” (Asian Global Leadership Forum, Malaysia, 2002).

If we look at the presence of religion in his narratives during this period, we note that regular business decisions were more and more expressed within a religious framework, thereby presenting YTL as a principled company (e.g. preference of long-term investments is linked to eternity, Table 1). This happened both inside and outside Malaysia – although inside Malaysia a bit less abundantly; and both for business and non-business audiences. The line between personal faith and the identity of the organization started to get blurred, as Yeoh’s personal faith became an integral part of the family business identity. Nearly all speeches contain at least one reference to God: “Most of all, I thank God for blessing our partnership” (Signing Ceremony, Malaysia, 2003).

This religious turn was internally driven by a passionately Christian family leader, but the external context mattered too. Similar to the ethnic Chinese family business identity, Christianity was associated with non-Muslim migrants in Malaysia. But charismatic Christianity grew exponentially in the wider Southeast Asian region (Koning & Dahles, 2009), especially among the ethnic Chinese business communities (Yeoh is thought to be a non-denominational Full Gospel Christian; in our database he mainly uses the label ‘Christian’). This peaked during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yeoh’s references to religion become more frequent from the early 2000s, when there was also more attention for the globalization of charismatic Christianity (Coleman, 2000; Robbins, 2004). We argue that Yeoh, with YTL now well-established in Malaysia and with a foothold abroad, became more confident in sharing his religious views. At the same time, there are occasions where his ethnic Chinese family business

and Christian values are expressed in a complementary manner, with Yeoh saying “the Chinese part of me” and “the Christian part of me” (see Table 3 below).

*Stewards of God's wealth (2004-2017)*

We saw that the “pan-Asian Chinese family business” phenomenon peaked in the early-2000s and find that Yeoh’s references to ethnic Chinese family business values as a moral compass for YTL decrease thereafter. In contrast to this, the religious identity is gaining more and more strength from 2004 onwards, with religion always mentioned. Often, biblical lessons or references are used to justify YTL as an ethical company doing the right things (“I have reminded time and again what Saint Augustine said “Without God we cannot, without us God will not””). All YTL employees were to master the “language of God” (see Table 1) and business success was associated with blessings. The increased focus on religion as an ethical framework is visible in several interviews, “If you believe in God and you understand the essence of God, you will have very good moral fibre” (Wealth Magazine, March 2008) and speeches:

“Honesty in Chinese business coupled with our Christian faith, enforces a strict code of behaviour within a moral and [philosophical] framework at the centre of which is the overarching virtue of trust.” (Kingston Guildhall, UK, 13 February 2004)

Sustainability, including social/environmental responsibility suddenly emerges as a prominent source with ethical implications in 2006 when Yeoh expresses the moral obligation to care for the planet (Table 1). This coincides with a worldwide trend (e.g. Al Gore’s “inconvenient truth”) and another internal family transition. Yeoh’s eldest daughter, Ruth, was instrumental in this, co-

writing an opinion piece on responsible innovation with her father in the Wall Street Journal in 2006; YTL also started publishing sustainability reports. The first mention of the word “climate” in the speeches occurs in 2007 when YTL launched an event called climate week in Kuala Lumpur, which also presented a book co-edited by his daughter, with Yeoh calling it an ethical responsibility and saying: “Sustainable development is a topic that is very close to my heart, thus it has been a core issue at YTL for many years now”.

In the early mentions, Yeoh links sustainability to the physical environment (e.g. green communities in property projects). As Table 1 shows, caring for the environment is literally presented as an ethical obligation (“The greater the success we are blessed with, the greater is our responsibility to share the goodness of God’s blessings”).

The “sustainability turn” also has to be interpreted in YTL’s above-mentioned internal transition from a Malaysian to a global company (over 50% of revenues were from outside Malaysia in 2017). Yeoh explicitly connects sustainability to YTL being *global*, for instance: “As a leading construction conglomerate in Asia, we are proud that YTL has long been in support of conservation and environmental protection” (Climate Change Week, Kuala Lumpur, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2008). This narrative appears usually in a specific context such as “Climate Week” or in a speech given at the Oslo Business for Peace Awards:

“Do more than adopt Corporate Social Responsibility for the sake of expediency and good PR. But grow it as part of the corporate DNA and culture. Ethical business and [commercial] profitability do not have to be mutually exclusive.” (Oslo, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

While 2007 and 2008 narratives related to sustainability predominantly featured climate change, in later years Yeoh also integrates corporate *social* responsibility, and links it to religion (“Helping the poor and the sick is more than corporate social responsibility or moral obligation. It is a biblical command which I obey diligently,” The Star, 2010) and climate change is associated with the Christian concept of stewardship of the earth. Indeed, it appears that religious identity becomes a “higher order” framework than “mere” sustainability with Yeoh viewing himself as a steward of God’s abundance.

“to have tried diligently as a steward of God’s goodness and resources, especially by being true to our Lord Jesus Christ’s higher calling to be a force for good in this very unforgiving world” (The Peak, 2014).

Table 2 shows the different sources and values underpinning identity work. Over the years, Yeoh’s religious values emerge as the most prominent source of identity in YTL while older sources of identity fade to the background (culture) and new sources of identity (sustainability) become absorbed in it (Table 3).

“Tables 2 & 3: please see appendix”

### **Discussion: Values, Identity Work, and Family Business Ethics**

What are the *sources* of family business ethics, or where do the values of founding family members, as visible guardians of the family business reputation who care about multiple goals, come from? Our findings indicate that family business ethics, as articulated by leaders, are multi-

layered, stemming from different sources, straddling the boundaries of personal, family and corporate identities. We noticed that Yeoh even instilled entirely new values into the family business that were not part of the founder's legacy. Some of those newly created values stemmed from a strong personal identity (e.g. religion), some tapped selectively into a family heritage (cultural identity as ethnic Chinese family business), whereas others appeared rooted in seasonal global and corporate business trends (sustainability). The mix-and-match of multiple layers of personal, family and corporate identity allowed for a richer repertory in terms of articulating YTL as an ethical organization. Theoretically, we suggest that the boundary between religious (personal/Christian), cultural (family/ethnic Chinese business), and sustainability (corporate/CSR) values (as sources of identity work) are dynamic and can blur, in particular when leaders come to symbolize the company and strongly influence strategic decision making (Phipps, 2012; Schultz & Hernes, 2013).

Within this tapestry, religious values (e.g. stewardship, caring, faith) played the most important role in determining and justifying ethical principles behind YTL's purpose and success, which was surprising given that Christianity was not part of the founder's heritage nor was it an obvious choice in the Malaysian context. This shows the merits of taking a family leader's perspective. The YTL case shows the power of projection and articulation of internal values by a leader, which are then linked to the organization and utilized to present the family business as ethical. In particular, our study supports those that illustrate a strong connection between personal spiritual beliefs of leaders and organizational culture (e.g. Fry and Cohen, 2009; Sorenson, 2013; Werner, 2008), which we believe is an even more prominent feature in family businesses due to the high levels of discretion that family leaders possess (Carney, 2005), and their long tenures and focus on more than financial goals (Le Breton Miller & Miller, 2006). This extends family business

studies that focus primarily on the individual level (Knapp et al., 2013) to the organizational level and illustrates how business leaders use rhetorical strategies to articulate (aspirational) ethical identities for their family businesses (Koning & Waistell, 2012), thus highlighting how multiple levels of analysis (personal, family, corporate) need to be combined to understand identity work in family businesses.

We also inquired how, through the lens of family leader communications, the ethical organizational identity evolved. It is well-established that narratives create identity and that narrative identities are (re)constituted over time (Somers, 1994) as the context changes. We argue that different identities can exist in parallel, may become integrated or stay more or less separate over time (due to different varieties of values synergy). All these findings send a strong message that the widely held belief that family businesses possess stable values affecting outcomes needs closer scrutiny; different leaders (internal) and their contexts (external) play an important role in deciding which identity to (de)emphasize when legitimizing the family business as ethical.

Our analysis of the *links* between the different identity sources through an investigation of the concurrence of different identities led to important discoveries. The strongest association came to the fore between religion (faith, goodness) and sustainability (e.g. environmental protection, care for society), as Yeoh's commitment to preserving the environment was directly linked to the ethical obligation to be "Stewards of God's Wealth". Stewardship is a strong concept in Christianity, and it affects how Christian family businesses owners relate to their companies (Werner, 2008). We also interpret our findings against the context of the rapid rise of charismatic Christianity in the region and globally (Vatikiotis 2005), which matched the international expansion of YTL in the mid-2000s. With YTLs growing global outreach, the sustainability-discourse in fact supports the firm's international reputation as an ethical global player. We

interpret this religious-sustainability relationship as *harmonized identity work* and we conclude that Yeoh's harmonizing identity work expressed the strongest moral identity for the family business in the most recent period.

Another pattern that evolved and which we label as *double identity work*, is religious values superseding ethnic Chinese family business values over time but not to the extent that the latter totally disappeared. The ethnic Chinese family business values (trust, honesty, hard work, migrant history linked to entrepreneurship) expressed a pan-Asian entrepreneurial phenomenon associated with success which proved important during YTLs internationalization phase. It is mainly used to address business and academic audiences outside Malaysia, while occasionally also using it domestically in a nationalist manner thus emphasizing YTL's connection with Malaysia.

The ethnic Chinese family business and sustainability values were rarely mentioned side by side, we interpreted this as *detached identity work*, and we explain this by the gradual disappearance of explicit ethnic Chinese family business values, and the sustainability narrative emerging more from the daughter and the global environment, with the CEO choosing to see it as part of his religious convictions under the header of the Christian concept of "stewardship" that matched with the prevailing trends in the area of sustainability.

The three identity work modalities (our first theoretical contribution), lend strong support to the notion that family business leaders influence business ethics (Sorenson, 2013), and we find that different identities can co-exist. Family leaders can amalgamate identities and change them over time, without necessarily merging them into one coherent identity. This is akin to the idea of identity work as simultaneously (dis)identifying (Beech et al., 2012) and we highlighted mechanisms of doing so. The new constructs emerging from this study can guide future research on identity work in family business ethics.

We then examined how family leaders rhetorically employ these identities. The articulation of family values, and the role of the family leader in it, has to be understood as relationally formed in a dialogue with audiences (Balmer et al., 2007; Christensen et al., 2013). This is important as the literature has not yet fully explored that the expression of family business values may be a process that develops in tandem with external factors (audience). Our most significant finding was the identification of a *pivotal moment* that came with a different type of narrative towards a new set of audiences: the reorientation of YTL as a global business. This crucial phase – roughly from 2002-2007 – saw a shift in how YTL’s identity was articulated during a time of internal growth, internationalization, and political changes in Malaysia. Many speeches and media interviews occur in the period 2002-2007, which may be connected to this pivot within YTL. The identification of turning points in identity narratives is relatively new in family business research, but it is consistent with advances in identity and business ethics research (e.g. Eubanks et al., 2012). Recently Sinha et al (2019) concluded based on a historical narrative analysis that family firms “(de/re)prioritize strategic guideposts”, thus creating new “imprints”. Together with our study, these recent research findings stress the need for a more fine-grained understanding of the role of family business leaders in connecting family values and business ethics in time and space.

Another important feature of the pivotal moment in YTL’s identity work was that it was purposeful, proactive and future-oriented, i.e. the CEO projected a desired identity by tapping selectively into family business values. Purposeful or calculative behaviour by family leaders is rarely studied (e.g. Labelle et al., 2018); and we find it has a strong relational dimension (e.g. domestic or international audience). This leads to another important finding, namely that identity work is not just about connecting the past to the present as a strategy of justifying family businesses as ethical. Rather, the articulation of ethical organizational identity was aspirational (cf.

Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) and *future-oriented*, projecting values that matched a desired organizational strategy. Therefore, our identity work lens illuminates how family leaders reposition the organization as an ethical business to prepare it for a desired setting and audience, which is - as far as we know- a new insight in the family business literature. The interplay of ‘internal’ (self) and ‘external’ (context/others) offers a new explanatory framework, moving beyond the traditional ‘inside-out’ view of family values (e.g. Yuan & Wu, 2018). Our work draws the attention of family business scholars to pivotal moments, with leaders re-orienting the ethical underpinnings of the family business to match their aspirational goals, highlighting the explanatory power of a present-future lens (our second contribution).

We also advance the family business literature on the role of religion (Kellermanns, 2013) showing that family business leaders can instil new religious values (e.g. stewardship) in family businesses which were not part of the founding principles. Our study thus highlights a blurred boundary between personal and organizational identities that is navigated through identity work (Knapp, et al., 2013), with religious beliefs leading to a re-framing the ethical foundations of the family business (third contribution).

An identity work approach therefore significantly advances family business ethics research and provides richer insights into the relationship between values and ethics where prior research remained fragmented (Binz Astrachan et al., 2017; Vazquez, 2018), neglecting relational and future-oriented dimensions. Taken together, our contributions highlight the relevance of incorporating identity work into the family business literature and provide new constructs and explanatory frameworks, thereby opening up avenues for further theoretical advancement.

## **Conclusion, Limitations and Further Research**

Our narrative analysis, exploring the external communications of the CEO of a large Malaysian family business, advances the family business ethics literature by incorporating an identity work approach. Out of three sources of identity (religion, culture, sustainability), Christian identity work emerged as the most influential – despite it not being part of the founder’s legacy. We find that personal beliefs shape articulations of the organization as ethical. We propose three new modalities of identity work (harmonized, double and detached identity work), that denote different underpinning value synergies (integrated, complementary and non-concurrent). We showed how identity work shifts and how the context (time, audience, location) played a role in updating the (re)presentations of the organization as ethical. We established that articulating a family business as ethical does not necessarily stem from stable historical family business values but that it is also relational (self-other) and aspirational (present-future), in particular during pivotal moments in family businesses.

Whereas our study investigated the *articulation* of family business ethics, more research on the link between rhetorical identity work and *actual* (non)ethical business behaviour is an important next step. We focused on an especially conducive setting for personal values to translate into organizational identity with a prominent, long-lasting, religiously inspired family business leader, leading to important theoretical advancements. But we recognize that not all family businesses share these features, so that our theoretical generalizations based on a single case study may not apply to all family businesses. In our case the family business leader has a strong, almost charismatic, position allowing his personal values to become epitome for the business; there is an extremely strong identity overlap between person and organization. We realize that there are many cases where leadership is more contested and where personal and organizational identities are distinct. We suggest scholars could explore the relationship between family business leadership

and the relegation of values into shared values in more depth. Further empirical work capturing different circumstances and outcomes can lead to a more comprehensive new theory on the unique aspects of identity work in family businesses.

The practical implications of our study are that family business leaders need not be imprisoned by historically embedded beliefs. Instead, they can tap into multiple sources of family business values/ethics that can be put to use rhetorically when circumstances call for it. The moral underpinnings of family businesses are based on strong values, but our study shows these are also flexible and not just connect the family business to the past, but also encourage it to aspire to a better future. The articulation of family business values is thus an important role of the leader in situating the family business in space and time, and it offers a way to bring together personal, family and corporate identities without necessarily fully integrating them.

Overall, our study shows that identity work has great potential for advancing family business ethics research, with this study providing a basis for future work.

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**Table 1: Articulation of YTL’s identity**

Time	Identity sources	Extracts speeches	Extracts Media	Narrative analysis (time, audience, location)	Context (internal, external)
1988-2003	Culture	Honesty in Chinese business is a strict code of behaviour within a moral and philosophical framework, at the center of which is the overarching virtue of trust. [...] Ours is a very different business culture – a Chinese enterprise is by definition a family business within the migrant tradition. (London Business School, UK, 28 <sup>th</sup> May 2003).	“[Yeoh’s] father drummed into him early what it takes to be successful and what it is to be Chinese: work harder than everybody else, get a good education, make your children proud.” (Boston Globe Magazine, April 17, 1994)	<i>Time:</i> Generally fading, revived in 1994 and selectively in early 2000s. More speeches and interviews around the end of this period.  <i>Audience:</i> Mostly business  <i>Location:</i> Mostly outside Malaysia.	<i>Internal:</i> YTL grows rapidly and goes global in 2002/3  <i>External:</i> pro-Malay policies; global popularization of “ethnic Chinese bamboo network”; Mahathir steps down in 2003  <b>Note: pivotal moment around 2003</b>
	Religion	“Wessex’s concession in perpetuity is the nearest thing to eternal life that squares with my faith.” (London Business School, UK, 28 <sup>th</sup> May 2003).	“We are only stewards of God’s wealth as what we have does not belong to us.” (Le Prestige, September 2001)	<i>Time:</i> Getting more and more prominent; explicit links to moral business obligations  <i>Audience:</i> non business and some business  <i>Location:</i> More outside Malaysia	<i>External:</i> Rise of charismatic Christianity  <i>Internal:</i> YTL prominent and confident in Malaysia, strong ties to Mahathir regime
	Sustainability	Not prominent	Not prominent	-	<i>External:</i> Limited attention in Asia for this theme
2004-present	Culture	You need to know where I am coming from – an archetypal Chinese family business which began life as a modest construction company. (Kingston, UK, 13 February 2004)	Not prominent	<i>Time:</i> Peaks early 2000s, fades thereafter.  <i>Audience:</i> Mainly business and academic audiences.  <i>Location:</i> Mainly overseas, global audiences.	<i>External:</i> Hype on overseas Chinese entrepreneurship recedes
	Religion	“All of us must master the Language of God. The Language of God is understood in terms of integrity, Godly stewardship of assets, and diligence. This means we value honesty, we act transparently” (National Quemoy University,	“The best business advice I’ve received came from God’s scriptures.” Wall Street Journal, May 25, 2009	<i>Time:</i> Becomes dominant.  <i>Audience:</i> pervades all communications  <i>Location:</i> all, especially abroad.	<i>External:</i> Asian born-again Christians become powerful community, especially among ethnic Chinese

		Kinmen, Taiwan, 17 <sup>th</sup> October 2011).			
	Sustainability	“YTL strongly believes that environmental protection is not only a moral issue, but an ethical responsibility.” (Climate Change Week, Kuala Lumpur, 11 <sup>th</sup> April 2008).	"Climate change has emerged as a challenge faced by every citizen in the world; we are currently at a crossroads, and if we don't face it now, it will be at a dire cost to ourselves, to the environment and to the health of future generations,” The Edge, December 1, 2008.	<i>Time:</i> Not present until 2006, peaks in 2008. Early focus on environment, later includes social issues.  <i>Audience:</i> Mostly specialised audiences.  <i>Location:</i> All	<i>External:</i> Corporate social responsibility a theme of increasing importance for multinationals.  <i>Internal:</i> Yeoh’s daughter Ruth gains more influence.

**Table 2: Sources and underpinning values of identity work**

Source	Underpinning values	Identity	Level
Religion	Stewardship, Care, Faith	Christian identity	Personal
Culture	Hard work, Trust, Honesty	Ethnic Chinese Family (Business) identity	Family
Sustainability	Care for environment and society	(Global) Corporate Social Responsibility identity	Corporate

**Table 3: Identity work modalities**

Identities	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation	Theoretical generalization
<i>Christian and ethnic Chinese family business identity</i>	In the East business is dominated by the Chinese enterprises-by definition family businesses. It is a collective effort passed from one generation to another. These businesses are indeed family fortresses and therefore leaves very little room for self-indulgence. This philosophy fits well with my Christian faith as I feel I am just a steward of God’s wealth. So when I think of investing wealth it is not about private or personal wealth so the Chinese part of me mandates that I reinvest to expand the business for future generations, it’s a case of noblesse oblige. The Christian part of me mandates that I reinvest the wealth for the betterment of life and also for the preservation of culture, it’s a case of the heart. (Forbes	<i>Complementary</i>  Values exist side by side, although there is tension. Both identities are accommodated in certain periods (Table 1)	<i>Double identity work</i>  Core religious values (stewardship, care, faith) and core ethnic Chinese family business values (trust, honesty, hard work) are complementary and articulated at the same time, without being integrated

	Global CEO conference, Hong Kong 25 <sup>th</sup> September 2002)		
<i>Christian and CSR</i>	I have reminded time and again what Saint Augustine said “Without God we cannot, without us God will not”. So let us all raise our own awareness about the state of our world, and work together towards a more sustainable future, our future generation is counting on us to do something! May God bless you in your endeavours in this area. (Premiere of “The 11 <sup>th</sup> Hour, Kuala Lumpur, 29 <sup>th</sup> April 2008)	<i>Integrated</i>  Value synergy occurs via ‘stewardship’ and ‘care’ in both. These identities have moved towards each other over time (Table 1)	<i>Harmonized identity work</i>  Core religious values (stewardship, caring, faith) and core sustainability values (care for environment and society) are mentioned together and explicitly integrated
<i>Ethnic Chinese family business and CSR</i>	No examples found where these identities were expressed concurrently	<i>Non-concurrent</i>  Values reflect different priorities: Building the family business (internal) versus protecting the environment (external). The focus shifted from internal to external over time (Table 1).	<i>Detached identity work</i>  Core ethnic Chinese family business values (trust, honesty, hard work) and core sustainability values (care for environment and society) are not occurring together