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Exploring the Role of Religious Rituals in Family Firm Identity Work: An Ethnographic Study

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Summary:

Identity work, which refers to the range of activities individuals undertake to create and maintain identities that align with their self-concepts, has long been a focus in organizational studies. Family firms, which are heavily laden with beliefs, emotions and values, provide a unique context to investigate identity work. Religious beliefs of founders and other family members may serve as a key source of family firm identity. This research explores how faith-led family firms engage in identity work through religious rituals. Through ethnographic research on a family firm in the Anatolian region of Turkey, the study reveals that religious rituals facilitate collective interaction and a sense of equality and shared understanding. Hence, this study aims to contribute to the literature on identity work in family firms and integrate religious rituals into a family firm context.

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Introduction

Identity work has long been a key area of organizational studies (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006; Brown, 2015, 2017, 2022; Winkler, 2018). Identity work, defined as the “range of activities individuals (or collectives) engage to create and sustain identities that are congruent with and supportive of self-concepts” (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1348), is a socially constructed process (Ybema *et al.*, 2009) through which “individuals construe their selves in relation to their organizations” (Brown, 2017, p. 296). This conceptualization highlights that individuals engage in identity work to align their personal identities with the organizational identities to which they belong.

Family firms not only represent the predominant form of business organization in the world in contemporary economies (Sharma *et al.*, 2012), but historically they have been a very important form of business organization (Colli, 2012). Family firms thus provide novel contexts to investigate identity work due to the co-existence of the family and business systems, each “heavily laden with beliefs, emotions, values, understandings, and expectations” (Whetten *et al.*, 2014, p. 480). Due to this co-existence, family firms develop distinct identities (Zellweger *et al.*, 2010, 2013). Owners’ religious beliefs, in particular, may have a strong impact on how they shape and maintain their firms’ identity (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Abdelgawad and Zahra, 2020). Yet, we still do not have a clear understanding of how these firms engage in identity work through religious rituals. Given that rituals form the basis for a “social action in which a group’s values and identity are publicly demonstrated or enacted in a stylized manner, within the context of a specific occasion or event” (Islam and Zyphur, 2009, p. 116), we turn our focus on religious rituals in family firms and ask: *How do faith-led family firms engage in identity work through religious rituals?*

Theoretical Framework

Identity Work in Family Firms

Identity work is a crucial aspect of family firms, as it helps to maintain and enhance the unique identity of these businesses. Bettinelli *et al.* (2022) present an integrative framework that highlights the key aspects of identity in family firms. They propose that identity in these businesses is a dynamic construct that evolves through the interplay of internal and external factors.

Most relevant to our study is the research on identity work that centers ethics and values in family firms. Dieleman and Koning (2020) focus on how family businesses articulate their values through identity work. They propose a framework that highlights the role of both family and non-family members in this process and how they jointly shape the firm's ethical values. Similarly, Reck *et al.* (2021) examine the role of employee identification in ethical decision-making in family firms. They argue that employees' identification with the firm's identity and values can positively influence their ethical decision-making, particularly in situations that involve moral dilemmas. Nevertheless, the influence of rituals on identity work in family firms remains underexplored and warrants further investigation.

Rituals in Family Firms

Rituals play a significant role in family firms as they help to shape the family's identity and provide a sense of continuity across generations. Focusing on the role of individual-level influences on family firm outcomes, Lumpkin *et al.* (2008) found that family orientation -

which includes the use of family rituals - has a positive effect on family firm performance. Matherne *et al.* (2017) similarly found that family identification, which is strengthened through shared rituals, plays a key role in legitimizing and reinforcing family firm identity. Religious rituals have also been found to be an important component of family firm culture. Barbera *et al.* (2020) develop a process model of religious value transmission in family firms and argue that shared religious rituals can lead to a greater sense of unity and cohesion within the family, which can ultimately benefit the firm. Mitchell *et al.* (2013) further support this idea by exploring the relationship between spiritual identity, stakeholder attributes and workplace spirituality in family businesses. However, we still lack a systematic understanding of how religious rituals shape and help maintain family firm religious identity.

Data and Methods

Research Context and Research Design

We conducted this study in the Anatolian part of Turkey, which presents a theoretically intriguing context to investigate the role of religious rituals in family firm identity work for two main reasons. First, the region has a long and rich cultural heritage that has evolved over thousands of years. This heritage embraces a plethora of diverse cultural and religious practices, including rituals (Verhoeven, 2002). Second, family businesses in this area are profoundly anchored in Islamic traditions (Demir et al., 2004), which naturally leads to the incorporation of religious rituals into their current practices.

To understand the role of rituals in identity work within family firms, we conducted an ethnographic study. A furniture manufacturer, FurnishCorp², was selected as an appropriate focal organization owing to the organization's embeddedness in the cultural and religious fabric of Anatolia. FurnishCorp, a second-generation family firm, was established in central Turkey in the early 1950s. Since its inception, the family has been deeply rooted in the furniture industry. Specializing in TV stands, FurnishCorp has emerged as a market leader and recently diversified into home furniture. By 2022, the company employed over 400 individuals, encompassing both family and non-family members. Within the organization, nine family members contribute to its operations, with three belonging to one household and six to another. Ownership and control of the company are equally distributed among family members, granting each an equal share and voting rights. Not publicly listed, FurnishCorp boasts a significant global presence, exporting products to more than 60 countries. During our first visit to this company, we observed that the rituals, which were religious in nature, seemed deeply ingrained in the firm's identity, encompassing traditional practices as well as collective gatherings and moments of reflection. This observation piqued our interest in the relationship between religious rituals and identity work. We thus immersed ourselves in FurnishCorp, participating in rituals and engaging with members, to collect rich data encompassing not only the rituals but also the meanings and significance attached to them by participants, thereby shedding light on how these rituals contribute to identity work within the family firm.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data from multiple sources. First, we engaged in participant observation during multiple fieldwork trips and took detailed notes that captured events, interactions, and reflections. This effort resulted in over 130 single-spaced pages of field notes. Second, we conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of participants, including family members in managerial roles and non-family members in various positions. These

² Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain anonymity.

interviews, lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours. They aimed to generate insights into the perspectives and interpretations of the rituals and their role in identity work. Third, we collected visual data, including photographs and short videos, to augment the textual data and provide a richer understanding of the physical and social context of the rituals.

To analyse these data, we followed the strategies outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), which include data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. We coded, categorized, and grouped the data thematically for data reduction. Following this process, we identified three central rituals at FurnishCorp: (1) congregational prayers; (2) iftar dinners during Ramadan; and (3) religious sermons and passages recited during breaks. We then organized the data into structured formats such as vignettes, allowing us to discern patterns and relations. Finally, we interpreted the patterns and explained the mechanisms regarding the role of religious rituals in identity work within the family firm. Throughout this process, we aimed to balance empirical grounding with theoretical engagement to ensure rigor and relevance. This methodological approach, blending rich ethnographic data with a systematic analysis, enables us to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on identity work, especially regarding religious rituals in family firms.

Preliminary Findings

FurnishCorp employ two key mechanisms to construct and maintain its religious identity through religious rituals, which are summarized in Table 1. The table includes illustrative data and vignettes to aid with visualisation.

Insert Table 1 about here

Religious Rituals as a Means for Collective Interaction

At FurnishCorp, family members have identified their family firm as a religious one. According to a family member manager, "*We are a religious family firm*" (Interview with Production Manager). Despite a homogenous context, with the majority of individuals affiliated with the same religion and living in accordance with Islamic principles, the family members utilize rituals to promote collective interaction. For instance, we observed that congregational prayers were a common ritual at FurnishCorp (see Photo 1 in the appendix). The family members consistently emphasized the importance of this type of prayer in the company.

We've got a huge prayer room in our company where we all get together and do our daily prayers. It's a big deal around here, you know. Prophet Mohammad once said it's better to pray together than alone, and that you'll get more spiritual rewards that way, like your prayers being answered and your sins forgiven. But it's not just about that - it helps us all get to know each other better, and we feel more connected as a team. That's what makes this company great! (Interview with Export Manager)

Furthermore, the company owners organize *iftar* dinners for their employees and their families, often served in the garden of the factory depending on the season and weather (see Photo 2 in the appendix). A non-family technician emphasized the connective role of this ritual:

I love coming here with my family. It's great to show them where I work and to introduce them to my bosses and co-workers. I pretty much live at this factory, so it's like a second home to me. When I'm back at my real home, I'm always talking about my work buddies and the stuff we're doing here. But the best part is that my wife and my colleagues' wives are starting to become good friends. It's really cool to see that happening. (Interview with a Technician)

FurnishCorp also utilizes a sound system in its manufacturing area to broadcast religious sermons and chants on selected topics, such as the significance of brotherhood and diligence in Islam, especially on certain days like Fridays. A non-family line manager highlighted the importance of these religious sermons in fostering synergy and interaction among people at FurnishCorp.

On Fridays, we get a bit of a longer lunch break to chill out. And you know what? Sometimes, our bosses join us to listen to religious sermons. Mr. Ali, the production manager, likes to read some passages from books or give us a talk. I think it's really great because it keeps us all pumped up and ready to go. And you can feel the brotherhood and good vibes flowing between everyone in the company during those times. It's like we're all part of one big family! (Interview with a Line Manager)

Through these rituals, family and non-family members come together in a non-business activity that is of significance to them all as Muslims.

Religious Rituals as a Means for Equality

Consistent with FurnishCorp's objective of cultivating a collective identity, the company's members recognize the importance of fostering a sense of equality and shared understanding. They believe that religious rituals performed within the company can facilitate this process. In Islam, certain prayers, such as Friday and funeral prayers, are obligatory to be performed in congregation. During our fieldwork, we observed family members stood in the back rows during Friday prayers. This practice reflects the Islamic belief that all Muslims are equal in the eyes of God. After the prayer, we probed further and the production manager, who was a family member, explained how congregational prayers inside the company provide a space where everyone is equal, regardless of their position in the company. The manager stated:

This room [prayer room] does not allow hierarchical differences. Everyone in this room has the same rights and responsibilities in the eyes of God. To further reflect this, family members usually perform the prayers on back rows.

Notably, a non-family member was given a leading role as the *imam* and recited the sermon during the prayer.

The sense of equality and shared understanding is further supported through the practice of congregational prayers inside FurnishCorp. According to the production manager, “*this ritual underscores the idea of equality as one employee, who is typically a non-family member and has memorized the Quran, acts as the imam, while the rest of the congregation, including family members, follow his actions and movements during the prayer.*” As the production manager explains, “*this practice always reminds him of the fact that only God knows who is superior to others.*” A non-family employee, who typically acts as the imam, further emphasizes the unifying role of congregational prayers inside the company, stating that “*he feels a strong sense of synergy and brotherhood among people inside the firm when performing prayers together.*” Thus, congregational prayers facilitate the sense of equality,

which in turn contributes to a collective family firm identity, where non-family members feel like family-members within the company.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research explores the role of religious rituals as a form of identity work in family firms. Presenting original findings from primary ethnographic research, this paper aims to contribute to the literature on identity work in family firms (e.g. Dieleman and Koning, 2020; Reck *et al.*, 2021) by proposing two mechanisms by which (religious) rituals construct religious identity: as a way of engaging in collective interaction, and as a way of promoting equality within the firm. This paper will also contribute to the literature on rituals in family firms (e.g. Mitchell *et al.*, 2013; Lumpkin *et al.*, 2008) by providing a systematic understanding of the role of religious rituals in family firms.

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Appendix

Table 1. Family Firm Identity Work at FurnishCorp through Religious Rituals

Mechanism	Illustrative Data (Rituals in play)
Religious Rituals as a Means for Collective Interaction	<i>"We're really careful about doing our congregational prayers. You probably know that Prophet Mohammad told us it's way better to pray together than alone because we'll get all kinds of good stuff like our prayers answered and our sins forgiven. Plus, it helps us bond and feel close to each other in the workplace."</i> (Interview with General Manager) (congregational prayers performed within the company) <i>"We're making money so we can give more to charity and help out more people who need it. Ramadan is super important to us Muslims, and it's the perfect time to share what we have with others. There's this saying from the prophet Muhammad that goes "eat together and not separately, for the blessing is associated with the company." We don't just care about our own families, but we also care about our employees and their families. This dinner we're having shows that we're all one big family here!"</i> (Interview with Purchasing Manager) (iftar dinners held within the company during the month of Ramadan) The company management broadcasts religious sermons and chants on selected topics, such as the significance of brotherhood and hard work in Islam, on specific days, including Fridays. Additionally, an employee's family member delivers an informal talk to the workers during the weekly lunch break. The company management believes that these talks and sermons help to alleviate the pressures of working in a demanding production environment. During one of these informal talks, the production manager shared passages from a Hadith book, which chronicles the prophet Muhammad's words and deeds, with the employees while they ate their lunch. He selectively read sections that underscored the importance of togetherness, such as <i>"Stay with al-Jama'ah [congregation] and stay away from divisions. This is because Satan is with one individual but stays away from two."</i> After reading the Hadith, he stated that <i>"the message was applicable to their business as well and encouraged everyone to help one another since they were all working together."</i> (Observation) (religious sermons and passages recited during rest time and lunch breaks)
Religious Rituals as a Means for Equality	At FurnishCorp, the company owners place great importance on the annual Iftar dinners held in the factory garden during Ramadan. These dinners are seen as opportunities for sharing and symbols of unity and togetherness. Both family and non-family members, along with their families, come together to socialize through these dinners. The dinner we observed started with a Quran recitation, believed to increase the divine gift. Family members did not sit separately, but instead sat with non-family members and their families. This was done to create a sense of belonging to a large family and promote equality among participants. By eating the same meal on the same table with their employees, family members showed an effort to eliminate the structural hierarchies that exist within the company. The dinner was accompanied by mystical Sufi music, creating a relaxing atmosphere. At the end of the dinner, participants collectively asked for the blessing, led by a family member. The chairman gave a closing speech emphasizing the importance of being a large family with their employees while pointing out the company's history and success. This demonstrates the importance of maintaining a sustainable family firm. One non-family member expressed their happiness about this ritual, saying that <i>"they were proud to do iftar together with their colleagues and that their family would be proud of their job."</i> Another non-family member, a technician, explained that <i>"if their families were happy, they would be happier and work harder for the company."</i> The general manager, a family member, also stated that <i>"such events made employees feel equal and closer to the company and to each other and, which is essential as they are doing the actual work."</i> These extracts demonstrate the positive effects of such collective rituals on maintaining religious family firm identity. At FurnishCorp, the company's emphasis on togetherness and unity through rituals such as the Iftar dinners shows a commitment to maintaining a sustainable and a religious family firm. These events are an opportunity for both family and non-family members to come together and socialize, promoting a sense of belonging and equality among all participants. (Observation) (iftar dinners held within the company during the month of Ramadan)

Photo 1: A congregational prayer at FurnishCorp



Photo 2: An iftar dinner held in the garden of FurnishCorp



Photo 3: An informal talk to employees during the lunch break at FurnishCorp

