

WHY DO FAMILY BUSINESSES ENGAGE IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES? MOTIVATIONS, VALUES, AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN POLAND AND GERMANY

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Purpose: The purpose of article is to find the reasons and motivations behind the social engagement of family businesses, with particular emphasis on the cultural contexts of Poland and Germany.

Design/methodology/approach: A mixed methods strategy was used. Empirical data from qualitative and quantitative research was used to identify the impact of cultural, institutional, resource, and relational factors on family businesses' decisions regarding pro-social activities.

Findings: The results indicate clear differences between the countries: in Poland, value-based motivations dominate - family values, traditions, and the need to build local relationships - while in Germany, instrumental and institutional motivations play a key role, related to responding to stakeholder expectations and complying with regulations.

Research limitations/implications: The study is exploratory in nature and does not allow for the generalization of results to the entire population of family businesses in both countries. Limitations also result from recruitment difficulties and differences in the availability of registers.

Practical implications: The results emphasize the need to take into account the specific nature of family businesses when designing support policies.

Social implications: The findings highlight that the social engagement of family businesses strengthens local communities by fostering trust, reciprocity, and long-term relationships, which may improve overall quality of life and social cohesion. Moreover, the study suggests that tailored CSR policies acknowledging cultural differences could guide both public policy and industry practice, encouraging more context-sensitive and sustainable approaches to corporate social responsibility.

Originality/value: The article contributes to the literature by developing a typology of motivations for social engagement and highlighting cultural differences in the perception of corporate social responsibility among family businesses.

Keywords: family businesses, social engagement, motivations, CSR, social capital.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Family businesses, which constitute a significant part of the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector in many countries, are distinguished by their specific management structure and strong family ties, which imply a long-term approach to business. As a result, they play a unique role in the socio-economic system, combining an economic function with a strongly emphasized social role.

Family businesses are increasingly involved in initiatives aimed at the well-being of local communities, including support for education, culture, sports, and environmental protection. Unlike corporate CSR programs, this involvement in family businesses is often personal, deeply rooted in family values and traditions.

Previous research on socially responsible family businesses has focused mainly on individual dimensions of motivation, such as the protection of socio-emotional wealth (SEW) (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007), institutional pressure (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983), or resource availability (Barney, 1991). Other authors (Bromiley, Rau, 2014; Miller et al., 2008) have emphasized the role of routines, practices, and organizational culture as sources of competitive advantage. However, there is a lack of studies that integrate these approaches in a cross-cultural perspective, particularly comparisons of family business motivations in different countries of Central and Western Europe. This research gap justifies the need for comparative studies that show how different cultural, institutional, and resource contexts influence decisions to engage in pro-social activities.

The aim of this article is to examine the motivations and cultural, institutional, and resource conditions that lead family businesses in Poland and Germany to engage in social activities. The study has both theoretical significance – by integrating the SEW, institutional, RBV, and PBV perspectives – and practical importance, as it provides insights into how public support and CSR strategies can be tailored to the specific characteristics of family businesses.

In order to address the stated objective, a set of research hypotheses was formulated to structure the analytical framework and provide a basis for the empirical validation of the underlying theoretical assumptions:

- H1. The motivations of family businesses for social engagement are multidimensional and cannot be explained within a single theoretical approach.
- H2. In Poland, identity-based and relational motivations dominate, rooted in family values and the local socio-cultural context.
- H3. In Germany, institutional and instrumental motivations play a greater role, linked to regulatory pressure and stakeholder expectations.

These hypotheses were subsequently elaborated into specific research questions, designed to operationalize the study and to direct the course of the empirical investigation:

RQ1. What are the main motivations of family businesses to engage in pro-social activities?

RQ2. How do the cultural and institutional contexts of Poland and Germany differentiate these motivations?

RQ3. How do resource availability and organizational practices influence the scope and forms of CSR in family businesses?

The novelty of this study lies in integrating theoretical perspectives (SEW, institutional theory, RBV, PBV) into a multidimensional model of motivations and in applying a comparative perspective that takes into account not only national differences but also potential regional contexts.

The structure of the article is as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background, including the main approaches explaining family business motivations for CSR. Section 3 describes the research methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses them in relation to the literature, and Section 6 formulates theoretical and practical conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

The analysis of the motives for social engagement of family businesses requires reference to several well-established theoretical concepts that form the basis for the study of family businesses in the literature, including the theory of socio-emotional wealth (SEW), institutional theory, resource-based theory (RBV), and the practice-based view (PBV) approach (PBV). Each of these approaches contributes a different dimension to explaining the motivations and mechanisms of engagement.

2.1. Social-Emotional Wealth (SEW) theory

According to the SEW concept (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007), decisions in family businesses are not limited to economic criteria, but are also motivated by the need to protect socio-emotional resources such as reputation, heritage, company identity, and intergenerational relationships. In the context of social activities, this theory interprets the involvement of companies as an expression of concern for maintaining their reputation, loyalty to the local community, and the continuation of family philanthropic traditions.

This approach is particularly relevant for countries with strong local and family traditions, such as Poland, where social engagement can be culturally rooted and go beyond economic benefits, even with limited resources.

2.2. Institutional theory

Institutional theory (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983) suggests that organizational behavior is shaped by external pressures such as legal regulations, industry norms, and stakeholder expectations. In this context, the social responsibility of family businesses can be seen as a way of legitimizing their activities - adapting to CSR standards and market requirements.

In countries with a developed regulatory system, such as Germany, this theory explains the formalization of social strategies, ESG reporting, and cooperation with non-governmental organizations as an expression of professionalization and compliance with institutional norms.

2.3. Resource-based view (RBV)

The resource-based perspective (Barney, 1991) refers to competitive advantage based on a company's unique resources – material, human, organizational, and reputational. In the context of social engagement, this means that family businesses with greater resources are able to implement more complex and long-term socially responsible activities.

Empirical data confirm that larger, often multigenerational companies invest in lasting partnerships and sustainable development initiatives that distinguish them from smaller companies with limited financial and organizational capabilities.

2.4. Practice-Based View

The practice-based view (Bromiley, Rau, 2014) draws attention to routine, historically conditioned patterns of action embedded in organizational contexts. In family businesses, many pro-social activities do not result from formal strategies, but from practices passed down from generation to generation and adapted to local conditions.

Such practices, which persist as "proven methods", can be a significant source of competitive advantage due to their difficulty to imitate and their strong roots in the organizational culture.

2.5. Integration of approaches

An approach that integrates SEW, institutional, resource-based, and PBV theories provides a comprehensive explanation of the motivations for social engagement in family businesses as a complex, multi-factor phenomenon. This integration takes into account identity motives and family values, institutional pressure, resource availability, and established organizational practices.

This approach indicates that family values can initiate intentions to act, institutional pressure can impose norms and expectations, available resources can ensure feasibility and scale, and established organizational practices can create repeatable patterns of action. Furthermore, integration allows us to describe the temporal dynamics of engagement, e.g., the evolution of motivation along with generational or economic changes.

Another strength of the integrative approach is its ability to explain cultural and institutional differences between Poland and Germany and to predict which forms of engagement will be more durable and resistant to organizational change.

In summary, the proposed integration provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the social responsibility of family businesses, taking into account the complexity of their motivations and the conditions of their activities.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Methodological assumptions

The essence of the study was to understand the motivations and conditions for the social engagement of family businesses in two different cultural contexts: Poland and Germany. An exploratory approach was adopted, which allows for the identification of decision-making and cultural mechanisms that are insufficiently described in the literature. A mixed methods strategy was used, combining qualitative case analysis with quantitative analysis of survey data. This approach allowed for an in-depth interpretation of the phenomenon in its natural context, while estimating statistical relationships in a large research sample.

3.2. Sample selection criteria

Companies meeting two key criteria were selected for the study: (1) formal registration as private companies, independent of external capital, and (2) control and management by family members, with at least one generation involved in operational or strategic activities. The selection of companies was carried out using a purposive and snowball sampling method, utilizing business networks, chambers of commerce, and organizations supporting family businesses in both countries.

In the quantitative part, 73 companies (57 from Poland, 16 from Germany) were surveyed, diverse in terms of size (micro, small, medium) and industry (manufacturing, services, trade, agriculture), which translated into the representativeness of the SME sector. In the qualitative study, 24 in-depth individual interviews were conducted with owners or members of families managing companies (15 in Poland, 9 in Germany).

3.3. Research tools

The qualitative part used a semi-structured interview scenario, including questions about the history and values of the company, relations with the local community, experiences with pro-social activities, and the perception of the role of the company in the social environment.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents, transcribed, and analyzed with the support of dedicated qualitative data analysis software.

The quantitative part was carried out using a survey questionnaire containing closed and semi-open questions concerning, among other things, the scope and forms of social activities, the motives for undertaking them (values, reputation, peer pressure, public incentives), the nature of relations with social partners, and the level of formalization and available organizational resources.

3.4. Analytical procedures

Qualitative data were subjected to thematic content analysis, identifying recurring patterns and motivational mechanisms. Coding based on an iterative approach by two independent researchers increased the accuracy and reliability of the results. On this basis, a preliminary typology of motivations and links between values and styles of engagement was formulated.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics, Student's t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, and correspondence and cluster analysis to identify patterns of prosocial behavior. In addition, cross-country comparative analyses were used to account for institutional and cultural differences.

3.5. Limitations of the study

The study is exploratory in nature and does not allow for the generalization of results to the entire population of family businesses in both countries. The German sample was particularly limited in the quantitative part, which was due to recruitment difficulties and differences in the availability of registers. In addition, the self-identification of companies as family businesses may introduce subjective distortions, as may the varying levels of formalization of prosocial activities.

An additional limitation of the study is the treatment of Poland and Germany as homogeneous units, while regional differences (e.g., East and West Germany, rural and urban Poland) may significantly affect family firms' motivations. Considering these subnational contexts could provide a more comprehensive picture of motivational diversity.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a multidimensional picture of the phenomenon and the formulation of model conclusions that can serve as a basis for further, in-depth research.

4. Research results

4.1. Motives for pro-social engagement – a comparative approach

The analysis of the results showed that family businesses in Poland and Germany undertake pro-social activities based on different motives, which can be classified into four main categories: value-based, instrumental, institutional, and relational. All types of motivation were present in both countries, but the intensity of their impact and their links to the organizational structure differed significantly.

In Polish companies, value-based motives dominated, referring to family traditions of helping others, a belief in moral obligation, and strong local roots. Pro-social activities were seen as a natural extension of the company's identity, which was personally recognizable in the local community. These motivations were particularly strong in companies with a long history, operating on a succession basis.

In German companies, instrumental and institutional motives played a more important role. Social activities were part of professional CSR strategies, linked to HR and marketing activities. Undertaking social initiatives was largely a response to stakeholder expectations, industry pressure, and legal and environmental requirements. Family values, although present, were subordinated to rationalization and adaptation to the environment.

4.2. Relationships between motivations and company characteristics

Analyses have shown significant correlations between the type of motivation and the characteristics of the company (Table 1). Smaller and first-generation companies are more likely to declare value-based and relational motivations, while larger, multi-generational companies show instrumental and institutional motivations. Having a formal CSR strategy and reporting practices correlates with greater motivational diversity, which indicates the professionalization of social activity.

Table 1.

Relationship between type of motivation and company characteristics (N = 73)

Company characteristics	Dominant type of motivation	Conclusions
Microenterprises	value-based, relational	Strong role of personal relationships, lack of formalization
Small and medium-sized companies	Instrumental, institutional	Greater resources → more formal CSR activities
First-generation companies	value-based	No CSR strategy, spontaneous actions
Second+ generation companies	Hybrid, strategic combination	Integration of values with professionalization of activities

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on primary data.

An interesting phenomenon is the emergence of so-called "adaptive motivation", which occurs in companies undergoing generational transformation. In such cases, the new generation of owners transforms family motives into more formal structures, integrating them with a modern approach to management. This is often a process of hybridization - combining emotional involvement with rational analysis of results.

4.3. Cultural differences in pro-social narratives

The narratives of business owners in Poland and Germany differed significantly in style and content (Table 2).

Table 2.

Differences in the understanding of corporate social responsibility

Country	Dominant style	Key features
Poland	Personal, emotional	References to family, locality, community
Germany	Formal, strategic	References to procedures, standards, regulations

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on primary data.

In Poland, the tone was predominantly personal, emotional, and based on local relationships and community values. Owners emphasized their specific responsibility towards the local community and their personal involvement. In Germany, the narratives were more formalized and referred to procedures, CSR policies, and compliance with regulations, which were treated as standard elements of business strategy and image building.

Quantitative data confirmed these differences: in Poland, personal, emotional stories based on relationships with specific individuals or local institutions predominated. Business owners emphasized that they "know who they are helping", "are part of this community", and "it is not appropriate to be indifferent".

In Germany, the narratives were more formalized, referring to CSR strategies, public-private partnerships, and compliance with ESG policies. Respondents spoke of "social responsibility as a standard" and "sustainable investments in the organization's image". Accordingly, the results lend empirical support to Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, although further research is needed to confirm these relationships across broader samples.

4.4. Typology of pro-social motivations of family businesses

Based on qualitative and quantitative data, four types of motivation for engagement were formulated (Table 3):

1. **Value-based motivation** – based on the belief that helping the local community stems from family heritage, values passed down from generation to generation, and the personal commitment of the owners. Examples include spontaneous actions, without a CSR plan, often carried out "from the heart". In interviews with business owners, phrases such as "you have to take care of your own", "who has the to take care of our people", and "I'd rather support the local soccer team, because our people play there, than organize a forest cleanup" were used.

2. **Instrumental motivation** – treats social activities as a way to increase the company's competitiveness, build its brand, employee loyalty, and attract customers or contractors. These activities are often measurable and included in the business strategy.
3. **Institutional motivation** – stems from the need to meet formal, industry, certification, or market expectations. This category includes activities undertaken with a view to maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the community.
4. **Relational motivation** – focuses on building social relationships and support networks, including relationships with employees and their families, as well as with local social organizations, schools, and local governments. These are often joint, partnership-based activities that create bonds based on reciprocity.

Table 3.

Typology of pro-social engagement motivations of family businesses

Type of motivation	Description	Examples of activities	Domain
Identity	Rooted in local values and the local community	Sponsorship of local events, donations	Poland
Instrumental	Focused on strategic benefits	CSR as an employer branding tool	Germany
Institutional	Response to regulatory and industry pressure	ESG reporting, compliance with CSR standards	Germany
Relational	Building networks of relationships and reciprocity	Partnerships with NGOs, employee support	Poland

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on primary data.

These motivations often coexist, creating complex configurations. In Polish companies, value-based and relational combinations prevail, while in German companies, instrumental-institutional combinations prevail (Figure 1). Thus, the findings lend support to Hypothesis 1.

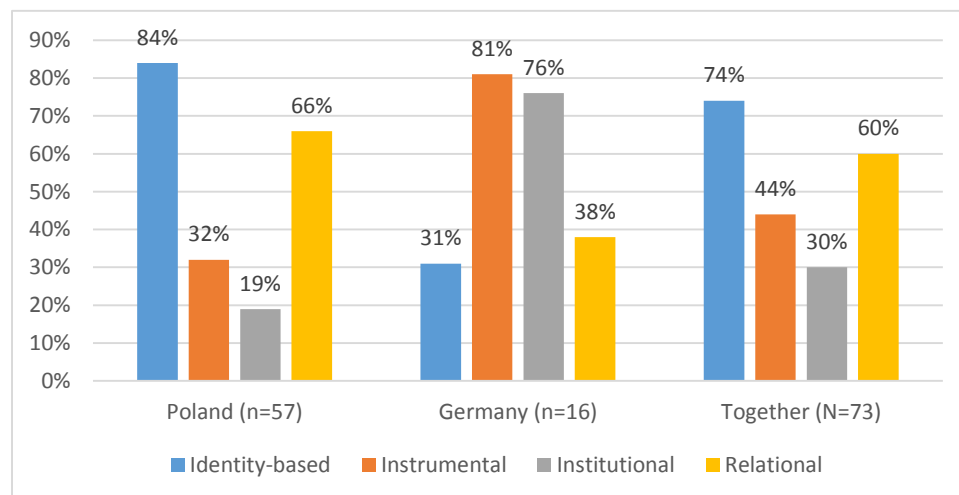


Figure 1. Comparison of motivations by country (quantitative data, N = 73).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on primary data.

5. Discussion

The results of the study are consistent with and expand upon the resource-based view (RBV), confirming that the availability of organizational resources – financial, human, organizational and reputational – significantly influences the scope and sustainability of socially responsible activities in family businesses (Barney, 1991). As Craig and Moores (2006) point out, our results emphasize that companies with greater capital can undertake more structured and impactful social initiatives. Empirical data also confirm that larger, often multi-generational companies invest in lasting partnerships and sustainable development initiatives, which distinguishes them from smaller companies with limited financial and organizational capabilities.

The research conducted has shown that the motivations of family businesses to undertake pro-social activities are complex and multidimensional. Social engagement is not only the result of economic calculations or adaptation to market expectations, but also an expression of deeply rooted family values, interpersonal relationships and local identity. In the Polish context, these activities often serve to protect social and emotional wealth (SEW), aimed at maintaining reputation, family heritage and strengthening intergenerational bonds. Entrepreneurs' narratives emphasize their symbolic and identity-related significance, regardless of the degree of formalization and integration with the company's strategy.

From a practice-based perspective (Bromiley, Rau, 2014), the persistence of informal, historically rooted practices in Polish family businesses highlights the importance of routines and embedded social norms as sources of competitive advantage. This phenomenon complements the findings of Miller et al. (2008), who point to the role of organizational culture and tradition in shaping the behavior of family businesses. However, the informal nature of these practices may also limit scalability and formal reporting, which is consistent with Maxwell's (2013) criticism of informal approaches to CSR.

In Germany, on the other hand, institutional mechanisms such as stakeholder expectations, certification requirements and industry pressure have a strong influence, leading to the professionalization and formalization of CSR activities. Social engagement is becoming part of the systemic framework of responsibility management, confirming the relevance of the institutional approach in this context.

The study also reveals clear cultural differences. In Poland, CSR is often interpreted in ethical and community terms, while in Germany a systemic and managerial approach prevails. This diversity indicates that the decisions of family businesses are not only the result of their internal resources and values, but also the effect of social learning processes in specific cultural contexts. Moreover, it should be noted that this study treats Poland and Germany as homogeneous units, whereas regional socio-economic differences may significantly influence family firms' motivations. For instance, East and West Germany still reveal disparities in

institutional development and business culture, while in Poland contrasts between rural and urban regions shape the forms and meanings of pro-social engagement. Acknowledging these subnational contexts further strengthens the cross-cultural argument by showing that motivations are conditioned not only by national cultures but also by regional trajectories and socio-economic environments.

Despite the results obtained, the limitations of the study should be emphasized. The relatively small sample size, especially in the German group, limits the possibility of generalizing the conclusions. Furthermore, the self-identification of companies as family businesses may introduce bias in terms of declared motivations and the level of formalization of activities. In the future, research should triangulate self-reported data with objective indicators of effectiveness and social impact.

In summary, the results provide in-depth insights into the cultural and institutional conditions shaping CSR in family businesses. They point to different models of engagement in Poland and Germany and emphasize the need to integrate the SEW, institutional, RBV and PBV approaches in order to capture the dynamics and multidimensionality of the social behavior of family businesses.

6. Conclusions

The study confirms that the motivations of family businesses for social engagement are multifactorial and conditioned by the cultural, institutional and resource context. A one-dimensional model, focusing exclusively on economic or value-based aspects, proves insufficient to explain the complex mechanisms of engagement. In its place, a Multidimensional Model of Strategic Determinants in Family Businesses has been proposed, which emphasizes the integration of three key elements – economic, social and values – when choosing a social support strategy (Fig. 2).

A comparative analysis shows that in Poland, identity and relational motivation, rooted in family values and the local socio-cultural context, predominate, while in Germany, CSR takes a more rationalized and formalized form, embedded in management strategies and subject to institutional requirements. This diversity proves that the effectiveness of pro-social activities does not always require formalization – Polish companies also implement valuable initiatives in an informal manner, which undermines the generalized assumptions of Western literature and points to the need for contextual research.

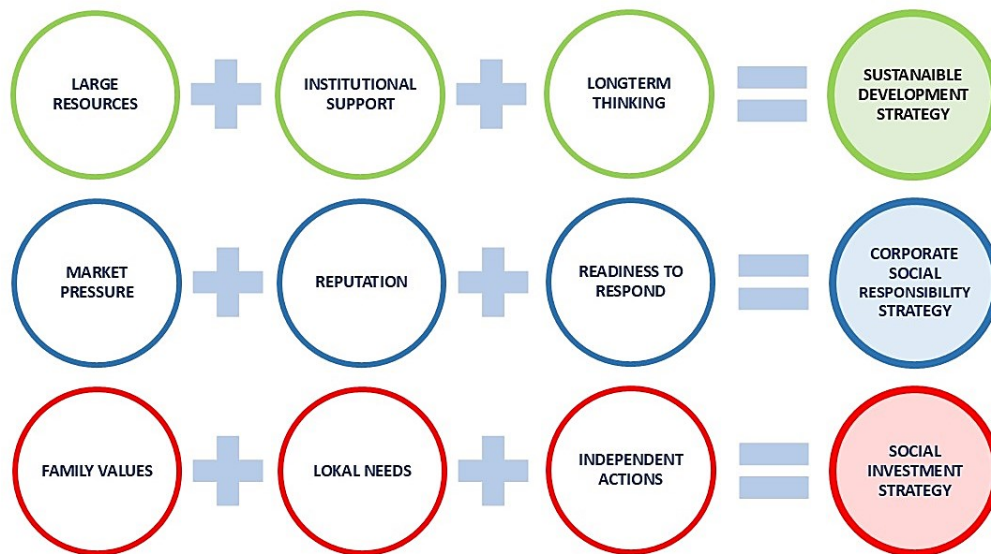


Figure 2. Multidimensional Model of Strategic Drivers in Family Businesses.

Source: own study.

Practical implications include recommendations for organizations supporting family businesses, which should adapt their programs to the specific motivations and needs of companies. Companies with value-based and relational motivations primarily require local cooperation and networking platforms, while strategically oriented companies need formal management tools and CSR performance indicators. At the public policy level, it is necessary to combine financial incentives with education and the development of CSR management skills, especially in the SME sector.

The study proves that formalizing social activities is not necessarily a prerequisite for effectiveness – family businesses in Poland implement valuable initiatives despite the lack of formalized strategies. This challenges the generalized assumptions of Western literature and points to the need for contextual research.

Finally, recognizing the role of generational change in shaping motivation paves the way for supporting the transition from informal to formal CSR, which is important for sustaining the long-term contribution of family businesses to the development of local communities. This points to the need for further research on the dynamics of motivation over time, its effectiveness in generating real social change, and international comparisons that take into account different degrees of CSR institutionalization and local family traditions.

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