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Intergenerational conflict during AI adoption in family firms: Evidence from a longitudinal two-country study

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Abstract

Purpose: This research explores the development of intergenerational conflict during various phases of AI adoption in family businesses and investigates how governance practices influence the escalation of conflict in different countries.

Design/methodology/approach: We conducted a longitudinal, multiple-case study involving 13 family firms, 7 in India and 6 in Germany. Over 18 months, we performed 42 semi-structured interviews, complemented by internal documents and observations. We applied process coding and cross-case replication to identify conflict patterns over time and to compare the development trajectories across different contexts.

Findings: We recognize three paths of conflict escalation: latent, episodic, and escalating, each activated at specific transition points (idea → pilot, pilot → scaling, full roll-out). Governance tools, such as family councils, structured forums, and boundary spanners, help moderate escalation, though their effectiveness differs between India and Germany. In India, relational and informal governance often delay overt conflict but let underlying tension remain; in Germany, formal mechanisms tend to curtail overt conflict earlier but may trigger occasional spikes.

Originality/value: This research advances understanding of conflict processes in family firms during technology adoption. It integrates stewardship, socioemotional wealth (SEW), and conflict process thinking in a stage-based model. The cross-country design reveals how cultural and institutional context shapes governance efficacy and conflict trajectories.

Research limitations/implications: Our sample size limits the generalizability of our findings; we invite future large-sample quantitative testing of trajectory-governance relationships.

Practical implications: Family firm leaders should adopt stage-sensitive governance interventions, anticipating stage shifts as turning points for conflict.

Keywords: AI adoption, intergenerational conflict, family governance, conflict trajectories, socioemotional wealth, India, Germany

Introduction

Family-owned businesses are perhaps the most common type of business globally. Their estimated share varies between 70 and 90 per cent in the world, depending on how one classifies family businesses. Even the modelling differs significantly between countries. Nevertheless, family businesses make a significant contribution to global employment, GDP, and innovation (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005; De Massis et al., 2018). The family nature of many MEs, as explained in detail by Miller et al. (2008) and Chrisman et al. (2012), combines with their long-term focus and stewardship values to promote patient capital, resilience in crisis, and devotion to local communities. But it is these very traits that help the institutions survive and also create specific governance challenges when significant changes (technological or strategic) are required. Families also take into consideration non-financial goals when making decisions. These could be to maintain control, preserve the family's legacy, protect its identity, and ensure dynastic succession (Berrone et al., 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2011). SEW may enhance undertakings that secure the firm's future sustainability. However, change-related risk aversion may occur

whenever newness is construed as a threat to family tradition or control. The digital transformation happening around the world has put many family firms at a crossroads. Technologies designed to improve quality include those that employ big data analytics (BDA), cloud computing, the Internet of Things (IoT), and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI) (Ransbotham et al., 2021). AI has come a long way from experimental pilots to mainstream use cases across many industries. Examples include predictive maintenance, demand forecasting, automated Diagnosis, supply chain management, and customer-service chatbots (Iansiti and Lakhani, 2020). Using these tools will make you quick and efficient. However, they will also disrupt old routines. In addition, they will change who makes the decisions. And this sometimes involves even senior leaders.

Moreover, this power has shifted even further down to the algorithms and family members. These changes can exacerbate already existing generational differences in family firms. Long identified as a feature of family-firm governance, intergenerational conflict is common. Different generations have different priorities. For instance, predecessors generally focus on stability and control, and protecting their legacy. Successors usually favour innovation, growth, and internationalisation (Cater and Schwab, 2008; Chirico and Nordqvist, 2010). Variance in educational backgrounds, exposure to digital technologies, and technical skills can amplify these differences, as younger leaders have stronger technical skills and more extensive external networks. (Rod, 2019) Past work categorizes conflict into task conflict and affective conflict. Task conflict represents conflict over what strategy to use, what process to follow, or how to allocate resources. Affective or relationship conflict is conflict expressed in personal hostility, distrust, or perceived disrespect (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996). Although task conflict can enhance creativity and decision-making when managed appropriately (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Kellermanns and Eddleston, 2004), affect conflict generally has a detrimental effect on family cohesion and business performance (Sorenson, 1999; Kellermanns and Eddleston, 2007). The emergence of AI will probably escalate these tensions further. Research shows that family firms face structural and behavioural constraints on their digitalisation. Typical barriers include limited financial resources, informal decision-making processes dominated by one person, reluctance to share data externally, and concern that automation may threaten traditional craft-based skills (Classen et al. 2014; Calabrò et al. 2019; Kraus et al. 2022). Family businesses face challenges as the family and business systems often overlap. This makes it hard to identify who is in charge of what. And it can also delay getting agreement on where to invest first. Even though this topic is essential, there is not much empirical research specifically done on AI adoption in family firms. Most existing literature looks at digital transformation on a broader scale or in non-family SMEs. Tuncalp (2025) is one of the few dedicated studies that find AI adoption can create value-based tensions between incumbent leaders and next-gen members.

Nevertheless, this analysis was cross-sectional and studied only one national context, so it could not show how conflict develops over time, nor how governance structures and cultural norms alter its development. Understanding these dynamics has significant theoretical and practical relevance. From a theoretical standpoint, the temporal nature of conflict during technology adoption remains underexplored. Most studies view SEW as a relatively stable disposition that influences decision-making uniformly. Yet, our preliminary observations suggest that SEW concerns may peak at specific transition points, for instance, when scaling an AI system alters legacy-rich customer-service routines. Mapping these inflexion points can enrich SEW theory and extend stewardship theory, which emphasises that family leaders often act as responsible stewards of the enterprise, but whose cooperative behaviour may be enhanced or constrained by formal governance structures (Davis et al., 1997; Madison et al., 2016). We also respond to calls for more process-based research on conflict in family firms (Eddleston et al., 2010; Lambrechts et al., 2017), as understanding the stages at which conflict shifts from task-related to affective forms can improve both scholarly models and managerial interventions. From a practical perspective, conflict over AI adoption can have material consequences for performance and family harmony. Protracted disagreements at early stages can delay investments or cause promising projects to be abandoned, leaving firms at a competitive disadvantage. Conversely, well-governed constructive task conflict may sharpen strategic thinking and lead to more robust implementation. Family-business advisers, boards, educators, and policymakers, therefore, require more precise guidance on which governance mechanisms, such as family councils, independent directors, milestone-based budgeting, or symbolic legacy-honouring rituals, help contain conflict and at what stages they are most valuable.

This study will address these gaps by examining how inter-generational conflict emerges and evolves in family businesses when AI is adopted, as well as the role of governance mechanisms and culture in shaping this conflict. We use a longitudinal, comparative, multiple-case design involving thirteen family firms, seven in India and six in Germany, over eighteen months as they progress through the idea, funding, pilot, and scale stages of AI initiatives. The cross-country design allows us to investigate whether cultural differences matter in terms of what triggers conflict or how conflict is expressed. The study makes four main contributions. To begin with, it presents a process model that tracks the development of intergenerational conflict across the stages of adoption, highlighting when and how it escalates from constructive disagreement about task to potentially harmful disagreement about affect. The second contribution identifies the moderating effect of governance mechanisms, including family councils, boards with independent directors, milestone-based funding, structured reporting, and symbolic rituals recognizing founders, which reduce escalation at different stages. The third insight states that differences exist across contexts. According to the authors, the cultural factors influence how firms express their conflicts, with Indian firms being more deferential and German firms being more direct. Giving evidence-based tools helps family-business stakeholders implement practices and policies. It helps them anticipate conflict hot-spots and apply prompt governance tools to enable family peace and project smooth sailing. This study not only fills an empirical gap but also offers rich insights for family business leaders facing the challenges of managing digital transformation. It does so by locating AI adoption within the literature on SEW, stewardship, and conflict management theories. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. To start, we review pertinent research on intergenerational conflict, digital transformation (DT), and governance in family firms. Next, we outline a longitudinal comparative methodology. Next, we present results supported by tables, figures, and quotes. In conclusion, we summarize the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Literature Review

The use of AI in family businesses is not just another technology. It changes who makes decisions, impacts established ways of doing things, and challenges the solidarity of family ties across generations. Family businesses have likely evolved through the tacit knowledge, traditions, and interpersonal trust that have built up over time. The use of appendable AI-driven tools such as predictive analytics, recommendation engines, or automated decision-support systems disrupts these familiar arrangements and can cause intergenerational conflict. Conflict is not a new phenomenon in family firms. Studies have shown that differences of opinion occur commonly in family firms, according to Eddleston and Kellermanns (2007). Yet, little is still known about the dynamics of conflict in family firms in the face of digital transformation. Specifically, we do not see how family firms are experiencing conflict during AI adoption. The literature review will utilize socioemotional wealth (SEW) theory, stewardship theory, the conflict process model, and cross-cultural governance research to help understand how conflict arises and escalates during AI adoption in family firms. Theoretical perspectives provide family business scholars with insights into the essential elements of family business systems theory. These frameworks offer insight into how the family priorities and motivations of individuals, governance mechanisms, and culture interact as projects move from ideas to execution (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Astrachan et al., 2020).

Socioemotional Wealth and Technology-Driven Tensions

Socioemotional wealth (SEW) refers to the non-financial advantages a family gains from owning and managing a business. These advantages are retaining control, protecting the family from unwanted attention, ensuring the legacy of the founder is honoured, and keeping close ties with employees and customers (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012). According to the SEW perspective, family firms are more likely than other types of firms to prioritise continuity and the influence of the family over financial gains (Cruz & Nordqvist, 2012; De Massis et al., 2018). AI adoption may increase SEW-related concerns through changing decision dynamics. Bringing automation to routine work may enhance productivity without impacting decision-making authority. However, when AI manages tasks in-depth, we're seeing an impact on power and influence. Powers shift from seasoned leaders to their younger successors and then to intelligent algorithms. In doing so, this alteration calls into question the symbolic authority of senior leaders and may be interpreted as destabilising the tacit knowledge they have relied on for the past decades (Iansiti & Lakhani, 2020; Calabrò et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2022). People resist these situations not only because they are uncertain about the technology but also because they fear the

weakening of traditional practices and authority based on their socio-emotional wealth (SEW) (Chua et al. 2015; Chrisman et al. 2012).

Generational differences deepen these tensions. Current leaders, who are mostly either first or second generation, prefer stability. Moreover, they take limited risks and tend to emphasise routine that supports heritage and ensures continuity (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2014). Younger generations place greater importance on innovation, digital competitiveness, and the reputational gains of technology leadership (Chirico & Nordqvist, 2010; Sieger et al., 2016). SEW differs because of these priorities and does not have a uniform meaning for the family; instead, it is dynamic and influenced by context. It matters most when things get serious. Scaling AI initiatives can lead to challenges when practices based on tradition or authority feel threatened (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013). According to research, SEW can be both a barrier and an advantage in terms of innovation. A strong attachment to tradition may lead to slow adoption initially, but framing AI as a tool to safeguard the legacy, such as using predictive dials to protect established product quality or enhance customer relationships, can reduce resistance (Craig et al., 2014; Zellweger et al., 2013). The findings suggest that it is essential to present technical change as connected to family identity, not as distancing from the past.

Stewardship Theory and the Role of Governance

While SEW emphasises the motives that connect families emotionally to their businesses, stewardship theory investigates the behaviour of family leaders. It suggests that many family managers act as stewards who aim for the long-term success of the company rather than seeking short-term personal gain (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012). However, stewardship behaviour heavily relies on governance mechanisms that promote transparency, accountability, and participation across generations (Madison et al., 2016; Suess-Reyes, 2017). Governance structures such as family councils, advisory or supervisory boards with independent directors, milestone-linked budgeting, structured reporting procedures, and rituals that honour the founder's legacy have been shown to depersonalise disputes and provide neutral platforms for dialogue (Gersick & Feliu, 2014; Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2014; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015). These mechanisms are especially valuable during AI adoption because they influence whether disagreements over budgets, vendor choices, or implementation strategies stay productive task conflicts or escalate into emotional conflicts that damage trust (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Eddleston et al., 2010). Studies indicate that councils and independent directors play a significant role in the idea and funding stages of AI initiatives, where scepticism often centers on the value and cost of investment (Suess-Reyes & Fuetsch, 2016; Astrachan & Pieper, 2020). Each additional investment tied to milestones agreed upon during the pilot phases makes sceptical senior leaders more comfortable with seeing tangible changes. In later stages, once AI alters decision-making routines and takes on the symbolic expertise of incumbents, rituals that publicly recognize the founder's contributions or that embed the new systems in long-standing family values can help cope with identity-based opposition (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018; Frank et al, 2019) The results indicate that governance tools work best when tailored to the particular phase of technological change.

Conflict as a Stage-Linked Process

The classic organisational behaviour models illustrate the stages of conflict. Pondy (1967) describes a sequence of latent tensions that become perceived, felt, and manifest as conflicts. Rahim (2002) States That Resolution strategies should be appropriate to the stage of conflict. The above quote is especially applicable to the few adopters of AI, who first disagree at the idea stage about the strategic value (maybe too early), then disagree over the allocation of resources during funding (maybe later), and finally disagree from an identity perspective during scaling (Sorenson, 1999; Ward, 2011). According to Jehn (1995) and Kellermanns and Eddleston (2004), researchers distinguish between task conflict, which is about goals and methods, and affective, or relationship conflict, which involves personal hostility or threats to identity. Task conflict that is not destructive can improve decision quality and foster creativity, often leading to better innovation outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Lambrechts et al., 2017). Kellermanns and Eddleston (2007) and Eddleston et al. (2013) argue that trust can break down and progress can halt with dysfunctional affective relationships. AI projects are more likely to lead to conflict because they involve technology that displaces legacy routines that are closely associated with the professional identity of incumbent leaders. When manual forecasting and client-service practices that have long been trusted are displaced by algorithms, older leaders may interpret this as a loss of relevance and respect that underpins emotional resistance (Röd, 2019; Kraus et al., 2022). The pattern is seen most clearly at the scaling

stage, after technical feasibility but before cultural acceptance is achieved. When managers understand it as a process linked to the project milestone, it helps them deploy intermediary efforts or governance measures at an early stage.

Cultural Context and Conflict Expression

People may have different expectations about hierarchy, authority, communication, and conflict resolution due to culture. Rivalry risk perception, control over resources, and legacy threat are common triggers across contexts, but cultural norms impact how and when differences manifest (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Basco et al., 2020). The analysis between India and Germany shows remarkable differences. In India, where there is high power distance and collectivism, younger successors usually do not openly challenge elders in meetings. Instead of directly confronting people, they would rather use informal channels or take it offline to address their concerns later. This tendency to delay can push back urgent discussions. This can cause a lot of building tension. In Germany, where power distance is less and things are more direct, intergenerational disagreements come up earlier. Because they are taken up in official governance spaces, these conflicts may get resolved more quickly (Sharma & Chua, 2014; Suess-Reyes, 2017). No matter the style of communication, research has shown that good governance mechanisms can neutralise cultural differences. Thus, conflict can be made productive irrespective of culture (Kenyon-Rouvinez & Ward, 2005; Debicki et al., 2016). In high-power-distance contexts, structured reporting and decision-making, along with the use of neutral advisors and independent board members, can help sustain dialogue, even when there are differences. Governance strategy adapts suitably to local norms. Furthermore, these types of processes provide a high quality of accountability and procedural fairness that mitigates conflict.

Integrative Perspective

The combined findings of the literature show that conflict across generations does not necessarily harm family firms in AI adoption. Instead, it is an expression of the persistent conflict between the conservation of family legacy, pivotal to SEW, and the quest for innovation, steered mainly by the younger generations. Viewing SEW (Socio-Economic Wellbeing) as a stage-sensitive construct explains why resistance to scaling peaks during technological change, which most visibly impacts identity-laden routines and authority structures. According to the stewardship theory, family leaders often want to act as custodians of the business. Even so, their capacity to engage in such actions constructively depends on good governance. Models of the conflict process show that disagreements arise during the milestones of the project. Essentially, the critical thing to do is to intervene with timely, stage-appropriate interventions. They can be early family council talks. Then, performance-linked budgeting during pilots. Lastly, symbolic recognition of heritage at implementation. Research in cultural studies suggests that communication shapes culture, but through a clear framework of transparency, it can guide two generations in a specific direction. The integrative approach highlights that the success of adopting artificial intelligence is as much about governance and inter-generational relations as it is about technical capacities. When treating conflict as a possible outcome of change, rather than the outcome itself, family firms can use governance tools that match the stage of the enterprise. Turning friction into conversation might result in improved innovation and family relationship outcomes for generations to come.

Research Methodology

Study Design We employed a longitudinal multiple-case study design to investigate how intergenerational conflict evolves across phases of AI adoption in family firms and how governance mechanisms moderate its escalation. This design fits our process-oriented research questions and allows for temporal and cross-case comparisons. We purposely sampled 13 family firms, seven in India and six in Germany, using maximum-variation logic that seeks differences in size (40–750 employees), generation in control (2nd–4th), and stage of AI adoption (from pilot to full rollout). A family firm means that the founding family holds at least at least 50% of voting rights and at least one family member is involved in top management. Inclusion criteria covered cases that (a) started an AI-related project in the last three years and (b) reported intergenerational involvement in adoption decisions. The study did not include firms that were either never involved in AI or fully automated before 2020.

We treated each firm as an analytical case and used theoretical replication (Yin, 2018) to develop predictions that contrasted with each other across cases. We thought there would be differences in the confrontation over time

between countries based on their governance structure (formal vs. informal) and the mix of generations within each country. We expected differences to be shaped by local norms and cultures. We continued sampling until we secured at least one trajectory in each country characterized as either low-conflict, episodic-conflict, or escalating-conflict. Over a period of 18 months (from January 2023 to June 2024), we conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with family owners, next-generation successors, non-family executives, and project managers (average length 68 minutes). We also collected company documents and meeting notes. The German interviews conducted in German were translated into English for joint coding. We made sure that the translation was very accurate. First, every set of transcripts was professionally translated. After that, an independent back-translation of a 20% sample was then done. Finally, we followed up with interviewees to confirm the meaning in some selected excerpts. Analysis of the data: We used process coding and temporal bracketing to map the occurrences of conflict. Using a cross-case matrix, we systematically compared and matched patterns between countries. Wholehearted discussions were held to resolve coding disagreements arising from the context.

Findings

The analysis of thirteen family-owned firms in India and Germany through a cross-case longitudinal lens revealed that intergenerational conflict in AI adoption follows a predictable trajectory, is moderated by Governance mechanisms, and is influenced in its expression, although not in its triggers, by cultural context. The cases were diverse, originating from sectors such as logistics, healthcare, food processing, professional services, retail, and manufacturing, with sizes ranging from 80 to 1,200 workers. Generations from the founders (G1) to the fourth (G4) are involved. The firms we studied have different governance arrangements for their boards of directors. Five firms did not have formal governance arrangements. The authority of the firm's senior leader was accepted. The other six firms used family councils, advisory boards, and supervisory boards. These boards made use of independent directors. Because of this variability, it was possible to observe how conflict arose within the first differences between informally governed firms (where personal conflict becomes common) and the formally governed (where debate is more easily contained). Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of these firms, including. The factors considered include their sector, the generation involved in AI decisions, governance arrangements, the type of AI project, and the adoption stage at the start of the study.

Table 1. Summary of participating family businesses

Case code	Country	Sector/industry	Generation involved in AI decision-making	Governance body present (family council/board with independents)	Type of AI initiative	Adoption stage at study start (2023)	No. of interviews
IN-1	India	Retail apparel	G2 CEO, G3 CIO	Family council + advisory board	Predictive demand analytics	Idea stage	3
IN-2	India	Manufacturing	G1 founder, G2 CEO, G3 ops head	None	Machine-vision quality control	Funding stage	3
IN-3	India	Logistics	G2 MD, G3 CIO	Family council	Route-optimisation AI	Pilot stage	4
IN-4	India	Healthcare services	G2 & G3 medical directors	Board with two	AI-assisted diagnostics	Funding stage	3

				independent directors			
IN-5	India	Food processing	G1 founder, G2 GM	None	AI-based forecasting	Idea stage	2
IN-6	India	Professional services	G2 CEO, G3 COO	Advisory board	Chatbot for client service	Pilot stage	4
IN-7	India	Wholesale trading	G2 MD, G3 CTO	None	AI-supported inventory planning	Scaling stage	3
DE-1	Germany	Automotive parts	G3 CEO, G4 CTO	Supervisory board with independents	Predictive-maintenance AI	Pilot stage	4
DE-2	Germany	Industrial machinery	G2 CFO, G3 CTO	Supervisory board	AI-driven energy-efficiency control	Funding stage	3
DE-3	Germany	Chemicals	G2 CEO, G3 innovation lead	Family council + board	AI-assisted process optimisation	Idea stage	3
DE-4	Germany	Consumer goods	G2 CEO, G3 COO	Board with independents	AI-supported demand forecasting	Scaling stage	4
DE-5	Germany	Logistics	G3 MD, G4 CIO	Family council	AI-enabled routing & scheduling	Pilot stage	3
DE-6	Germany	Retail food	G2 founder-CEO, G3 innovation mgr	None	Customer-service chatbot	Idea stage	3

Source: Authors' field data collected 2023–2024; names anonymised.

In nearly all cases, conflict began during the idea stage, with task-oriented disagreements over the value of AI. Senior leaders often doubted the need for the technology or questioned its cost, while younger successors saw it as critical for competitiveness and a way to preserve the family legacy. An Indian next-generation CIO said, "My father saw AI as an expensive experiment, while I saw it as an investment for the future" (IN-3, G3 CIO). A German G3 innovation leader explained that convincing the G2 CEO took "weeks of showing how AI would not undermine but reinforce our reputation for precision and quality" (DE-3). Early discussions centered on aligning with heritage; for example, IN-1 emphasized using predictive analytics to minimize ethnic wear stock-outs, which senior leaders readily accepted. Conversely, in DE-6, an AI-driven chatbot was described as "modernising customer engagement," but the G2 founder felt this wording dismissed his personal service style, resulting in lingering skepticism. As projects moved toward funding, disagreements often increased regarding budget size, release timing, and spending control. Senior leaders favored small-scale investments with short-term gains,

whereas successors advocated for larger investments to remain competitive. A German CFO stated, "The board agreed to fund only a limited pilot until results were proven" (DE-2, G2 CFO). In an Indian manufacturing firm without a governance forum (IN-2), a six-month budget deadlock stopped the pilot despite technical readiness. In several cases, particularly IN-4 and IN-6, gender dynamics influenced funding disagreements. Daughters leading AI projects initially faced scepticism from older male relatives. As one G3 medical director shared, "Convincing my father was twice as hard not only about the technology but also about me being the one proposing it." When family councils or boards with independent directors were involved, and funding was tied to milestones based on pilot performance, trust was built, and disputes were resolved more efficiently.

Conflict in the pilot stage initially remained task-focused but shifted to technical disagreements over vendor choice, data privacy safeguards, and definitions of success metrics. These debates sometimes delay project timelines. A G3 COO admitted, *"We argued for two months over what success metrics should be"* (IN-6). In DE-5, the board questioned the security of external cloud-based routing data. Firms that engaged neutral technical consultants, for instance, in cybersecurity or AI vendor selection, found these discussions to be less personal and shorter-lived. This demonstrates that external expertise can help moderate technical conflicts. The scaling stage was where conflict most often escalated into affective, identity-driven resistance. Older leaders sometimes felt that algorithms displaced the intuition and judgment that had defined the business for decades. A German CEO confessed he *"...felt the algorithm was replacing our judgment built over decades"* (DE-4). In IN-7, the G2 managing director resisted an AI-driven inventory-planning system that replaced the intuitive forecasting he had relied on for thirty years: *"My instinct has guided our stock decisions for decades. How can a machine know the market better?"* Firms that combined technical roll-out with symbolic legacy-honouring rituals, such as ceremonial handovers or public recognition of the founder's contributions, experienced less resistance. In DE-4, a formal ceremony at which the G2 CEO endorsed the new system reassured him that his expertise was being acknowledged rather than replaced.

Table 2. Conflict patterns across AI-adoption stages

Adoption stage	Typical conflict trigger	Illustrative quote*	Moderating factor (if present)	Managerial take-away
Idea	Vision/value disagreement between senior & next-generation	"My father saw AI as an expensive experiment, while I saw it as an investment for the future." (IN-3, G3 CIO)	Early family-council debate reframed AI as legacy-enhancing	Frame AI as legacy-enhancing to gain early buy-in
Funding	Disputes over capital commitment & control of spending	"The board agreed to fund only a limited pilot until results were proven." (DE-2, G2 CFO)	Independent-director mediation + milestone-based budgeting	Tie further investment to clear pilot milestones to reassure incumbents
Pilot	Technical conflict over vendor, data-sharing, & KPIs	"We argued for two months over what success metrics should be." (IN-6, G3 COO)	Transparent KPI-setting + regular reporting	Agree on KPIs upfront and keep progress evidence-driven
Scaling	Affective conflict tied to loss of legacy practices	"…felt the algorithm was replacing our judgment built over decades." (DE-4, G2 CEO)	Legacy-honouring rituals during roll-out	Combine technical scaling with symbolic recognition of legacy

*Quotes shortened for clarity; all linked to anonymised case codes.
Source: Authors' field data collected 2023–2024.

Across instances, the quality of governance proved crucial. Firms with family councils or boards that include independent directors benefited from neutral forums that depersonalised the debate. A German board member

observed that the external director "kept us all looking at the numbers, not at each other." Milestone-based budgeting reassured senior leaders by linking additional investment to proven pilot results, while structured reporting maintained transparency and reduced speculation. During scaling, symbolic gestures that honoured the founder's legacy helped sustain trust and respect. In contrast, in four firms three in India and one in Germany weak or absent governance allowed task conflicts to escalate into personal grievances, resulting in significant delays or even project abandonment.

Table 3. Governance mechanisms and their moderating influence

Governance mechanism	Firms using (n = 13)	Stage most effective	How it moderated conflict	Illustrative outcome
Family council	6	Idea & Funding	Neutral forum for dialogue; reduced personalisation	IN-3: reframed AI as "legacy-enhancing," conflict stayed task-focused
Advisory / supervisory board with independent directors	5	Funding & Pilot	Added impartial expertise; mediated budget/vendor disputes	DE-2: external mediation enabled timely pilot approval
Pilot-milestone budgeting	7	Funding → Pilot	Linked further fund release to pilot results; reassured incumbents	IN-4: Milestone-based budgeting prevented budget deadlock
Structured reporting to board/council	5	Pilot & Scaling	Regular progress updates kept the debate evidence-driven	DE-1: Monthly KPI reviews reduced escalation over delays
Legacy-honouring rituals	4	Scaling	Publicly recognised senior leaders' contribution; reduced identity-driven resistance	DE-4: The symbolic handover ceremony eased the G2 CEO's opposition
Absence / weak governance	4	All stages	No neutral forum → task conflict escalated to affective	IN-2: unresolved funding dispute caused the project to stall

Source: Authors' field data collected 2023–2024; case codes anonymised.

Although the core conflict triggers risk perception, control of capital, and concern for legacy were similar in both countries, cultural norms influenced the style and timing of expression. In Indian cases, successors often refrain from openly disagreeing in formal settings out of respect for elders, opting instead to persuade privately and delaying essential debate until later stages. In German cases, disagreement was typically expressed openly in council or board meetings and formally documented, making conflicts more visible but often leading to earlier resolution. Despite these stylistic differences, governance quality was more important than cultural background in determining whether conflict escalated or remained constructive. By the end of the eighteen-month observation period, five firms successfully scaled their AI initiatives, all characterized by strong governance, early framing of AI as a way to enhance legacy, and constructive conflict management; four firms remained at the pilot stage, hindered by unresolved yet non-escalated disagreements; and four firms abandoned adoption entirely, usually where emotional conflict persisted and governance was weak or missing. A G3 CIO in IN-3 commented, "Because we had clear milestones and a forum to discuss setbacks, the arguments never became personal."

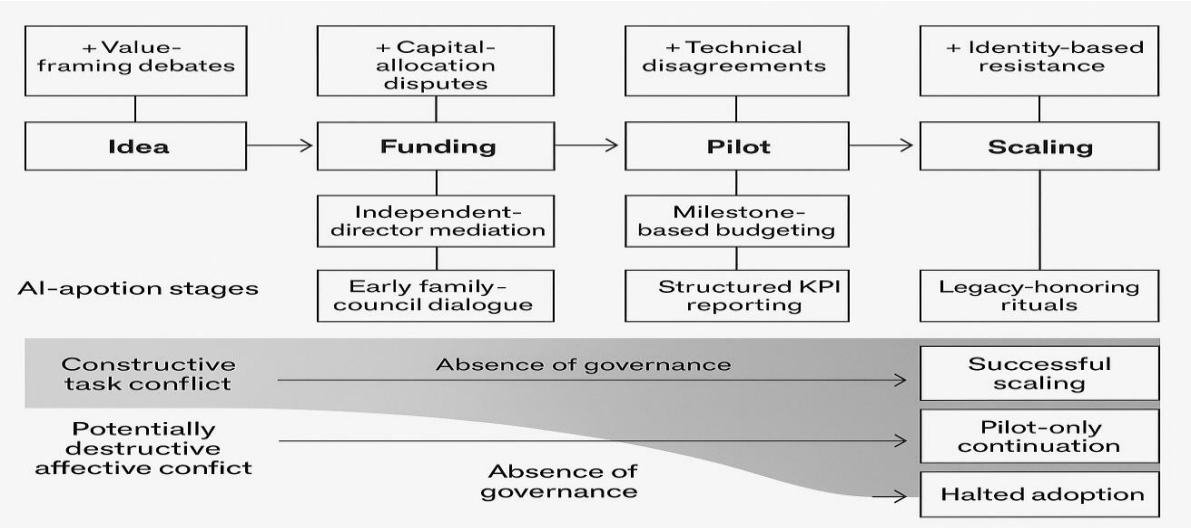

Figure 1. Process model of intergenerational conflict in AI adoption

In summary, the results indicate that conflict related to AI adoption is neither accidental nor inherently negative. Therefore, predictable and stage-specific patterns can be positively managed through effective governance. Culture can influence how a conflict manifests, but the root cause of the conflict has nothing to do with culture. The factors that determine whether a conflict will strengthen or weaken collaboration are the timing and quality of governance initiatives. It is not the national culture that influences how it affects collaboration. All this information provides what is needed to advance to the next stage of theory.

Discussion

According to research, using AI in family firms leads to unique intergenerational conflict situations. These conflicts do not only arise from technical readiness or lack of funds. Algorithmic tools influence who makes decisions, which affects family identity, social-emotional wealth, and other aspects of life. The different stages of AI adoption, such as ideation, funding, piloting, and scaling, are connected to the type and level of conflict. Family firms in India and Germany exemplify this. It is important to view technological change as a process rather than a one-time event, as suggested by Pondy (1967), Rahim (2002), and Kraus et al. (2022). Conflict during the early phases of group task formation tends to be constructive and task-focused. On the other hand, in later phases, firm-level conflict is usually identity-based. At the idea stage, disputes are predominantly about feasibility, strategic value, and costs. According to Iansiti and Lakhani (2020) and Calabrò et al. (2019), leaders of the young generation consider strategic investments of AI to keep their companies competitive and create efficiencies while promoting new growth. On the contrary, C-level executives have started to raise questions about financial risks and the reliability of algorithms vs the gut feelings they have developed for years (Chrisman et al., 2012; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2014). Exchanging ideas initially revolved around task conflict which was mostly expressed in technical language.

The parties are debating the project's funding, particularly the allocation and prioritization of capital during the funding phase. Young people want to see money spent faster and on more experiments, while the incumbents prefer to see more gradual spending based on proven results (Kotlar and De Massis, 2013). Companies that track and measure oversight tools, family councils, independent directors, and milestone-based budgeting experience fewer overall disputes and construction-related conflicts. Risk-averse incumbents are encouraged by performance reporting, generally done by executives (Madison et al, 2016; Gersick & Feliu, 2014). During the scaling phase, a major shift occurred due to the influence of AI systems on decision-making, which now largely informs demand forecasting, inventory control, and customer relationship management. At this point, many leaders experienced a loss of control over practices and rituals that had previously been integral to their identity. The disagreement was no longer technical but one of emotion. The perceived threat to legacy and integrated socioemotional wealth (SEW) has driven growing resistance. According to previous literature, SEW is responsive to shifting practices concerning decision-making authority and identity-related practices (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Berrone et al., 2012; Chua et al., 2015).

The quality of Governance determined whether a conflict was constructive or became personal. Firms that have councils, advisory boards, milestone-linked reporting, and other governance structures succeed in keeping the conversation evidence-based and aligned with strategy (Astrachan & Pieper, 2020; Suess-Reyes & Fuetsch, 2016). Structured debates, budgets, and outcome-based funding turned disagreements into opportunities. Indeed, rifts that appeared to split the outside world played an effective role in national entrepreneurial strategies. The outcome is an interesting blend of the two extremes. In contrast, firms that lacked such structures encountered deadlocks and personal issues lasting longer, which hampered the adoption of AI technologies (Eddleston et al., 2010; Kellermanns and Eddleston, 2007). The findings also suggest that symbolism can lessen reluctance. When leaders framed AI with enduring family values, such as showing that predictive analytics could bolster traditional commitments to product quality and customer trust, opposition often decreased, especially from older family members. Founders regularly toasted themselves publicly, celebrated leadership transitions, and told stories about how new technologies aligned with the founding. The Miller family's actions crafted a narrative that depicted AI as a mere extension of their family legacy rather than a disruption (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018; Craig et al., 2014; Zellweger et al., 2013). During the scaling phase, identity-related issues were monumental. These symbolic activities were reasonably practical during that phase.

Context played a role in how conflict was expressed, but did not change its sources. Because Indian firms are collectivist and have a higher power distance culture, younger successors did not necessarily voice their disagreements in front of everyone during formal meetings. This mainly leads to delays in resolving disputes and sometimes also results in the escalation of differences (Hofstede, 2001; Basco et al., 2020). In German companies, where norms showed a lower power-distance and greater individualism, qualitative intergenerational disagreements were voiced in official settings sooner and were resolved faster through debate (Sharma & Chua, 2014; House et al., 2004). But in both cases, governance quality had a larger effect than culture on whether conflict became destructive or constructive. Clear rules and inclusive structures can contain conflict, irrespective of culture.

The results of the study present some theoretical contributions. By merging theories on socioemotional wealth and conflict processes, we find SEW is not fixed, but dynamic and stage-dependent. As AI disrupts identity-rich routines or changes decision rights, SEW enhances these processes. Moreover, the results contribute to an advancement of the stewardship theory. According to the results, leaders will behave to support the long-term success of the firm depending on governance mechanisms that ensure fairness and evidence-based decision-making (Davis et al. 1997; Hernandez 2012). This research contributes to the family firm conflict literature by tracing how task-focused conflict becomes emotional conflict as AI is adopted. This often coincides with milestones that threaten existing hierarchies and is not merely driven by interpersonal conflict. In addition, the study explains that the cultural context influences the style and timing of expressing a conflict, although the core triggers of the conflict remain unchanged. Thus, the study shows that culturally appropriate governance can help steer conflict towards a more productive purpose.

Family business leaders should not regard conflict as a deviation, but rather as a regular and possibly constructive aspect of technological transformation. To ensure that debates remain strategic and transparent, institutional governance structures, such as councils or independent boards, must be strengthened, and funding should be linked to milestones. Actions that symbolise the connection of artificial intelligence (AI) to the family's heritage, such as recognising senior leaders' past achievements or presenting AI as a tool that reinforces long-standing commitments to quality and innovation, can dispel prejudice among older members. In places where people have different cultures, make sure you communicate how the locals do. In contexts with many influential people, allowing successors to discuss their issues privately in a structured way can help avoid latent tensions. In less powerful settings, open debate at the start of governance forums can speed things up. The findings may not be applicable everywhere because the study had a small sample size and focused on two particular countries. Also, the study focuses mainly on early and mid-stage AI adoption, leaving a gap in our understanding of whether conflict and governance practices will endure after the full incorporation of AI systems. In the future, researchers can consider a longitudinal approach to examine conflict trajectories as AIs become more integrated into daily operations and as the roles of the generations evolve. By conducting comparative studies across a broader range of cultures, we may gain more insight into how the governance environment interacts with local culture to influence conflict

dynamics. Getting views from non-family managers and workers may help us understand how intergenerational aspects lead to change in organisations when they go digital.

Conclusion

The study aims to understand the emergence of intergenerational conflict during the adoption of artificial intelligence in family businesses and how socioemotional wealth priorities, governance quality, and cultural context influence this emergence. The results show that the adoption of technologies in family firms is not only technical and financial in nature, but also involves relational and cultural changes. Since AI redistributes decision-making, it suddenly challenges conventional approaches to their family identities. Often, these shifts reveal an essential divergence in generational priorities. While younger successors tend to emphasise innovation, competitiveness, and market reputation, incumbent leaders usually prefer continuity, control, and protection of legacy. One of the main contributions of this work reframes conflict as an inevitable or necessary part of change rather than a barrier to change. Proof shows that conflict has a pattern. It progresses through stages of adoption. Disagreements that occur at the idea and funding stages tend to be task-related and focus on issues with feasibility, cost, and strategic relevance. When debates are evidence-based, they can help in furthering the decision-making process. As AI systems reach the scaling phase and begin to influence our decision-making routines, conflict tends to escalate and intensify as they are perceived as a threat to our power and tradition. Recognising the pattern of stages helps parents of family companies foresee probable flashpoints and plan actions to address that pattern of behaviour in advance.

The study also shows that socioemotional wealth is not fixed. It can change based on the situation. Although many believe that SEW limits innovation, this study finds that SEW would also serve as a resource for some firms. Older leaders tend to be more open to change when AI is positioned as bolstering the firm's existing strengths, such as reliability, service quality, and/or commitment to innovation. In this way, SEW can help with technology changes instead of opposing them. Reducing resistance to AI adoption is possible by aligning its implementation with the family story and avoiding symbolic framing to build generational trust. The comparison of Indian and German firms shows that cultural norms determine the manner and pace of conflict expression but do not alter the underlying causes of conflict. In India, where social norms are influenced by years of oppression, younger leaders are more likely to hold back disagreement to avoid rupturing the relationship. In Germany, due to its low power distance and communication patterns that favour disagreement, early conflicts in governance were more quickly resolved. Despite the differences in style, governance quality was always the more important factor, according to the outcomes. In both contexts, clearly defined decision-making protocols, neutral forums, independent directors, and budgets tied to milestones were useful tools to depersonalise conflict and focus the debates on facts and strategy.

The findings are helpful for family businesses that plan to undergo technological transformation. Implementing governance structures such as family councils, independent advisory boards, or reporting against project milestones helps ensure conflict is constructive conflict. Publicly acknowledging the founders' inputs, the ceremonial switching of decision authority, and communication that links the AI to the firm's historic values are symbolic measures. These can be taken to narrow generational gaps further. When they all work with each other, conflict can be a positive force for critical evaluation and/or joint decision-making. The study contributes to theory by integrating the perspectives of socioemotional wealth, stewardship, and conflict processes to explain how intergenerational dynamics shape the adoption of emerging technologies. It increases knowledge about SEW, which evolves with organisational change and peaks in response to the threat of routine legacies. In addition, it reinforces the perception that stewardship behaviour relies on the presence of governance mechanisms that enhance fairness, transparency, and inclusion. The research highlights how conflict moves from being task-related to affective in different phases of adoption. Conflict is often less about the technology and far more about the impact on identity, authority, and our perceptions of these. This knowledge can help manage change in family businesses more effectively.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The study included firms from only two countries and focused solely on the early and mid-stages of AI implementation. The post-full-integration processes of long-term conflict trajectories remain to be explored. The small number of participants in the study affects the usefulness of the findings. In future research, longitudinal designs could be helpful to see how conflict changes with the evolution

of family roles over time, and the increased embedding of AI systems in decisions. By broadening to a broader set of cultural and institutional contexts, we could gain additional insights into the interaction between governance and local norms. Besides, the perspectives of non-family executives and employees on intergenerational conflict and the organisation will provide richer and more interesting insights during the fifth stage (organisational transformation). To put it another way, this research finds that managing intergenerational conflict is not a peripheral challenge for family firms wishing to modernise using AI, but rather a central challenge. Resilience against the pernicious effects of technological and social change is rooted in the dedication of contemporary family business researchers and consultants to this sector (26 words). If strong governance and meaningful symbols can guide a conflict, the conflict can be transformed into dialogue that improves decisions, ensures family solidarity, and assists in technology transfer.

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