

Exploring Innovation and Sustainability in Family Business Marketing Strategies: Insights and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Innovation in marketing strategies is crucial for businesses to remain relevant over the long term. Marketing strategies encompass four critical elements—product, price, promotion, and location—which must be enhanced to ensure the sustainability of family businesses across generations. This focus is particularly emphasized by entrepreneurs implementing family-run enterprises. This study aims to identify innovative practices employed by family business entrepreneurs, with a special focus on marketing strategies. Each marketing element significantly supports systematic and effective management of family businesses. The research explores four objectives: innovation in marketing strategies, mechanisms of innovation, barriers to implementation, and the training needs for fostering innovation. A qualitative approach, using interviews with family business entrepreneurs of varied demographic backgrounds, was employed. Findings reveal that innovative marketing strategies are pivotal for effectively managing family businesses, enabling them to adapt to technological and economic changes. The study concludes with recommendations for further research into family business dynamics, particularly concerning innovation's multifaceted impact on sustainability.

Keywords: innovation, family business, marketing strategy

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurs today face significant challenges in sustaining their business performance, particularly when planning for future generations. Long-term planning has become a priority for many, as it ensures business resilience and growth in a competitive environment (Zapata-Cantu, Sanguino, Barroso & Nicola-Gavrila, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted the entire world in 2020, caused widespread negative effects on nearly all businesses (Khatijah, 2021). Before the pandemic, Malaysia's economy demonstrated strong growth, despite intense competition among neighboring countries striving to advance their economies through technology and innovation (Minai, Mohd Sobri, Saqlain Raza, & Segaf, 2021). However, the global economic recovery post-pandemic is a slow process, requiring innovative solutions to stabilize and accelerate economic cycles (Yaqoob, Al-Huqail, & Aziz, 2024). To achieve this, innovation plays a critical role. Entrepreneurs need to adopt innovative and creative approaches by leveraging emerging technologies and fostering competitiveness to drive national economic progress (Simbolon, 2024).

In the evolving landscape of global economies, family businesses have emerged as pivotal contributors to national growth. According to Kandade, Samara, Parada & Dawson (2021); Hu & Kee (2022); Syahrina, Armanurah, Afifah & Yazid (2022), family businesses account for a significant portion of global GDP, with their sustainability linked to the ability to innovate and adapt to market changes. In Malaysia, the importance of family businesses is highlighted by their contribution to economic development, creating wealth, employment, and opportunities for successive generations (Wai, et al., 2024). However, the sustainability of these enterprises is often challenged by changing consumer preferences, technological advancements, and economic fluctuations (Dewanti & Suprpto, 2016). Innovation, particularly in marketing strategies, is increasingly recognized as a key factor enabling family businesses to remain competitive and thrive. For example, Siagian, Tarigan, & Jie (2021) emphasize that innovation in product design, pricing, promotional techniques, and distribution channels can significantly enhance business resilience. Family businesses, with their unique blend of tradition and adaptability, are well-positioned to leverage such innovations. Recent

studies have demonstrated that adopting digital tools and platforms is pivotal for businesses aiming to reach broader audiences.

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards e-commerce and digital marketing, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok becoming essential for brand visibility (Cavaco, 2022; Praton, 2022). These digital tools are particularly effective for engaging younger, tech-savvy consumers, a crucial demographic for sustained growth. Despite these advancements, family businesses often face internal and external barriers to innovation. Internally, resistance to change among senior members can stifle progress. Externally, limited access to financial resources and technical expertise can hinder the adoption of new technologies. According to Gonçalves (2024), overcoming these barriers requires a combination of strategic planning, education, and support from external stakeholders such as policymakers and industry experts.

This article explores the findings of a study conducted to investigate the implementation of innovative marketing strategies in Malaysian family businesses. The research focuses on four critical marketing elements: product, price, promotion, and location. It examines how these elements can be innovatively enhanced to ensure business sustainability. Furthermore, the study delves into the mechanisms that support innovation, the barriers that hinder it, and the training needed to address these challenges. By integrating insights from recent literature and empirical findings, this article provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of innovation in family business marketing strategies. It highlights the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, essential for navigating the complexities of modern markets. The implications for policymakers, educators, and practitioners are discussed, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to supporting family businesses in their innovation journeys.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Family businesses are often characterized by their reliance on traditional practices and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and resources. While these attributes can contribute to a sense of stability and continuity, they can also limit the adaptability and dynamism needed to thrive in a rapidly changing global economy. In Malaysia, family businesses constitute a vital sector, contributing significantly to GDP and employment. However, they are increasingly challenged by external forces, such as technological advancements, globalization, and evolving consumer preferences. Research indicates that family businesses face unique pressures to balance tradition with innovation. Studies by Miller & Le Breton-Miller (2021) highlight that the preservation of family values and legacy often takes precedence over adopting disruptive innovations. This conservative approach, while ensuring stability, can hinder growth and responsiveness to market changes.

Furthermore, family businesses frequently struggle with limited access to external funding and expertise, making it difficult to invest in new technologies or implement strategic marketing changes (Soluk, & Kammerlander, 2021). The Malaysian government's initiatives, such as the National Policy on Industry 4.0, emphasize the need for businesses to integrate advanced technologies and data-driven approaches. However, the adoption of these measures in family businesses remains sporadic and inconsistent. The gap between policy aspirations and ground-level implementation underscores the need for focused research to identify the barriers, mechanisms, and opportunities for fostering innovation in this sector (Yew, 2021; Yew, 2024).

Problem Statement

Despite their economic importance, family businesses in Malaysia often lack the structural and strategic capacity to innovate effectively. The entrenched reliance on conventional marketing methods, coupled with limited digital adoption, poses a significant threat to their sustainability. For instance, the absence of digital marketing strategies has left many family businesses unable to connect with younger, tech-savvy consumers, resulting in declining relevance and competitiveness.

A critical barrier to innovation in family businesses is the resistance to change among older generations. This resistance is compounded by financial limitations, as many family businesses operate on narrow profit margins that restrict investments in advanced tools or training programs. Additionally, a lack of awareness about

emerging market trends and technologies further exacerbates the problem. The interplay of these factors often leads to a cycle of stagnation, where businesses struggle to evolve despite recognizing the need for innovation.

The study seeks to address these challenges by exploring the factors that influence the implementation of innovative marketing strategies in family businesses. By focusing on the critical areas of product, price, promotion, and location, the research aims to uncover actionable insights that can help these businesses adapt to contemporary market demands.

Research Questions

To achieve its objectives, the study is guided by the following questions:

What innovative marketing strategies are family businesses in Malaysia currently implementing, and how effective are these strategies?

What mechanisms, such as leadership dynamics, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration, facilitate the adoption of innovation in marketing?

What are the key barriers—including cultural, financial, and technological—that hinder the implementation of innovative marketing strategies?

What types of training and developmental programs are most effective in equipping family business entrepreneurs with the skills needed to innovate?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Innovation in Family Businesses

Innovation is a cornerstone for business sustainability, especially for family-owned enterprises. Family businesses are characterized by their ability to leverage intergenerational knowledge and long-term orientation, which often fosters unique approaches to innovation (Varshney, et al., 2024 & Aboelmaged, et al., 2024). However, these businesses also face constraints, such as resistance to change, lack of resources, and the challenge of balancing tradition with modernity. This section reviews the existing literature on marketing innovation within family businesses, focusing on its mechanisms, barriers, and potential for enhancing competitiveness.

The Role of Marketing Strategies in Family Businesses

Marketing innovation in family businesses extends beyond traditional methods to include product, price, promotion, and location innovations. According to Sharma & Sharma (2021), innovation in these areas can create significant competitive advantages. For instance, product diversification and eco-friendly initiatives align with current consumer demands for sustainability. Similarly, Saura, Palacios-Marqués, & Barbosa (2023) emphasize that digital marketing platforms, such as social media, are crucial tools for reaching younger, tech-savvy demographics. These platforms not only expand market reach but also enable real-time consumer feedback integration.

Barriers to Innovation in Family Businesses

Despite the potential for innovation, family businesses often encounter substantial barriers. Resistance to change, particularly from older family members, remains a pervasive issue (Ano & Bent, 2022). Financial constraints also limit the adoption of advanced marketing tools and training programs. Additionally, knowledge gaps in emerging trends and technologies hinder strategic decision-making. Le Breton-Miller and Miller (2018) note that these barriers are compounded by a conservative approach to business management, which prioritizes stability over growth.

Mechanisms Supporting Marketing Innovation

Effective mechanisms can significantly enhance the capacity for innovation in family businesses. Intergenerational collaboration is one such mechanism, with younger family members introducing fresh perspectives and technological expertise (Miller & Le Breton-Miller 2021). Strategic partnerships with external stakeholders, such as suppliers and vendors, provide access to critical resources and technologies. Furthermore, adopting a customer-centric approach facilitates the development of tailored solutions that align with market needs.

Training Needs for Fostering Innovation

Training is essential for overcoming barriers and fostering a culture of innovation. Digital literacy programs, focusing on social media marketing and analytics, are particularly beneficial for family businesses (Bera, 2023; Faruque, Chowdhury, Rabbani & Nure, 2024). Workshops on creative thinking and problem-solving equip entrepreneurs with the skills to devise innovative marketing strategies. Courses on integrating advanced technologies, such as AI, further enhance the technical competence of family business stakeholders.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the dynamics of marketing innovation in family businesses, there is a need for more empirical research focusing on specific cultural and regional contexts. For instance, Malaysian family businesses operate within unique socio-economic conditions that influence their approach to innovation. Future research should explore these nuances to develop tailored solutions that address local challenges and leverage regional opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research was designed to provide in-depth insights into the innovative marketing strategies employed by family businesses in Malaysia. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore the complexities and nuances of this subject. This approach was deemed suitable given the need to capture detailed perspectives and contextual factors influencing innovation within family businesses.

Research Design

This study employed a multiple case study design, which allowed for a comparative analysis across different family businesses. This approach was chosen to capture both commonalities and differences in marketing innovation practices among these enterprises. Given the industry-specific nature of family businesses in Malaysia, this method provided a contextualized understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities they face. However, a key limitation of this design is its limited generalizability, which is addressed in the discussion section.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews which facilitated open-ended discussions with the key informants. Respondents included family business owners, managers, and other decision-makers who had significant roles in shaping their business strategies. The interviews aimed to uncover:

- The types of marketing innovations implemented.
- The mechanisms and resources supporting innovation.
- The barriers encountered during implementation.
- Training needs to enhance innovation capacity.

To enhance transparency and reproducibility, as well as to ensure reliability and richness of data, interviews were recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Observational notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information during the interviews. To strengthen the

validity of findings, the study also incorporated document analysis, reviewing marketing plans, reports, and available internal business communications. The business social medias also included as study sample to provide rich data about existing promotional activities. The integration of both quantitative data collection alongside qualitative interviews considered beneficial to provide triangulated insights into the impact of marketing innovations.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria. These included businesses that had been operating for at least two generations (ensuring stability and experience in marketing), had a history of implementing marketing strategies, and demonstrated a willingness to discuss their practices (ensuring data depth and openness in responses). This ensured that the data gathered was relevant and provided insights into the research questions.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns and themes within the collected data. The analysis followed a systematic process:

Familiarization: Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content.

Coding: Key ideas and concepts were labeled systematically to identify recurring themes.

Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that addressed the research objectives.

Interpretation: Themes were analyzed to derive meaningful insights and link them to existing literature.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before commencing the research. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms for all participants and businesses in the reporting process.

Trustworthiness of Data

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation by using multiple sources of data, including interviews, observational notes, and secondary documentation where available. Member checking was also conducted, allowing participants to review and verify the accuracy of their transcribed responses and interpretations.

By employing this robust methodological framework, the research was able to provide a comprehensive exploration of marketing innovation in family businesses, offering actionable insights for academia and practice. The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on four family businesses in Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including business owners and managers, to gather insights into their experiences with innovation. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed structured and semi-structured interview techniques. Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to extract meaningful insights.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive view of how family businesses in Malaysia adopt innovative marketing strategies to remain competitive in dynamic markets. The study uncovered various themes, mechanisms, and challenges, all of which are critical to understanding the intricate processes driving innovation in these enterprises.

Demographic Profile of Informants

The study involved four informants, each representing diverse experiences and roles within family businesses. The demographic details of the informants are as follows:

Gender and Age

The informants included one male and three females, aged between 30 and 69 years.

Roles

Three informants held managerial positions in their respective businesses, while one informant (Informant C) was the business owner. Informant C had delegated the management of their business to their son-in-law, continuing the family business legacy.

Type of Business

All informants operated in the food management industry, though their specific business types varied:

Informant A: Restaurant specializing in local cuisine.

Informant B: Bakery business.

Informant C: Catering services.

Informant D: Satay restaurant.

Business Experience

Informant A started their entrepreneurial journey in childhood, selling traditional snacks and nasi lemak prepared by their parents. With an initial capital of RM 50, they successfully established their restaurant and aim to pass the business to their children.

Informant B had varied experiences, including working as a receptionist and tailoring clothes, before entering the bakery industry. With 24 years of experience, Informant B's bakery business is now managed by their son-in-law, though they remain actively involved.

Informant C's experience stemmed from assisting their father in catering services.

Informant D had 14 years of management experience; they upheld the legacy initiated by their father-in-law.

Legacy Continuation

All informants emphasized the importance of sustaining their businesses for future generations, with several actively mentoring family members to ensure continuity.

Presented below are the key results structured thematically, offering detailed insights into the practices, support mechanisms, and barriers identified in the research. These findings are grounded in qualitative data and analyzed using the framework analysis method, ensuring a thorough and structured interpretation.

Theme I: Innovations in Marketing Strategies

Family businesses demonstrated various levels of innovation, often tied to their product offerings and market positioning. Key innovations included:

Product Diversification: Businesses expanded their product lines to include variations that cater to specific customer needs, such as introducing new flavors, packaging styles, or eco-friendly materials.

“Yes, if you want me to explain everything from A to Z, there have been many changes. From making bread, I moved on to making cakes. I diversified the range of products I offered. Then, I created my own line of cookies.”

When I make my own cookies, they are not the same as others, even if the shape is similar. People can imitate the shape, but the taste will never be the same... [Informant B]

Digital Marketing: The use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok emerged as a dominant strategy for reaching younger, tech-savvy audiences.

"I'm not familiar with modern tools like Facebook. It's actually my son-in-law who handles the posts. Sometimes, I just share what he posts." [Informant A]

Customized Services: Personalized offerings, such as tailored wedding packages, highlighted the potential of niche marketing.

"Essentially, I am a wedding planner, and my partner is as well. Recently, we expanded it into a full package. This means we've added more services, including providing a photographer, outfits, makeup, a DJ, wedding invitations, and many other essentials related to wedding events..." [Informant C]

Theme II: Mechanisms Supporting Innovation

Successful innovations were often supported by:

Collaborative Efforts: Involvement of younger family members who introduced fresh ideas and technological expertise.

"When I took over the business, that's when we started implementing innovation. We introduced a wedding planner package." [Informant C]

Customer Feedback: Active engagement with customers to refine products and services.

"Actually, the ideas often come from the customers as well. Sometimes, they come in and suggest improvements, saying things like, "Do it this way" or "Add this." So, a lot of the improvements are inspired by customer feedback..." [Informant D]

Strategic Partnerships: Collaborations with suppliers and vendors to access new resources and technologies.

"Currently, we have four large mixers, one spare mixer, two tall machines, and one smaller machine. We work closely with the machine suppliers so that they will always be there for any troubleshooting..." [Informant B]

Theme III: Barriers to Innovation

Despite their successes, family businesses encountered several barriers, including:

Resistance to Change: Older generations often hesitated to adopt new methods or technologies.

"This part is a bit challenging. However, the machine I bought back in 1999 is still functioning well to this day." [Informant D]

Financial Constraints: Limited budgets restricted investments in advanced tools and training.

"For now, we're just using a blender. We've applied for funding to get a proper machine, but there's been no response. If nothing happens, we'll save up and buy it ourselves next year." [Informant A]

Knowledge Gaps: A lack of awareness about emerging trends and technologies hindered decision-making.

"If you're selling satay, you don't necessarily need to use technology like machines." [Informant D]

Theme IV: Training Needs

The study identified a critical need for targeted training programs to support innovation:

Digital Literacy: Training in social media marketing, e-commerce platforms, and analytics tools.

“During the Movement Control Order (MCO), we used Cash on Delivery (COD) for biryani. We would take orders, collect them, and deliver them house-to-house. However, we didn’t utilize any systems or apps; it was done manually. We need to learn how to use these tools effectively.” [Informant C]

Creative Thinking: Workshops to foster creativity and problem-solving skills.

“It’s also very important, as I mentioned. We need to apply our packages and equipment according to the current trends. As people say, the more advanced an economy becomes, the more we need to upgrade our tools.” [Informant C]

Technical Skills: Courses on using AI and other emerging technologies for marketing purposes.

“But if I were to share, the only technology I use for promotion is just my phone.” [Informant A]

“The easiest way to promote your product is using YouTube. You can learn by yourself. another high tech is difficult. Some more I did not know where to learn about those digital marketing techniques...” [Informant D]

Thematic Analysis Using Framework Analysis Method

To effectively present the findings using the framework analysis method, thematic analysis results are organized into tables for better clarity and reader engagement. Table 1 below presents the major themes and their corresponding sub-themes, along with supporting data. This tabular representation enhances the clarity of the findings, making it easier to identify key insights and align them with the research objectives and existing literature. Each theme and sub-theme are substantiated with specific examples and participant quotes, enriching the narrative with depth and authenticity.

Table I Thematic Analysis Using Framework Analysis Method

	Sub-Themes	Supporting Data
Innovative Practices	Product Diversification	Businesses introduced eco-friendly packaging, personalized services, and niche products.
	Digital Marketing	Use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to reach younger audiences.
	Customer Feedback Integration	Active collection of feedback to refine and improve product offerings.
Support Mechanisms	Intergenerational Collaboration	Younger family members contributed technological skills and fresh ideas.
	Strategic Partnerships	Collaboration with suppliers and vendors for resource sharing and technology access.
	Customer-Centric Approach	Focus on direct engagement with customers to co-create value.
Barriers to Innovation	Resistance to Change	Senior members were reluctant to adopt new technologies or methods.
	Financial Constraints	Limited budgets restricted investments in tools and training.
	Knowledge Gaps	Lack of awareness about emerging trends and their business implications.
Training Needs	Digital Literacy	Training on e-commerce, social media analytics, and digital marketing tools.
	Creative Thinking	Workshops to enhance problem-solving and innovation in marketing strategies.
	Technical Skills	Courses focused on integrating AI and other advanced technologies into marketing practices.

DISCUSSIONS

Innovation is a widely discussed concept in business, yet its understanding varies significantly among small business operators. For some, the term remains unfamiliar, as they are often deeply rooted in traditional practices and daily operational challenges. This lack of familiarity is not uncommon in smaller enterprises, where the focus is often on survival and incremental growth rather than transformative change (Moreno-Menéndez, Arzubiaga, Díaz-Moriana & Casillas, 2022). In this study, the variation in conceptions of innovation among informants highlights a gap in awareness and understanding. While some operators equate innovation with basic improvements or diversification, others perceive it as a strategic process involving significant changes to ensure long-term competitiveness. The following section explores these differing conceptions, shedding light on the varying levels of innovation awareness among small business operators.

Based on the interview findings, two informants, A and B, were unfamiliar with the definition of innovation. Meanwhile, the other two informants, C and D, provided distinct definitions based on their individual understanding and knowledge. Informant C defined innovation as improving existing products, while Informant D described innovation as developing a business through change, overcoming risks, and making smart decisions to remain relevant over the long term. At its core, innovation involves modification or enhancement. Informant C offered a concise interpretation of innovation, focusing on product improvement, whereas Informant D provided a more detailed perspective, emphasizing the strategic aspects of innovation necessary for long-term business success.

The findings underscore the importance of a strategic approach to innovation in family business marketing strategies. The adoption of innovative practices, such as digital marketing and product diversification, not only enhances competitiveness but also ensures adaptability in dynamic market conditions. These findings align with Pratono (2022), who emphasized that innovation in marketing elements such as pricing, product design, and promotional techniques significantly contributes to business resilience.

The involvement of younger family members, who bring technological expertise and fresh perspectives, was identified as a critical mechanism supporting innovation. This aligns with the findings of Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2021) and Agnihotri & Bhattacharya (2024), who argue that intergenerational collaboration is essential for sustaining innovation in family businesses. Similarly, customer feedback played a pivotal role in refining marketing strategies, reflecting the observations of Sheth, Jain & Ambika (2023) and Söderström & Kock (2023) on the growing importance of consumer-centric approaches in digital marketing.

However, the study revealed significant barriers, such as resistance to change among senior family members and financial constraints. These challenges resonate with Ferrari (2023); Lorenzo, et al (2022), who noted that entrenched traditions and limited access to resources often hinder innovation in family businesses. Addressing these barriers requires targeted interventions, including training programs focused on digital literacy and creative thinking, which are increasingly essential in today's Industry 4.0 landscape.

The implications for practice are profound. Policymakers should consider providing financial incentives and grants tailored to family businesses, facilitating their transition to more innovative practices. Educational institutions also have a role in equipping entrepreneurs with the necessary skills through specialized training and certification programs (Tiberius, Stiller & Dabić, 2021). As Zapata-Cantu, et al., (2023) noted, fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation is pivotal for ensuring the long-term sustainability of family businesses.

By linking these findings to existing literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of innovation in family businesses, offering actionable recommendations for stakeholders to support growth and sustainability. The findings underscore the importance of a strategic approach to innovation. Businesses that successfully integrate innovative marketing strategies demonstrate adaptability and resilience. The study's insights align with Malaysia's Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0) goals, emphasizing the integration of technology in traditional sectors.

Implications for Practice

Family Business Development: Encouraging a culture of innovation within family businesses can lead to sustainable growth and intergenerational success.

Policy Support: Policymakers should provide grants and incentives to support innovation in family enterprises.

Educational Initiatives: Universities and training institutions should design programs that address the unique needs of family businesses.

Future Research Directions

While purposive sampling provided rich, detailed insights, it introduces potential selection bias, which may limit the generalizability of findings. To mitigate this, future research should consider random sampling methods or a larger, more diverse sample across industries. Expanding the sample size could improve the study's applicability to family businesses beyond the specific industries examined.

Further studies could expand the scope to include diverse industries and explore the long-term impact of innovative strategies on business performance. Quantitative analyses could complement qualitative findings to provide a broader understanding of innovation in family businesses.

CONCLUSIONS

Innovation in marketing strategies is vital for the survival and growth of family businesses. By embracing change, leveraging technology, and investing in training, these enterprises can enhance their competitiveness and contribute to Malaysia's economic development. The findings offer a roadmap for family businesses to navigate the complexities of the modern market, ensuring their legacy for future generations.

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