

# The Scarcity of MENA-Focused Family Business Research: A Systematic Literature Review

Israa Mahgoub, Yuxin Lin  
New York University Abu Dhabi  
Published Date: 05 April 2024

**Keywords:** Systematic Literature Review, Family Business, Middle East

## 1. Introduction

This systematic review offers useful insights to scholars to not only demonstrate with concrete evidence that MENA family businesses are indeed significantly under-researched, but it also serves as a benchmark for global scholars to assess research coverage in their respective regions of interest. Our review also contributes to filling a critical gap using an innovative approach: literature reviews rarely examine family firms from a regional perspective ([Csákné Filep et al., 2023](#)). Addressing this, our review advocates for a more balanced and inclusive global research landscape in family business. This encourages cross-country analysis of family firms - an area with untapped potential for enriching our understanding of family businesses worldwide ([Bornhausen, 2022](#)).

## 2. Methodology

Systematic literature review is a process where researchers rigorously and systematically locate, assess, and aggregate the outcomes from all relevant studies related to a particular topic of interest. This method is especially useful in mapping out areas where there may not yet be a significant body of empirical studies ([Brereton et al., 2007](#)). We conducted this systematic review in three stages. The first stage is setting the research strategy, where we identify the relevant databases, information sources, publications types and format as well as keywords that lead to publications that align with our research scope. The second stage is initial data collection where we run the research and download all potentially relevant publications, then refine the papers downloaded to keep only the relevant ones. The third stage consists of scanning all downloaded publications and data extraction.

## **2.1 Designing Research Strategy**

### **2.1.1 Identifying Information sources**

To locate information sources, we started out by identifying the most frequent and directly relevant information sources used in key systematic literature reviews in the field of family business. This resulted in Scopus database, which at the time of conducting our review had indexed the three leading academic journals exclusively dedicated to family firms ([Rovelli et al., 2022](#)), namely Family Business Review, Journal of Family Business Strategy, and Journal of Family Business Management, in addition to a wide array of scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings. Given that the first language in the majority of countries we are exploring is Arabic, we added Arabic databases such as Arab World Research Source and Al Mandumah, which were the two most comprehensive sources for research on family business across various disciplines.

### **2.1.2 Selection of Publications**

To guide the initial search, we set the main criteria that translate directly into keywords, filters, and parameters for the search engines. This stage is about identifying all potentially relevant publications, before later refining them. The initial criteria are:

- 1) Study types: peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, conference proceedings
- 2) Study format: systematic literature reviews, bibliometric analyses
- 3) Study topic: family business (all research areas, thematic focuses or disciplinary approaches)
- 4) Study publication date: 2022 - 2023

Then, we identified a list of keywords based on environmental scans and preliminary research. The keywords are: *family business, family firm, family enterprise*, as well as *research, literature, systematic literature review and bibliometric*. These keywords were entered in a permutative combination into Scopus database and their Arabic translations were entered into the Arab World Research Source and Al Mandumah databases.

## **2.2 Data Collection and refining sources**

After conducting the initial search and generating a large pool of potentially relevant publications, all publications were manually screened to ensure that they qualified for our review, and to eliminate any duplicates. Publications included in the review must a) meet the four initial criteria outlined above and b) include results or findings related to the geographical scope of the literature reviewed. Any publication that did not meet these conditions was excluded at this stage.

## 2.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

In this phase, we carefully went through each paper that met our inclusion criteria. The data extraction process was designed to capture key information that directly pertains to our research scope: the prevalence of MENA-focused research in family business literature. For each paper, we extracted all the relevant findings and results. To systematically analyze this data, we employed a coding framework that helped categorize each paper's findings. For papers that provided direct conclusions aligning or conflicting with our hypothesis, these conclusions were noted verbatim. For papers without direct conclusions, we checked if MENA was mentioned in the context of research coverage. If MENA was mentioned, however, we further categorized the mention based on the geographical unit and language used (i.e. MENA, Arab world, specific MENA countries, and broader language like 'East'), then we determined what the paper said about the geographical unit, categorizing it as either 'understudied/underrepresented' or 'studied/represented'.

## 3. Results & Discussion

Tables 1-3 provide an overview of the publications included in this systematic review. Table 1 provides a summary of the reviewed sources categorized based on their format and publication date. A total of 36 publications met the inclusion criteria, the majority being peer-reviewed articles published in 2022 and 2023. Table 2 shows the distribution of publications by methodology. Systematic literature reviews account for most of the sample, in total 23 papers. The remaining 14 papers are equally divided between bibliometric analysis and a combination of both methods. Table 3 presents a thematic breakdown of the 36 publications included in our systematic review.

### 3.1 Data overview

Table 1 - Overview of Reviewed publications - Type			
Format and Publication Date	Excluded	Included	Total
Peer-Reviewed Articles (2023)	17	18	34
Peer-Reviewed Articles (2022)	9	18	27
Book chapters (2022)	3	0	3
Book chapters (2023)	2	0	2
Conference papers	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>67</b>

Table 2 - Overview of Included publications - Methodology	
Methodology	Count
Systematic Literature Review	23
Bibliometric Analysis	7
A combination of Systematic Literature Review & Bibliometric Analysis	7

Table 3 - Overview of Included publications - Thematic focus	
Theme	Number of papers
Succession	5
Strategic Management and Innovation	7
Internationalization and Market Dynamics	5
Social Responsibility and Sustainability	4
Organizational Outcomes and Performance	4
Gender	4
Other	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>

### 3.2 Findings

Table 4 shows the current state of scholarly literature across different themes within the field of family business. It showcases the geographical scope of existing literature, drawing attention to a pronounced discrepancy in the volume and focus of research outputs. The table not only reveals a stark underrepresentation of MENA-focused studies across various thematic areas but also illuminates the broader issue of regional imbalance within academic research.

Table 4 - Geo scope results				
Theme	References of reviewed studies	Literature date range	Research areas of reviewed studies (in the field of family business)	Geo scope summarized findings
Succession	Jahwari and Alwi, 2023; Baltazar et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Marques et al., 2023; Asi et al., 2022	1991 - 2023	Succession Planning Implementation, Succession and Innovation, Identities in Succession, Leaders' Socioemotional Wealth in Succession, Spirituality and Succession	The systematic literature reviews on succession find that the vast majority of research on the topic is conducted on family businesses in North America (especially the United States), Europe and Asia (especially the developed countries); in contrast to only few studies on the Middle East or the Arab world. Most of the research on the topic has been published in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United states in addition to

				other European countries more broadly.
Strategic Management and Innovation	Anwar et al., 2023; Pütz and Werner, 2023; Ahmad Tipu, 2023; Smajić et al., 2023; Tirdasari et al., 2022; Sindakis et al., 2022	1984 - 2022	Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial strategies, Absorptive Capacity, Organizational Structure, Future perspective of socioemotional wealth (SEW), Digital Adoption	The systematic literature reviews on strategic management and innovation find that the vast majority of research on the topic is conducted on family businesses in Europe (e.g. United Kingdom, Germany, Italy) and the United States. None of the studies mention the Middle East or the Arab world. Research on the developing world focuses on Asia (eg. India, South Korea, and Japan).
Internationalization and Market Dynamics	Maggi et al., 2023; Bargoni et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022; Rondi et al., 2022; Bornhausen, 2022	1991 - 2022	International Entry Modes, Consumer Behavior, Globalization, Family Multinationals, Cross-Country Analyses of Family Firms	Three of the five systematic literature reviews on internationalization and market dynamics noted the dominance of research about family businesses in the United States on this topic. Many studies also focus on family businesses from other developing countries in Europe. An increasing number of works are also published in Asian countries (eg. China, India, and South Korea). Systematic reviews under this topic also mentioned that there is also multi-national research.
Social Responsibility and Sustainability	Stock et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Stasa and Machek, 2022; Reina et al., 2023; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2023	2001 - 2022	Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability Disclosures, Social Capital in Family Business, Socioemotional Wealth	The systematic literature reviews on social responsibility and sustainability find that the vast majority of research on the topic is conducted on family businesses in North America, Europe, and Asia (both Eastern and Southern). Out of the papers examined, there is one directly included empirical data from the Middle East.
Organizational Outcomes and Performance	Amato et al., 2022; Beliaeva et al., 2022; Pu et al., 2022	1991 - 2020	Employment Outcomes, Family Business Success, Marketing, Governance and performance	The systematic literature reviews on organizational outcomes and performance find that the vast majority of research on the topic is conducted on family businesses in the United States and European countries like Italy and Spain. None of the studies mention the Middle East or the Arab world. Among the developing countries, China is one of the top regions publishing research on this topic.
Gender and diversity	Bang et al., 2023; Bağış et al., 2023; Marín-Palacios, 2023; Boukhabza and Ouhadi, 2023	1990 - 2022 (with few studies between 1957 and 1989)	Women in Family Business Research Women / female Entrepreneurship, Women in Family Business Succession	All the systematic literature reviews on gender and diversity find that the United States is the most prolific in studying this topic in family business, typically followed by the United Kingdom and other European countries such as Italy. Two papers mention the lack of research on this topic in developing economics, with one directly noting the MENA region as one of them.
Family business research (comprehensive)	Bağış et al., 2023; Rovelli et al., 2022; Csákné Filep et al., 2023	1988 - 2022	Family business research	The systematic literature reviews on family business in general reveal that the United States produces the highest number of total papers published on this topic. Other North American countries, like Canada, and European nations, such as Germany, also contribute a substantial amount of research output. The large volume of publications from developed countries also

				translates into a high level of influence. One literature review specifically analyzes the frequency of citations for papers from different geographic regions, finding that patterns in citation rates mirrored the productivity rankings.
Other	Duan et al., 2023; Sandgren et al., 2023; Altin et al., 2022; Rodrigues and Franco, 2022	1958 - 2023	Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Accountants in Family Firms, Tourism Industry, Socioemotional Wealth, Copreneurial Businesses	This category includes systematic literature reviews with a variety of themes. Systematic literature reviews under this category find that the vast majority of research is conducted on family businesses in developed countries such as the United States, Australia, Italy, and Spain. None of the studies mention the Middle East or the Arab world.

### 3.3 Limitations

While comprehensive in its approach, our analysis is subject to certain limitations that should be taken into account. Our primary reliance on the Scopus database may introduce a limitation in terms of coverage. Scopus is a robust source for family business journals and papers, a fact supported by its frequent usage in key systematic literature reviews on family business literature. However, it is worth noting that those SLRs predominantly pertain to research in management or business disciplines. Scopus popularity and comprehensiveness in fields such as humanities and history are less certain. In addition, the databases we covered primarily English and Arabic journals and publications, omitting French. The exclusion of French information sources might potentially lead to bias in the results of our study, especially when it comes to North Africa where French is a predominant language in research.

### 4. Conclusion

Despite the pivotal role of family businesses in MENA economies, our findings reveal that they are significantly underrepresented in scholarly literature, regardless of the research area or scope. While there are scholarly efforts to push research towards a more global direction, the distribution of published research remains highly unbalanced at the regional level, especially when it comes to MENA. The emerging attention in shifting away from Western-centric research and the growing attention on the importance of comparative studies that explore different cultural contexts might lead to a growing interest in studying MENA in the future.

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