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Beyond Bloodlines: A Review of Succession Planning and Generational Continuity in African Family Businesses

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic review of 107 peer-reviewed articles on succession planning in African family businesses, offering a conceptual reframing of succession as an institutionally embedded process rather than a discrete managerial task. Moving beyond proceduralist and Eurocentric paradigms, the review integrates institutional theory, socioemotional wealth, and dynamic capabilities to interrogate how cultural norms, economic constraints, and social expectations interact to shape succession outcomes. Findings reveal a dominance of informal, kinship-based succession practices that, while culturally coherent, often compromise gender inclusion, strategic renewal, and organizational resilience. This study introduces a Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) framework that synthesizes how succession success is mediated by the alignment between contextual forces and formal/informal planning mechanisms. Underrepresented subregions (e.g., Francophone and matrilineal societies) and overlooked themes (e.g., digital succession, gendered agency, and advisory ecosystems) are identified as critical frontiers for future research. The review concludes by proposing a theoretically generative agenda built on five propositions that reconceptualize succession planning through the lenses of institutional hybridity, temporal processuality, and intersectional legitimacy. This work provides a foundational synthesis for scholars and a diagnostic roadmap for practitioners seeking to structure inclusive, culturally attuned, and future-ready succession strategies in Africa.

1 | Introduction

Succession planning in family businesses has long been recognized as a determinant of longevity, resilience, and sustainability across generations (Sharma et al. 2012). This issue is particularly pressing in Africa, where family firms comprise a significant portion of the private sector and play a vital role in employment, GDP, and social capital (Olatunde et al. 2023). Studies have shown that succession is rarely a one-time event, but a complex, phased process shaped by formal training, informal mentorship, and family dynamics (Chrisman et al. 1998; Le Breton–Miller et al. 2004). Sustainability, defined as financial continuity and adaptability across social and generational lines (Chrisman et al. 2011), is increasingly tied to structured succession practices. Despite this understanding, many African family firms operate informally, often without governance frameworks or contingency plans (Hanane et al. 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of succession planning as a cornerstone of sustainability in family firms, scholarship on African contexts remains siloed, with limited attention to comparative dynamics across the continent (Handler 1994; Uhlaner et al. 2015). Africa is not a monolith; its family businesses operate within a spectrum of institutional strength, market development, and cultural inheritance systems (Olatunde et al. 2023). Yet, the bulk of extant literature treats these firms as conceptually and operationally uniform, masking substantial differences between, for example, Northern Africa's formal governance traditions and Sub-Saharan Africa's informal kinship-based practices (Khavul et al. 2009; Nwosu 2020). This lack of cross-national and intra-regional comparison restricts theoretical generalizability and stymies context-sensitive strategy development. Some studies, for instance, portray traditional leadership hierarchies and extended family roles as barriers to effective succession (Koiranen 2002), while others highlight their function in cultivating continuity and leadership legitimacy (Chrisman et al. 1998). These inconsistencies underscore an urgent need for integrative reviews that account for divergence and convergence in succession practices across African contexts (Zoogah et al. 2015).

The academic treatment of succession in African family businesses remains fragmented and lacks cumulative insight (Handler 1994; Uhlaner et al. 2015). There are theoretical and empirical blind spots: many studies treat African family firms as a homogeneous category, ignoring regional cultural, economic, and institutional variance (Khavul et al. 2009; Nwosu 2020). Moreover, the impact of gender roles, informal structures, and generational resistance remains under-theorized (Berndt and Meintjes 2023). The literature poorly represents key themes such as digital transformation, external advisory roles, and comparative multi-country dynamics (Kraus et al. 2021; Kupangwa et al. 2023). We also lack longitudinal insight on how succession evolves over time, as well as contextual frameworks that capture the co-evolution of socio-economic and familial variables. Thus, while we understand succession planning in theory, we know far less about how it unfolds in situ in African contexts characterized by volatility and cultural pluralism. This raises a critical research question: How can succession planning in African family businesses be conceptualized and structured to ensure sustainability across generations amid shifting social, economic, and technological realities?

The urgency of this question is underscored by the fact that African family businesses, unlike those in mature economies, operate in hybrid systems combining modern commercial logic with deeply entrenched kinship expectations (Koiranen 2002; Zoogah et al. 2015). These businesses often serve as economic units and social safety nets, responsible for generating wealth and supporting extended family welfare (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). Yet, intergenerational transfer is frequently marred by conflict, ambiguity, and patriarchal bias (Ferreira et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023). These firms also face external challenges, including political instability, weak institutions, and limited access to capital (Uhlaner et al. 2015). Understanding how succession and sustainability interact in such environments is crucial for academic clarity, effective managerial practice, and informed public policy.

This study conducts a systematic and critically structured synthesis of 107 peer-reviewed works to address these shortcomings, following the protocol outlined by Denyer and Tranfield (2009). This review identifies prevailing themes, interrogates contradictions, evaluates methodological dispersion, and highlights regionally specific approaches. It provides a consolidated reference point for future theoretical and empirical inquiries, building on recent contributions (Kupangwa et al. 2023; Daspit et al. 2021). By doing so, it responds to long-standing calls for cumulative knowledge building in family business succession (Pittino 2013; Memili et al. 2015), laying the groundwork for an informed research agenda grounded in African realities.

This review contributes to theory by critically consolidating 107 studies and challenging the assumption that succession frameworks developed in Western contexts are universally applicable. It shows that African succession is shaped by unique combinations of informal mentoring, cultural norms, and economic constraints (Hanane et al. 2023; Borham et al. 2023). We offer a new conceptual lens that integrates institutional and family systems theories to explain the fragmented, negotiated, and often informal nature of succession in these settings.

Our contribution is also contextual. This study is the first to systematically analyze succession practices across different African regions, drawing attention to variation by geography, development stage, and cultural norms (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023). For instance, we observe greater formality in Northern Africa compared to more informal, trust-based systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. The review reveals the overlooked roles of women, external advisors, and digital tools in succession issues, particularly salient in Africa's rapidly urbanizing and digitizing economies (Kupangwa et al. 2023). By mapping these contextual variables, we lay a foundation for comparative studies and the development of empirically grounded theories.

Ultimately, this review is relevant to practitioners, educators, and policymakers. It provides a diagnostic framework for family business owners to assess and enhance their succession practices. It identifies gaps in existing training and advisory services for educators and advisors. For policymakers, it highlights where institutional support, such as legal frameworks for inheritance or incentives for governance, could bolster succession outcomes. Ultimately, our work advocates for a shift away from generic succession templates toward culturally attuned, inclusive, and forward-looking models.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological foundation of the study, detailing the systematic literature review (SLR) protocol adopted, the databases consulted, the inclusion criteria, and the analytical techniques employed to ensure rigor and replicability. Section 3 presents the analytical findings, organized around five sub-research questions that examine succession planning practices, barriers, contextual determinants, strategic outcomes, and unresolved theoretical gaps. Section 4 offers a critical discussion that situates the findings within broader institutional and family business theories, advancing a context-sensitive theorization of succession in African family enterprises. Section 5 concludes the study by synthesizing its theoretical contributions, practical implications, and proposing a forward-looking research agenda articulated through five generative propositions.

2 | Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach grounded in the evidence-based framework proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009). This method was selected to address the fragmented and heterogeneous knowledge base on succession planning in African family businesses, enabling synthesis across

TABLE 1 | Key themes and their association with research questions.

Theme	SRQ1	SRQ2	SRQ3	SRQ4	SRQ5
Formal versus informal succession	X			X	X
Mentorship and leadership development	X			X	X
Intergenerational conflicts		X	X		X
Financial constraints		X			X
Gender dynamics		X	X		X
Cultural norms and expectations			X		X
Business continuity and sustainability				X	X

Source: Author.

diverse empirical and conceptual contributions while maintaining methodological transparency and replicability. The review follows five structured stages: (1) question formulation, (2) locating studies, (3) study selection and evaluation, (4) analysis and synthesis, and (5) reporting results (Denyer and Tranfield 2009).

2.1 | Research Question

This systematic review's overarching research question is: how can succession planning in African family businesses be conceptualized and structured to ensure sustainability across generations amid shifting social, economic, and technological realities?

This central question was formulated through an iterative pilot search involving the preliminary examination of 50 scholarly articles identified from Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar databases. These initial sources laid the foundation for understanding the current scope and thematic gaps in the literature, highlighting the need to explore succession planning within African family business contexts (Hanane et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023).

Following the CIMO (Context–Intervention–Mechanism–Outcome) logic articulated by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), the central research question explicitly delineates its conceptual parameters. The Context pertains to African family-owned businesses, which uniquely blend familial and entrepreneurial roles, thereby embedding their succession processes within complex socio-cultural dynamics (Khavul et al. 2009; Olatunde et al. 2023). The Intervention involves the formal and informal succession planning practices and strategies that these enterprises adopt. The Mechanisms relate to culturally mediated processes, including familial governance structures, gender dynamics, economic constraints, and mentorship practices, all of which influence succession effectiveness (Borham et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023). Lastly, the intended Outcome is sustainable intergenerational business continuity and growth (Ayoola et al. 2023).

The overarching research question was operationalized through five sub-research questions (SRQs) for a structured and comprehensive analysis. These SRQs, informed by identified gaps and thematic emphases (Table 1) from the pilot search, include:

SRQ1. *How do African family businesses employ succession planning practices and strategies?*

SRQ2. *How do scholars articulate and interpret the key challenges that hinder effective succession planning in African family businesses?*

SRQ3. *How do cultural, economic, and social dynamics shape succession planning processes within African family businesses?*

SRQ4. *In what ways do the outcomes of effective succession planning impact business sustainability and growth in African family businesses?*

SRQ5. *Which gaps and limitations are identified in the existing literature on succession planning in African family businesses, and what suggestions are offered for future research to strengthen theory and practice?*

The rationale behind these SRQs is twofold: first, to enable detailed thematic synthesis and second, to systematically address critical dimensions of succession planning in diverse African settings (Kupangwa et al. 2023; Daspit et al. 2021). Consequently, this methodological approach ensures rigorous interrogation of the literature, facilitating the advancement of scholarly understanding and practical relevance in managing leadership transitions for sustained organizational viability.

2.2 | Locating the Studies

To comprehensively synthesize the existing literature, a rigorous search strategy was executed across five scholarly databases selected for their distinct strengths and comprehensive coverage: Scopus, due to its extensive indexing of contemporary peer-reviewed literature in business and social sciences (Falagas et al. 2008; Martín-Martín et al. 2021); JSTOR, for its deep archival repository of seminal humanities and social science scholarship essential to tracing theoretical evolutions (Beckmann and von Wehrden 2012); Google Scholar, to minimize publication bias by capturing interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research (Haddaway et al. 2015); EBSCOhost, due to its targeted collection of management and economic journals pertinent to governance and organizational practices (Bramer et al. 2017); and African Journals Online (AJOL), included to

TABLE 2 | Search protocol for selected literature sources.

Database	Article parts searched	Fields searched	Search string	Number of papers	Time span
Scopus	Title, abstract, keywords	All fields	Succession AND Planning AND Sustainability AND Family AND Business AND Africa	756	2000–2023
JSTOR	Title, abstract, caption	All fields	Succession AND Planning AND Sustainability AND Family AND Business AND Africa	597	2000–2023
AJOL	Title, abstract, keywords	All fields	Succession AND Planning AND Sustainability AND Family AND Business AND Africa	203	2000–2023
EBSCOhost	Title, abstract, keywords	All fields	Succession AND Planning AND Sustainability AND Family AND Business AND Africa	150	2000–2023
Google Scholar	Title, abstract, keywords	All fields	Succession AND Planning AND Sustainability AND Family AND Business AND Africa	196	2000–2023

Source: Author.

capture regionally published studies frequently overlooked by global indexing platforms, thus enriching the review with contextually relevant indigenous scholarship (Nwosu 2020; Zoogah et al. 2015). Our literature search initially relied on Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. To strengthen contextual coverage, the search was later extended to include AJOL and EBSCOhost, which provide broader access to African and Global South scholarship often absent from mainstream indexes (Asongu and Nwachukwu 2016; Nkomo 2015). Web of Science and publisher-specific databases, such as Wiley, Emerald, and Elsevier, were not consulted separately, as their content substantially overlaps with Scopus and Google Scholar (Falagas et al. 2008), and access constraints limited feasibility (Onyancha 2019). The final selection of databases was therefore guided by both methodological considerations, including the balance between global and regional sources, and pragmatic factors such as coverage and accessibility (Okeke 2024).

Searches were structured using Boolean logic, combining targeted keywords such as "succession planning," "African family business," "business continuity," and "sustainability" (Table 2). Queries were adapted to each database's syntax, optimizing search precision and comprehensiveness. The search was restricted to English-language peer-reviewed journal articles focusing on African family businesses that contribute to succession planning and sustainability, published between 2000 and 2023 to reflect contemporary scholarly developments and emerging managerial practices within African family businesses (Hanane et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). This structured approach ensured methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability, aligning with best practices for systematic reviews as recommended by Denyer and Tranfield (2009).

2.3 | Study Selection and Evaluation

To ensure comprehensive coverage and analytical rigor, a systematic and replicable selection procedure was employed in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al. 2009). The initial search across five scholarly databases yielded a total of 1902 records: Scopus (756), JSTOR (597), African Journals Online (AJOL, 203), EBSCOhost (150), and manually retrieved articles from Google Scholar (196). These databases were selected for their complementary strengths in indexing international, interdisciplinary, and regionally grounded literature, thereby maximizing relevance to the African family business succession context. Following the removal of duplicate records, 1554 unique articles remained. Titles and abstracts were systematically screened to assess their preliminary relevance to the core themes of succession planning, African family businesses, and sustainability. At this stage, 1230 articles were excluded, primarily due to a lack of thematic alignment with the review focus. The remaining 324 articles proceeded to full-text evaluation.

A set of strict inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied. Studies were included if they met the following conditions: (1) publication in a peer-reviewed journal or high-impact conference proceeding, (2) explicit focus on succession planning within African family-owned businesses, and (3) contribution to empirical, conceptual, or review-based discussions on sustainability or

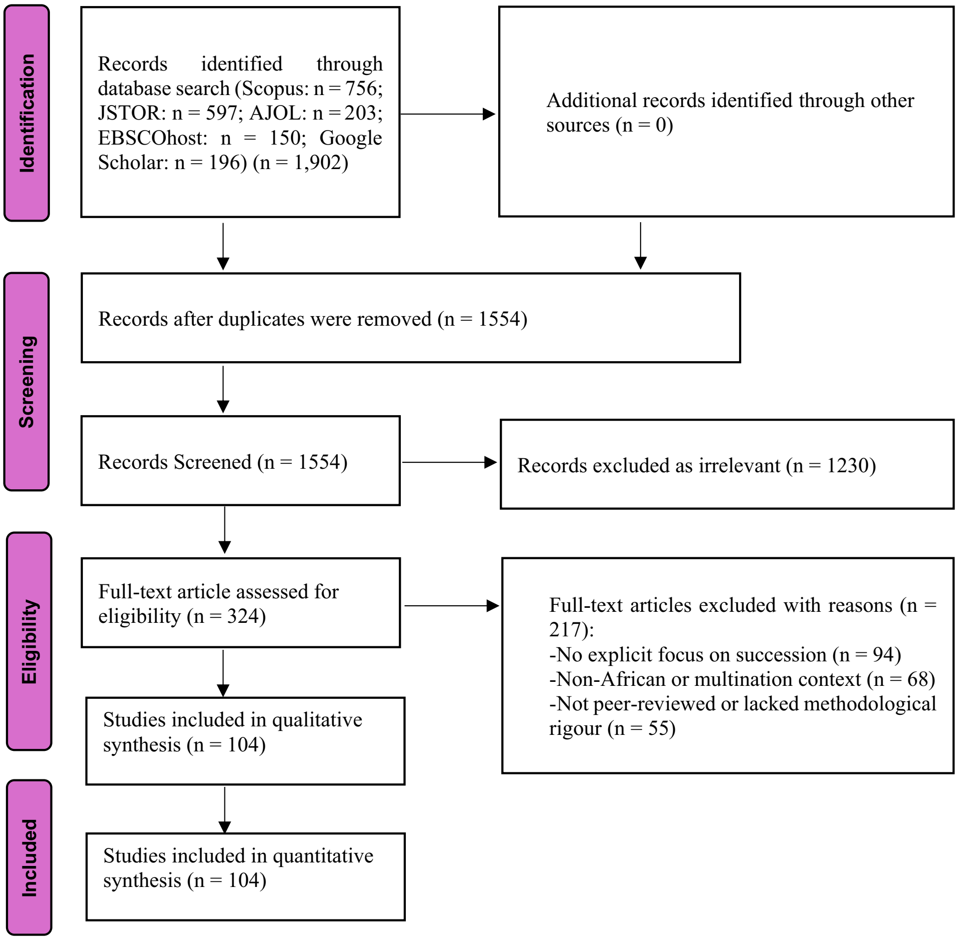

FIGURE 1 | The research PRISMA diagram. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

business continuity. Excluded materials comprised non-English texts, editorials, opinion pieces, book chapters, case reports, and articles lacking geographical or conceptual relevance to the research objective (Snyder 2019; Booth et al. 2021).

To ensure methodological rigor and relevance, all articles were independently assessed by two reviewers using an adapted version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, a widely recognized tool for evaluating the trustworthiness, relevance, and results of published research across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies (CASP 2018). The assessment focused on five key criteria: clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of study design, transparency of methodological procedures, focus on succession planning, and contextual relevance to African family businesses. Inter-rater reliability, measured using Cohen's kappa, was $\kappa = 0.83$, indicating a strong level of agreement. Only studies meeting a minimum of four out of the five evaluative benchmarks were retained, thereby safeguarding the conceptual integrity and empirical robustness of the final synthesis (Snyder 2019; Booth et al. 2021). To enhance consistency and reduce reviewer bias, a structured inclusion protocol was developed. Each article was subjected to two rounds of independent screening, drawing on information in titles, abstracts, and keywords. Prior to this, a calibration exercise involving 50 randomly selected abstracts was undertaken to align coding practices and ensure inter-rater consistency. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus, in accordance with recognized protocols for enhancing the reliability of qualitative research reviews (Miles and Huberman 1994).

During the full-text assessment, 217 articles were excluded on the following grounds: absence of explicit focus on succession planning ($n = 94$), non-African or multinational contexts ($n = 68$), or insufficient methodological rigor or peer-review validation ($n = 55$). This rigorous multi-stage filtering process resulted in 107 articles deemed appropriate for final synthesis.

The search period was restricted to literature published between 2000 and 2023, capturing significant shifts in business practice, theoretical framing, and socio-economic conditions relevant to succession planning in African contexts (Linnenluecke 2022). Furthermore, broad search terms were adopted to ensure coverage of diverse terminologies and conceptual frameworks used within the field. This approach enabled the identification of high-quality and thematically relevant literature, yielding an analytically robust and contextually grounded dataset. The PRISMA flow diagram visually summarizes the selection process (Figure 1).

2.4 | Data Extraction and Synthesis Strategy

A structured data extraction matrix was developed to ensure consistency and analytical depth across the included studies. Key variables captured included: study context (e.g., country and firm type), methodological approach (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), succession strategy typology (formal or informal), thematic focus (e.g., governance, gender, culture, and technology), and reported outcomes (e.g., sustainability, leadership continuity, and conflict resolution).

Guided by Denyer and Tranfield's (2009) thematic synthesis approach, findings were aggregated categorically and mapped to the study's sub-research questions. NVivo software was employed to facilitate initial open coding, with axial coding used to identify cross-cutting themes, conceptual patterns, and gaps in the literature (Miles and Huberman 1994). In addition to thematic synthesis, a meta-narrative approach was applied to reconcile divergent findings across regional contexts and theoretical traditions, thereby accommodating both convergence and divergence in succession planning scholarship (Tranfield et al. 2003). This combined analytical strategy ensured that the synthesis was comprehensive, methodologically transparent, and sensitive to the literature's contextual and epistemological heterogeneity.

3 | Analysis and Synthesis

This section presents the analytical and interpretive processes undertaken following the systematic review of 107 peer-reviewed studies. Grounded in Denyer and Tranfield's (2009) framework, the objective was not merely to aggregate findings but to critically interrogate the literature, divergent perspectives, and elucidate coherent thematic constructs. The analysis deconstructed each study to map its methodological posture, conceptual contribution, and empirical significance. This section aims to distill evidence-based patterns and highlight conceptual and empirical discontinuities by categorizing, coding, and contextualizing the data. The results are organized around the five sub-research questions and reflect both convergence and divergence across thematic categories, offering a basis for informed theoretical advancement and context-sensitive managerial application.

3.1 | Empirical Scope and Theoretical Positioning

Among the 107 articles reviewed, there is evidence of a growing scholarly commitment to understanding the sustainability of African family businesses through the lens of succession planning. The corpus reflects methodological plurality, with 62% of the studies being empirical, 25% case-based, and 13% adopting observational designs. This diversity enables triangulation across data types, allowing inductive insight and theoretical refinement. These studies collectively foreground the dual embeddedness of African family firms, operating at the intersection of formal market institutions and informal kinship-based governance structures. This duality, prominent in Sub-Saharan Africa and North African contexts such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt, suggests that succession planning cannot be theorized using universalist models derived from Western corporate traditions alone. When interpreted through an African institutional lens, the embedded governance perspective (Miller et al. 2011) provides a more grounded framework for examining the contextual logics of succession in these hybrid organizations.

The firms analyzed span a wide spectrum, ranging from formally registered medium-sized enterprises operating in regulated sectors, such as finance and manufacturing, to informal family-run businesses rooted in trade, agriculture, and services. The informality prevalent in many of these firms further complicates succession, often replacing structured governance with elder-based authority and kinship ties, a dynamic that is under-theorized in conventional succession models.

When mapped against the five sub-research questions, the distribution of studies reveals a relatively balanced thematic engagement. Approximately 24% of the articles examine succession planning practices, offering insight into the strategic and operational mechanisms through which leadership transfer is orchestrated. These include formal succession frameworks and informal, trust-based mentoring processes often absent in legal documentation but deeply embedded in cultural practice. About 27% focus on succession challenges, highlighting systemic barriers such as patriarchal inheritance systems, generational misalignment, lack of formal training, and intra-family conflict. This supports the institutional void theory (Khanna and Palepu 2010), suggesting that succession is vulnerable to disruption and fragmentation in the absence of formal governance structures. The largest share of studies (30%) examines cultural, economic, and social influences on succession planning. These findings reinforce the relevance of socioemotional wealth (SEW) theory (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007), particularly its emphasis on the non-financial goals that drive decisions in family businesses. In many African settings, the preservation of familial identity, social status, and community obligations often overrides efficiency-based imperatives, thus shaping succession trajectories in ways that are neither linear nor purely strategic. Fifteen percent of the studies investigate the outcomes of effective succession planning, linking successful leadership transitions to firm sustainability, long-term viability, and intergenerational continuity. These outcomes resonate with systems theory approaches, which view the family business as a dynamic interplay between family, ownership, and business subsystems. Finally, 4% of the reviewed literature explicitly addresses gaps and future research directions, calling for deeper engagement with cross-national comparisons, the role of gender in leadership transitions, and the impact of digital transformation on intergenerational succession. These gaps underscore the need for theory development that accounts for regional heterogeneity and the adaptive capacity of family firms operating under conditions of institutional flux.

The methodological and theoretical orientation of the 107 studies reviewed reveals a maturing body of scholarship that is increasingly attentive to the complex realities of succession planning in African family businesses. Qualitative methods comprise 62% of the studies (Table 3), primarily employing interviews, ethnographic case studies, and narrative analyses. These approaches are especially effective in uncovering the interplay of kinship structures, cultural norms, and leadership legitimacy, which are central to understanding succession in contexts where informal institutions often supersede codified governance (Ferreira et al. 2023; Hanane et al. 2023). The emphasis on qualitative inquiry reflects a deliberate methodological alignment with theoretical traditions that foreground embeddedness, such as institutional theory and socioemotional wealth (SEW) perspectives (Oliveira et al. 2023; Ayoola et al. 2023). Quantitative studies, comprising 22%, typically use surveys and statistical models to

TABLE 3 | Distribution of reviewed papers by focus, method, and theory.

Category	Number of articles	Percentage (%)
Themes mapped against sub-research questions		
Succession planning practices	26	24%
Challenges in succession planning	29	27%
Cultural, economic, and social influences	32	30%
Outcomes of succession planning	16	15%
Gaps in literature	4	4%
Methodological focus		
Qualitative studies	66	62%
Quantitative studies	24	22%
Mixed methods studies	17	16%
Theoretical grounding		
Empirical & theory-driven	83	78%
Atheoretical/conceptual	24	22%

Source: Author.

investigate succession outcomes, firm performance, and governance efficacy. While these studies offer valuable generalizability, they often fail to capture the socio-cultural subtleties of leadership transfer unique to African business environments (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). Nonetheless, their contribution to validating propositions drawn from qualitative work is indispensable, especially when examining the effect of structured succession frameworks on firm sustainability (Borham et al. 2023). Mixed-methods research comprises 16% of the literature and represents a methodological synthesis that allows statistical rigor and contextual depth. These studies are useful in advancing mid-range theory by linking observable patterns to the underlying socio-institutional mechanisms that shape succession dynamics across formal and informal enterprises (Kupangwa et al. 2023).

The theoretical grounding of the reviewed literature shows that 78% of the studies are empirically informed and explicitly theory-driven, drawing on conceptual frameworks such as socioemotional wealth theory (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007), institutional theory, and systems theory. These frameworks offer a multi-level lens for examining how intra-family dynamics influence succession planning, broader institutional voids, and regulatory uncertainties (Khavul et al. 2009; Zoogah et al. 2015). Conversely, 22% of the studies are atheoretical or conceptual, developing models or typologies without direct empirical testing. While these contributions have laid important groundwork, their limited engagement with the lived realities of African family businesses curtails their contextual robustness.

This methodological and theoretical distribution illustrates an evolving field marked by empirical richness and increasing conceptual sophistication. However, a critical need remains to adapt and expand theory to capture the hybrid realities of African family enterprises that operate at the nexus of tradition and modernity, as well as informality and institutionalization.

Future research must build on this foundation by developing context-sensitive frameworks that can account for the structural ambiguities and cultural logics uniquely defining succession in African business ecosystems (Olatunde et al. 2023; Nwosu 2020).

3.2 | Succession Planning Practices (SRQ1): Reframing Informality and Institutional Emergence

Succession planning practices in African family businesses remain largely shaped by informality, kinship authority, and cultural embeddedness. Across 107 reviewed studies, 45% identified succession strategies as predominantly informal, underscoring the continued reliance on unwritten protocols, family relationships, and trust-based transfer of leadership (Hanane et al. 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023). This persistent informality common in micro-enterprises and medium-sized family firms reflects what Khanna and Palepu (2010) define as an institutional void, where formal governance mechanisms are either absent or underdeveloped, and informal institutions step in as substitutes. However, interpreting this informality solely as a deficit overlooks its adaptive function. Within African contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan economies such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, family loyalty, ancestral authority, and elder-based legitimacy are not merely cultural residues but embedded governance mechanisms (Borham et al. 2023). These mechanisms ensure continuity in the absence of codified succession policies. In this sense, succession should not be framed as a transition of roles but as a transmission of socioemotional wealth (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007), where leadership continuity is tied to family identity, symbolic capital, and relational trust.

A critical theme in 38% of the studies is mentorship as a pathway to succession, albeit implemented informally and inconsistently (Oliveira et al. 2023). Mentorship in these contexts often involves observation-based learning and apprenticeship

TABLE 4 | Succession formalization typology in african family businesses.

Typology	Key features	Illustrative contexts	Theoretical implication
Embedded informality	Succession based on kinship ties, elder authority, and no formal documentation	Informal trade-based businesses in Nigeria and Ghana	Institutional voids filled by cultural norms and socioemotional wealth
Relational mentorship	Tacit knowledge transfer, family-based apprenticeship, minimal structure	Small family firms in Sub-Saharan Africa	Mentorship as a socio-cognitive transfer mechanism
Digitally mediated succession	Successors use digital tools to assert competence and reshape stakeholder ties.	Tech-savvy youth in SMEs, especially in Kenya and Nigeria	Digital capital as an emergent legitimacy strategy
Externally informed formalism	Structured succession frameworks are often driven by advisors or academic training.	Medium-sized firms in Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa	Institutional hybridization via external governance models

Source: Author.

within family settings. However, without structured mentoring models and performance-based metrics, successors are often ill-prepared to navigate strategic and operational demands, especially in competitive markets (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). This underscores the gap between relational embeddedness and operational readiness. Younger generations are increasingly leveraging digital tools to reshape these succession dynamics. In a subset of recent studies (e.g., Edwin et al. 2023), successors use fintech platforms, e-commerce systems, and social media branding to modernize business models and assert legitimacy within family firms. These tools act as alternative forms of symbolic capital, especially in contexts where formal education or technical expertise is not traditionally prioritized in leadership transitions. Digital proficiency thus becomes a vector through which younger successors negotiate power, bridge generational divides, and establish external credibility among stakeholders.

Further, external actors, including universities, family business incubators, and succession-focused advisory firms, are beginning to influence formalization trajectories, particularly in urban centers and among firms transitioning to second and third-generation leadership. These actors introduce succession planning templates and competency-based mentorship frameworks, facilitating intergenerational dialogue. Their influence is most visible in North African countries like Egypt and Morocco, where exposure to international governance models has catalyzed more structured succession planning (Hanane et al. 2023; Edwin et al. 2023).

To advance theoretical understanding and account for the observed variation across regions, firm types, and institutional contexts, we propose a Succession Formalization Typology (Table 4) that captures the emergent spectrum of succession practices in African family businesses. This typology challenges the binary framing of succession as either “formal” or “informal” and instead situates practices along a continuum shaped by digitalization, generational agency, and external institutional influence. It highlights the role of younger successors as agents of change who reconfigure succession pathways by rejecting informality and recontextualizing it within hybrid governance models. Theoretical contributions from socioemotional wealth, institutional theory, and emerging digital legitimacy frameworks must be recalibrated to reflect these hybrid, evolving realities.

3.3 | Succession Challenges: Gender, Kinship, and Institutional Complexity (SRQ2)

Succession planning in African family businesses is not merely a managerial exercise, but a socio-institutional process shaped by embedded norms, fragmented governance structures, and competing generational ideologies. While the extant literature identifies intergenerational conflicts, financial constraints, and gender-based exclusions as dominant challenges, these phenomena must be reinterpreted through the prism of theories to uncover the deeper structuring logics that render succession processes both contested and culturally contingent.

Across 54% of the reviewed studies, intergenerational conflict emerges as the most frequently cited impediment to effective succession planning. However, rather than framing this as a clash of personalities or isolated disagreements, institutional theory encourages us to see such conflicts as symptomatic of institutional layering. That is, the younger generation often embodies the rational-legal norms of modern enterprise: digital acumen, meritocratic ideals, and formal governance, while the older generation remains embedded in traditional authority structures, privileging ancestral legitimacy and relational continuity (Hanane et al. 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023). These tensions represent more than generational divergence; they reflect institutional contradictions between market logics and familial

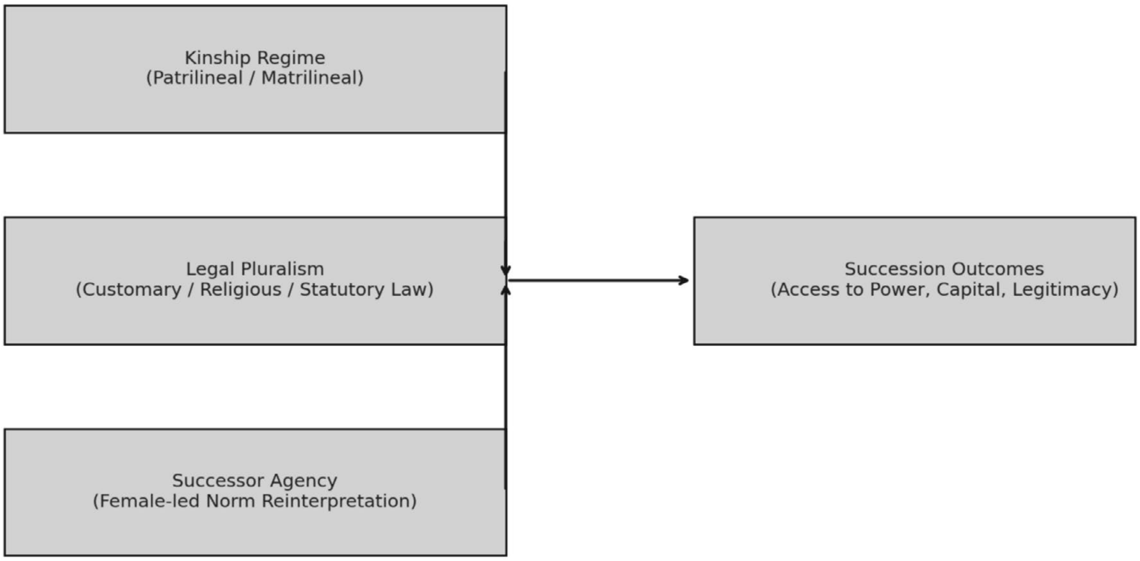

FIGURE 2 | Challenges shaping the successional outcome in African families.

obligation systems, a dualism particularly acute in Sub-Saharan contexts.

Financial constraints, identified in 48% of studies, further entrench succession discontinuities by limiting the capacity to professionalize leadership transitions. However, drawing on institutional voids (Khanna and Palepu 2010), these financial challenges should be viewed as outcomes of weak external markets for governance expertise, estate planning, and succession consulting services that are underdeveloped or inaccessible in many African economies. The result is a reliance on familial resources and kin-based decision-making, which, while adaptive, often undermine the development of systematic, equity-based transition models (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023).

Perhaps the most structurally embedded challenge and least theorized in existing literature is the intersection of gender, kinship systems, and legal pluralism. Gendered exclusions in succession are not simply a reflection of patriarchal preferences but are institutionalized through both customary inheritance laws and religious legal frameworks that vary dramatically across African regions. In patrilineal societies (e.g., among the Igbo of Nigeria or the Ashanti of Ghana), succession norms are often rigidly male-centric, undergirded by customary laws that reinforce male primogeniture. Here, female successors are either symbolically included (e.g., as custodians) or completely excluded, regardless of competence or involvement in the enterprise (Borham et al. 2023; Ayoola et al. 2023).

In contrast, matrilineal systems (e.g., the Akan of Ghana or certain Bantu groups in Malawi) offer alternate pathways for women to assert succession claims, albeit still filtered through male intermediaries such as maternal uncles. In these contexts, female successors often reinterpret their roles by leveraging education, digital capital, or external legitimacy (e.g., through board memberships) to bypass entrenched cultural gatekeepers. This gendered negotiation of power and legitimacy calls for a reconceptualization of succession as a site of institutional entrepreneurship, where successors strategically reframe inherited norms to align with evolving legal, economic, and cultural landscapes (Zoogah et al. 2015).

The overlay of religious law adds further complexity. In North African countries where Sharia-based inheritance laws co-exist with customary practices, female succession is often restricted by doctrinal prescriptions that allocate lesser inheritance shares to women. Yet, emergent evidence suggests that some families circumvent these restrictions through gifting practices or the establishment of family trusts, thereby enabling capable daughters to assume leadership without directly contravening religious mandates (Edwin et al. 2023). Such adaptations illustrate the plasticity of institutional rules when confronted with changing familial aspirations and business imperatives.

What emerges from this synthesis is a need to move beyond functionalist models of succession planning that privilege process optimization and toward a contextual theory of succession embedded in African socio-legal and kinship orders. Intergenerational conflict, financial incapacity, and gender exclusion are not isolated variables but mutually reinforcing outcomes of broader institutional logics that structure the family firm's access to power, capital, and legitimacy.

Accordingly, we propose an integrative framework (Figure 2) that captures the interaction between these challenges and how they influence succession outcomes: (i) Kinship Regime (patrilineal vs. matrilineal), (ii) Legal Pluralism (customary, religious, and statutory law) and (iii) Successor Agency (especially among female successors as institutional entrepreneurs). This framework generates new insight by showing how succession outcomes are contingent not merely on individual attributes or strategic planning but on the institutional configurations within which these practices are embedded. Female successors, in particular, navigate succession as inheritors and agents, reshaping norms through appeals to external legitimacy, coalition-building within the extended family, and selective appropriation of statutory rights when customary frameworks fail. Understanding how actors, especially women, reinterpret and reconfigure these terrains opens new pathways for theorizing succession not as a linear transfer of power but as a dynamic, negotiated process deeply embedded in African society's pluralistic and evolving institutional fabric.

3.4 | Recontextualizing Cultural, Economic, and Social Determinants of Succession (SRQ3)

The third sub-research question (SRQ3) interrogates how cultural, economic, and social institutions co-produce the conditions under which succession planning unfolds in African family businesses. While existing studies foreground these variables as discrete influences, this synthesis argues that they must be understood as mutually constitutive components of an embedded institutional framework that configures the structure, logic, and legitimacy of succession across diverse African settings.

In 58% of the reviewed studies, culture, particularly with respect to kinship, patriarchy, and respect for elders, is identified as a primary structuring force. Succession planning is often embedded within customary inheritance regimes that valorize male primogeniture and lineage continuity over meritocratic selection or external competence (Hanane et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). These norms are informal institutions that constrain the successor pool and elevate symbolic legitimacy over managerial acumen. From the standpoint of SEW theory (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007), these choices are not irrational but reflect a preference for preserving familial identity, continuity of bloodline, and social capital over financial optimization. However, this institutional prioritization frequently results in the appointment of ill-prepared successors and the exclusion of capable non-family or female members, undermining organizational resilience (Ferreira et al. 2023; Borham et al. 2023).

This cultural embeddedness exhibits cross-regional variation. In West African patrilineal contexts, such as among the Yoruba and Igbo, succession is typically intra-male and intergenerational. In contrast, in matrilineal systems (e.g., among the Akan of Ghana), succession decisions involve maternal relatives, creating more complex authority chains. Yet, even within matrilineal regimes, actual leadership roles often remain male-dominated, suggesting that the gender implications of kinship structures must be interpreted in conjunction with prevailing cultural scripts and institutional enforcement mechanisms.

Economically, 45% of studies highlight that the capacity to engage in formal succession planning correlates with regional development and institutional infrastructure (Oliveira et al. 2023). In more economically developed regions, such as Northern and Southern Africa, firms are more likely to access estate planning services, succession consultants, and formal education, leading to the development of codified succession strategies. In contrast, firms in economically peripheral zones rely on informal, often undocumented mechanisms driven by oral agreements and elder-mediated negotiation (Borham et al. 2023; Raimi 2020). This economic informality reflects and reinforces institutional voids (Khanna and Palepu 2010), where the absence of market-supporting institutions, such as regulatory clarity, legal recourse, and financial literacy, renders structured succession processes inaccessible and culturally suspect. However, economic factors also exhibit a recursive relationship with culture. In contexts where inheritance is framed not as individual capital transfer but as communal trust, economic decisions around succession are often made collectively, with the imperative to maintain socio-relational equity superseding market efficiency. As such, economic rationality is deeply embedded within culturally encoded definitions of fairness and obligation, particularly visible in regions where business assets are intertwined with ancestral land or communal wealth.

Social institutions, particularly the extended family and community networks, further shape succession trajectories. In 37% of the reviewed studies, succession decisions are influenced not only by the nuclear family but also by wider kinship and social groups, whose legitimacy must be managed and whose approval is often necessary for leadership continuity (Ferreira et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023). This dynamic aligns with family systems theory, which posits that leadership transitions are negotiated within systems of affective interdependence and relational complexity. The result is a heightened potential for delay, conflict, or negotiated compromise in successor selection, especially where business and family hierarchies are misaligned.

Community expectations also play a normative role. In many African contexts, businesses serve as socio-economic anchors for their communities, with obligations extending beyond shareholders to include clan members, religious institutions, and local patrons. These constituencies often exert informal veto power over succession outcomes, particularly in closely held enterprises where business legitimacy is tethered to social acceptability (Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). Consequently, successors must secure internal endorsement and external recognition, which introduces another layer of complexity into succession dynamics.

To systematize these insights, we advance the Embedded Institutional Framework for Succession (EIFS) in Table 5, which conceptualizes succession planning as the outcome of intersecting institutional domains. This framework demonstrates that

TABLE 5 | Embedded institutional framework for succession (EIFS).

Institutional domain	Theoretical anchor	Succession implication
Cultural norms	Socioemotional wealth theory	Preservation of family lineage often overrides meritocratic selection.
Economic structures	Institutional void theory	Informality dominates where regulatory and advisory support is weak.
Social expectations	Family systems theory	Extended kinship and community complicate successor legitimacy.

Source: Author.

succession in African family businesses is not merely a transfer of managerial control but a negotiated resolution among multiple, often conflicting, institutional logics. The interaction of these domains produces patterned variations in succession formality, inclusiveness, and sustainability, highlighting the need for theoretical models grounded not in ideal-typical organizational forms but in empirical realities of hybrid governance and evolving institutional orders. Only by embedding succession within these broader institutional terrains can scholars and practitioners generate contextually appropriate and theoretically generative interventions.

3.5 | Succession as Strategic Continuity: The Outcomes of Effective Planning (SRQ4)

The fourth sub-research question (SRQ4) investigates the consequences of effective succession planning on the sustainability and growth of African family businesses. Most existing literature presents a linear view of succession planning as a procedural tool for leadership transfer, conceptualizing succession as a strategic and institutional mechanism for preserving and reproducing family business continuity, identity, and adaptive capacity. However, we argue that succession planning outcomes extend beyond operational handovers, including legitimacy maintenance, knowledge retention, stakeholder confidence, and long-term strategic renewal.

Across 67% of the reviewed studies, effective succession planning is consistently linked to business continuity and sustained performance (Hanane et al. 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023). However, rather than treating continuity as a static condition, it should be seen as a function of *intergenerational knowledge integration*—a process through which tacit knowledge, relational capital, and reputational legitimacy are transferred and institutionalized. Drawing on organizational continuity theory (Barnett and Carroll 1995), succession planning ensures the preservation of business routines and the reconfiguration of leadership competencies to match emergent strategic challenges. In African contexts, where institutional volatility is common, such structured continuity becomes a luxury and a resilience strategy.

Succession planning also significantly shapes employee retention, morale, and engagement, discussed in 54% of the studies (Borham et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). From the vantage point of human capital theory, clear succession pathways signal internal career development prospects and organizational stability. Employees in such structures interpret succession plans as investments in organizational continuity and personal security. This aligns with the SEW construct, where family businesses are concerned with preserving affective endowments such as identity, family control, and social ties (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007). When succession is transparent and inclusive, it reduces uncertainty, fosters trust, and mitigates turnover risk, key outcomes in resource-constrained African enterprises where labor mobility is increasingly common.

Importantly, 42% of the literature indicates that effective succession planning fosters innovation and adaptability, qualities typically viewed as being at odds with tradition-bound family businesses (Hanane et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023). Through the theoretical lens of dynamic capabilities (Teece 2007), succession processes that incorporate strategic mentoring, early involvement in decision-making, and cross-generational collaboration enable firms to renew their routines, reconfigure their assets, and seize market opportunities. African family firms that embed successors into early leadership scaffolding, particularly those exposed to global trends, demonstrate heightened responsiveness to shifting market dynamics, regulatory reforms, and digital transformation imperatives (Borham et al. 2023).

This link between succession and innovation is particularly salient in rapidly changing African economies, where volatility in currency, policy, and consumer behavior demands agility. Where succession is poorly planned or deferred, firms often retreat into conservatism or collapse under strategic inertia. Conversely, where succession is used as a platform for strategic renewal, firms are more likely to attract talent, diversify products, and expand into new markets (Ayoola et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2020).

The outcomes of effective succession planning can be categorized into three interdependent domains (Table 6). This triadic model challenges simplistic assumptions that succession is merely an administrative event. Rather, it positions succession planning as a strategic capability that integrates continuity, social legitimacy, and adaptive learning to ensure long-term survival and competitive advantage. Importantly, in African family businesses where succession unfolds within pluralistic legal and cultural systems, the strategic function of succession is not just about "who takes over" but "how the future is envisioned, legitimated, and executed."

Future research should move toward dynamic, longitudinal models that track how succession planning intersects with shifting institutional landscapes, for example, generational migration, digitization, political reform, and demographic change. Such approaches would illuminate not just the outcomes of succession but its capacity to function as an anticipatory governance

TABLE 6 | Outcomes of effective succession planning.

Domain	Theoretical anchor	Key outcomes
Continuity	Organizational Continuity Theory	Stability during leadership transitions, reduced operational disruption
Capability Retention	Human Capital Theory, SEW	Employee morale, reduced turnover, and stakeholder confidence
Strategic renewal	Dynamic Capabilities	Innovation, responsiveness, and long-term competitiveness

Source: Author.

mechanism that aligns the aspirations of the next generation with the structural demands of volatile African markets.

3.6 | Gaps in Literature and Future Research Directions

The final sub-research question (SRQ5) focuses on identifying gaps in the literature and constructing a future research agenda that can advance succession planning theory within African family businesses. We argue that the literature suffers from conceptual underreach and theoretical misalignment, where empirical gaps reflect more profound epistemological and contextual blind spots. Existing studies replicate frameworks derived from Western governance models while under-theorizing the pluralistic, hybrid, and evolving institutional contexts that define African family enterprises. This calls for a shift from research *deficit-filling* to a more generative, theory-building orientation that reframes these gaps as opportunities to reconceptualize succession through indigenous logics, institutional pluralism, and emergent digital pathways.

Approximately 28% of the reviewed studies (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023) point to the absence of cross-regional comparative studies, noting the over-reliance on country-specific case studies that implicitly treat African family businesses as homogeneous. This oversight masks meaningful variation in succession strategies across political economies (e.g., Nigeria vs. Morocco), kinship systems (patrilineal vs. matrilineal), and institutional architectures (statutory vs. customary vs. religious law). Future research must adopt a comparative institutionalist approach to uncover how region-specific configurations, legal pluralism, inheritance cultures, and advisory ecosystems generate divergent succession pathways. Such a project would refine existing typologies and advance *middle-range theory* capable of accounting for convergence and divergence in African family enterprise systems.

While 23% of studies acknowledge the need for longitudinal analyses (Hanane et al. 2023; Oliveira et al. 2023), most current research treats succession planning as a static process, overlooking its evolution over time and across intergenerational cycles. This under-theorization of temporality limits our understanding of how succession outcomes are shaped by adaptive learning, reputational cycles, or policy changes. Future studies should deploy processual research designs to trace how succession decisions, legitimacy claims, and strategic choices unfold across multiple generations. This would allow for the theorization of succession not as a discrete event, but as an ongoing institutional reproduction and transformation process, what Giddens (1984) calls the "recursive constitution" of organizational practices.

Nineteen percent of the reviewed articles (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2023) briefly mention the role of external advisors, legal, financial, or business consultants, but treat their involvement as technical or incidental. This transactional framing neglects the potentially transformative role of advisors as institutional translators who mediate between local norms and global governance standards. Future research should interrogate how advisors co-create legitimacy, translate codified succession frameworks into culturally resonant models, and bridge informal governance with formal structures. Theoretically, this opens up a promising intersection between institutional work, boundary spanning, and advisory ecology theory, especially relevant in contexts where businesses operate across multiple logics.

Although noted in only 16% of studies (Borham et al. 2023), the impact of digital tools on succession planning remains under-explored. This represents a critical oversight given Africa's mobile-first digital leapfrogging and the increasing role of social media, fintech, and e-learning in redefining organizational practices. Successors now deploy digital tools for operational efficiency and as symbols of generational legitimacy, reshaping brand identity, stakeholder communication, and knowledge management. Future research should theorize digital capital as an emergent resource in succession processes, particularly among younger leaders seeking to modernize legacy enterprises. Conceptually, these invite integrating Bourdieu's capital theory with digital transformation frameworks to analyze how successors reconfigure power, status, and competence within digitally mediated succession arenas.

While gender exclusion in succession is widely noted, most studies remain descriptively thin or analytically siloed. What remains absent is a rigorous intersectional framework that links gender with kinship regime, legal pluralism, and successor agency. For example, while patrilineal systems favor male succession, female successors in matrilineal systems often exercise symbolic leadership filtered through male intermediaries (Ayoola et al. 2023). Moreover, religious law, particularly Sharia inheritance principles in North Africa, may constrain formal leadership succession but can be circumvented through informal mechanisms, such as waqf or gifting. Future studies must investigate how female successors act as institutional entrepreneurs, strategically invoking statutory rights, leveraging digital capital, or mobilizing community support to bypass restrictive norms. This will advance gendered institutional theory, which is sensitive to African legal and cultural ecosystems.

4 | Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study converge on a central insight: succession planning in African family businesses is not merely a managerial function but an institutionally embedded process shaped by overlapping socio-cultural, economic, and political logics. The predominance of informal succession practices, rooted in kinship obligations, elder deference, and lineage continuity, underscores the salience of cultural norms as enduring structuring mechanisms (Hanane et al. 2023; Ferreira et al. 2023). Yet, while culturally resonant, these informal arrangements often operate in tension with contemporary business imperatives, generating succession pathways that are opaque, exclusionary, and structurally fragile.

Much of the extant literature adopts a procedural lens, viewing succession planning as a series of steps (identification, mentoring, and transition) to be optimized. However, such models under-theorize the institutional embeddedness of succession, how kinship hierarchies, customary law, patrimonial norms, and legitimacy structures mediate who is eligible to succeed and on what grounds. Intergenerational conflict, one of the most frequently cited challenges, should therefore not be framed simply as a generational misalignment of values but as a collision between institutional logics, the traditional logic of kin-based governance versus the emergent logic of professionalized management (Ferreira et al. 2023).

Theoretical advancement lies in positioning succession as a site of institutional negotiation, where successor selection is about competence and preserving socioemotional wealth (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007), maintaining kinship honor, and reproducing gendered power. The tension between tradition and innovation, inheritance and meritocracy, authority and legitimacy is not incidental; it is the core architecture of succession in African family firms.

Financial constraints further exacerbate succession discontinuities, especially in resource-constrained environments where formal succession planning is considered an unaffordable luxury (Oliveira et al. 2023). These constraints limit investments in successor training, estate planning, and governance structures, reinforcing reliance on relationship-based decision-making and informal oral agreements. Yet, such informality limits scalability and renders succession vulnerable to elite capture, intersibling rivalries, and legal ambiguities.

Gender remains a central axis of exclusion. Patriarchal norms, especially in patrilineal societies, systematically marginalize women from succession pathways, regardless of managerial competence (Borham et al. 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). This exclusion operates not merely as a social bias but as an institutionalized filter, embedded in customary inheritance practices, religious laws, and gendered leadership expectations. The result is both a loss of human capital and a stifling of inclusive innovation, undermining the adaptive capacity of these firms in volatile economic contexts.

Beyond the nuclear family, the involvement of extended kin and the broader community further complicates succession trajectories. In many African contexts, family businesses are enmeshed in complex social fields where legitimacy is relationally constructed. Community elders, religious leaders, or extended relatives may exert informal veto power over successor legitimacy, even when internal business logic would suggest alternative candidates (Kazungu 2023; Lubawa and Osabuohien 2023). This governance deficit, where authority is diffused but not codified, creates ambiguity that undermines the firm's strategic continuity.

What is needed is not the wholesale importation of Western governance structures but the development of hybrid models that are formalized succession plans that are also culturally legible, socially legitimate, and economically feasible. This requires acknowledging that African family firms operate in institutionally pluralistic environments where customary law, statutory regulations, and communal norms coexist, sometimes in contradiction.

A critical meta-finding of this review is the over-concentration of empirical studies in Anglophone and economically dominant regions, particularly Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. While these countries offer accessible data environments and active business ecosystems, they risk skewing the literature toward elite, urban, and often Anglophone business experiences. Francophone, Lusophone, and Sahelian regions such as Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, and Chad remain underexamined, despite possessing distinctive kinship systems, legal traditions (e.g., civil law influence), and family firm structures. Similarly, the literature exhibits thematic saturation in its focus on male-dominated leadership models and succession crises among elite urban family firms. There is limited inquiry into succession in rural, matrilineal, or Indigenous enterprise systems, which may exhibit entirely different succession logics, including communalized decision-making, rotational leadership, or collective asset management. These neglected contexts are not outliers but alternative epistemologies of succession that demand inclusion if the field is to mature theoretically.

The cumulative evidence suggests the need for a contextualized succession paradigm that integrates governance formality with cultural legitimacy, economic feasibility, and social embeddedness. Structured succession planning is not simply a technical fix but a strategic necessity for ensuring operational continuity, talent retention, and innovation capacity in family firms navigating volatile markets (Ferreira et al. 2023; Ayoola et al. 2023). However, to be effective in African contexts, these structures must be designed with an acute sensitivity to local power dynamics, gender roles, and intergenerational trust systems. This includes integrating mentorship, inclusive training, and flexible governance mechanisms that recognize successors' diverse profiles, such as women, in-laws, and non-kin professionals, who may hold legitimacy in practice even if they defy traditional norms.

5 | Conclusion and Implications

This review provides a comprehensive and theory-informed analysis of succession planning within African family businesses, synthesizing evidence from 107 studies. Moving beyond descriptive enumeration, the review integrates findings into an interpretive and explanatory model that captures the embeddedness of succession in cultural, economic, and social logics unique to the African context. A consistent theme across the literature is the dominance of informal succession pathways, shaped by culturally encoded norms prioritizing lineage, elder authority, and patrilineal succession. While culturally coherent, these practices often impede merit-based leadership transitions, reduce organizational adaptability, and limit gender inclusivity. In contrast, formal succession frameworks characterized by structured planning, use of external advisors, and strategic mentorship are correlated with smoother transitions, better employee morale, and improved long-term performance. These findings, however, are contingent on access to institutional and financial resources, which remain unevenly distributed across the continent.

This review advances theory in three major ways: (i) it repositions succession not as a procedural challenge but as a deeply embedded process negotiated within plural institutional logics, customary, statutory, religious, and market-based. These overlapping systems shape not only who leads but also how legitimacy is constructed and maintained. (ii) The current literature is skewed toward Anglophone and economically dominant regions such as Nigeria,

TABLE 7 | Theoretical model: Context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) framework.

Domain	Key constructs	Mechanisms	Outcomes
Cultural	Patrilineal norms, elder authority, and legitimacy traditions	Informal succession, symbolic selection, and family loyalty	Limited innovation, exclusion of women
Economic	Resource scarcity, informality, inequality	Ad hoc planning, lack of training, and absence of external advisors	Succession fragility, high turnover
Social	Extended kin involvement, community expectations	Legitimacy-based succession, communal veto power	Political succession dynamics, non-meritocratic outcomes
Mediating Institutions	Formal governance, advisor intervention, and digital tools	Professionalized planning, training systems, and data-informed selection	Continuity, resilience, and employee stability

Source: Author.

Kenya, and South Africa. It also reflects thematic saturation in elite, urban, male-led enterprises. This creates a distorted epistemic map that marginalizes matrilineal societies, rural enterprises, and Francophone or Lusophone contexts where succession logic may follow entirely different patterns. (iii) Drawing from Teece (2007) and Gómez-Mejía et al. (2007), the review reveals that succession functions not only as a transfer of managerial control but also as a dynamic capability that ensures long-term adaptability while preserving affective family identity. Successful succession planning, therefore, requires balancing rational-economic and socioemotional imperatives.

Succession planning in African family businesses is shaped by a threefold configuration of (i) Contextual Forces (cultural norms, economic conditions, social obligations), (ii) Mediating Mechanisms (formal/informal practices, use of advisors, technology adoption) and (iii) Succession Outcomes (business continuity, talent retention, strategic renewal). These interrelationships suggest that effective succession outcomes are contingent on the alignment between contextual forces and mediating mechanisms (Table 7). Where alignment fails, outcomes are suboptimal, characterized by leadership vacuums, internal conflict, or business decline.

Building on the identified conceptual and empirical gaps, this study articulates a forward-looking research agenda grounded in theoretical integration. Rather than calling for more studies in general, the agenda proposed here targets *specific lacunae in the literature* and offers theoretically generative directions that can enrich succession scholarship in African family business contexts. Succession planning, as shown in this review, is shaped not by isolated managerial choices but by complex institutional ecologies, where culture, law, kinship, economic infrastructure, and digital transformation intersect. The following propositions (Table 8) aim to structure a future research agenda that foregrounds contextual, temporal complexity, and the interplay of structure and agency.

This agenda reflects a shift from Eurocentric or managerialist assumptions toward a more grounded and pluralistic theoretical

TABLE 8 | Future research propositions.

Proposition	Research focus	Theoretical contribution
P1	Conduct comparative, multi-country studies to investigate how region-specific cultural, legal, and economic systems shape succession practices.	Advances *comparative institutionalism* by revealing patterned variation across diverse African contexts.
P2	Undertake longitudinal studies tracing intergenerational shifts and succession outcomes over time.	Develops a *processual understanding* of succession as institutional reproduction and transformation.
P3	Examine the role of external advisors: legal, financial, and strategic in mediating succession processes, particularly in firms lacking formal governance.	Integrates *boundary-spanning* and *institutional work* theory to explain how advisors translate between local norms and global governance standards.
P4	Investigate how digital tools and platforms are used to legitimize successors, facilitate knowledge transfer, and signal generational modernity.	Theorizes *digital capital* within the framework of *hybrid governance*, recognizing technology as both a functional tool and a symbolic asset.
P5	Explore gendered succession dynamics through intersectional analysis, accounting for the roles of kinship structure, legal pluralism, and successor agency.	Enriches *intersectional institutional theory* by foregrounding African-specific gender regimes in succession planning.

Source: Author.

orientation. Succession planning in African family businesses is not merely a leadership transition but a strategic, symbolic, and institutional negotiation. Understanding it requires concepts that capture regional specificity, intergenerational evolution, digital mediation, and the contested construction of legitimacy. Progress in this field will not come from replicating Western-centric models but from developing a theoretical corpus that reflects Africa's institutional hybridity, cultural plurality, and the strategic agency of its emerging business leaders. These propositions provide a conceptual framework for such a paradigm, capable of generating globally relevant insights from African empirical realities.

For practitioners, this review reinforces the urgent need to formalize succession planning, particularly through inclusive governance structures, advisor engagement, and the adoption of digital infrastructure. It also calls for a more equitable lens in successor selection, challenging patriarchal biases that limit talent utilization. Fostering a supportive ecosystem comprising legal guidance, subsidized training for successors, and advisory services tailored to family firms will be essential for policymakers and support institutions to unlock the full potential of succession-led growth.

Succession planning in African family businesses is not a technocratic exercise but an institutionally embedded, socially contested, and symbolically charged process. This review provides the conceptual scaffolding for rethinking succession through an African lens, honoring cultural specificity while pursuing strategic modernization. The path forward lies in recognizing the plurality of succession logics, expanding research beyond dominant regions and themes, and designing context-sensitive models that integrate formal governance and indigenous legitimacy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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