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Isabell K. Stamm*

From Nurturing the Successor to Attracting New Founders: How Firm Platforms Organize a Market for Selling Businesses

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Abstract: Firm platforms organize a market for selling Mittelstand firms in Germany. In doing so they face a challenge: to instill a market frame in a segment of the German economy that is known for its family embedding. This study examines the strategies firm platforms use to reframe ownership transfer from a gift passed on within the family to a commodity traded on a market. Building on a content analysis of the seven largest and most innovative firm platforms in Germany, this study reveals how firm platforms argue from within a gift exchange frame and shift its parameters in social, object, and time dimensions. This study makes a more general point by arguing that digital platforms function as cultural trailblazers in marketization. This study contributes to succession, digital platform, and marketization debates.

Keywords: commodity; gift exchange; Mittelstand; organization of markets; qualitative content analysis

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of firm platforms in Germany has grown tremendously to 38 in the year 2021.¹ Firm platforms provide a digital infrastructure mainly designed for match-making between potential sellers and buyers (Kenney and Zysman 2016; Kirchner and Schüssler 2019). Most of these firm platforms are small, offering a few hundred small and medium-sized firms for sale, and are not

1 A detailed list of these 38 firm platforms can be requested by the authors or offered as online appendix.

*Corresponding author: **Isabell K. Stamm**, Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Societies, Paulstr. 3, 50676 Köln, Germany, E-mail: ist@mpiifg.de. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0441-2726>

(yet) profitable. Nevertheless, firm platforms are actively intervening in organizing and expanding the M&A market in Germany towards the small and medium sized segment of firms also often referred to as *Mittelstand* (Pahnke and Welter 2019).

Remarkably, firm platforms organize this market in a segment of the Germany economy in which selling a business has long been seen as a taboo. The particularity of the German *Mittelstand* is not only a matter of firm size, but of a shared ownership ideology (Pahnke and Welter 2019): Most *Mittelstand* firms are family owned (Gottschalk and Lubczyk 2019) – emphasizing a long-term interest in the business' development and viewing the family as stewards of the business (Berghoff and Köhler 2020). Within this ownership ideology, the business turns into a family object that is passed on across generations. Selling the business externally is perceived as family betrayal (Breuer 2009; Stamm 2016). These particularities in the German *Mittelstand* form a specific challenge for firm platforms: in organizing a market for selling businesses, these firm platforms need to overcome the stigma of selling (Jaskiewicz et al. 2016). The question then arises: How do firm platforms intervene to help (or manipulate) firm owners to acknowledge their business to be a commodity?

This question relates to a broader process of institutional change (Ahrne, Aspers, Brunsson 2014; Oliver 1992) in which a taken-for-granted set of norms and rules on how to transfer the ownership of a business shifts from succession to sales. This process of up-rooting exchange practices from a non-market toward a market institution has been referred to as disembedding (Deutschmann 2020; Polanyi 1944), detraditionalization (Thompson 1971) or demoralization (Zelizer 1979). Organization sociologists often use the term marketization to underline that this process includes active agency and strategic actions through which this institutional change is promoted (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2014; Beckert 2009; Brunsson and Jutterström 2018; Fligstein 2001a, 2001b; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). In the process of marketization, to use Polanyi's (1944) famous notion, a "commodity fiction" is created around the business, which turns it into a commodity although it was originally not intended for market exchange. Zelizer points to intermediaries as indispensable agents who acknowledge the non-market value of the exchanged good and engage in marketization (Zelizer 1979). Ahrne and colleagues (2014) refer to these agents as market organizers. Nonetheless, the current debate on marketization does not provide an explanation on how market organizers refer to non-market understandings of exchange and alter them.

Our specific research question on interventions of firm platforms thus reflects the more general theoretical question on strategies of reframing non-market understandings of exchange when organizing a market. Building on this broader debate, we adopt a gift exchange perspective (Caillé 2005; Mauss 1924; Moebius 2006; Polanyi 1944), in order to analytically grasp the non-market understanding of transferring a business within the family (Jaskiewicz et al. 2016). A gift exchange

perspective directs our empirical analysis of firm platform activities to enable understanding of strategies in which firm platforms refer to gift exchange framing and alter their parameters when organizing a market for selling firms (Hillebrandt 2009). Empirically, this study uses a content analysis (Kuckartz 2014) of the seven largest and most innovative firm platforms in Germany to reconstruct a composite narrative (Willis 2019) of the arguments these platforms use to convince business owners to sell their businesses. The composite narrative inductively yields three strategies firm platforms use to reframe a gift exchange perspective when organizing the market for selling firms: (1) shortening timeframes of transfer; (2) delegitimizing certain actor groups while giving other actor groups symbolic meaning; and (3) providing guidelines in the valuation of the exchanged good. Hence, firm platforms shift the timing, subject, and object dimensions of exchange. These findings emphasize the role of platforms as cultural trailblazers of marketization and contribute to the marketization debate by unveiling concrete strategies of how market actors utilize references to non-market exchanges in the process of marketization. These insights seem particularly relevant in a platform economy that increasingly marketizes pockets of social life (Kenney and Zysman 2016).

2 Firm Platforms as Market Organizers

The rise of firm platforms in Germany started in the late 1990s. Early movers in the field included smaller M&A advisors and business consultant networks (e.g. Firmenboerse, Unternehmensboerse, Nachfolge-Boerse or Concess). In 1999, the “Change/Chance” initiative, which was spearheaded by the Deutsche Ausgleichsbank, the German Chamber of Commerce, and the Central Association of the German Trades, launched their own platform. In 2006, they merged with the “nexus” initiative, promoted by the Federal Ministry for Economy and Technology and key partnering associations, to become Germany’s largest and nationally operating firm platform “nexus-change” (later renamed in “nexus”). In 2019, on average more than 6000 seller’s ads and roughly 1500 buyer’s ads were posted on this platform. From the 2010s onward the number of firm platforms increased tremendously, with key business magazines (e.g. Handelsblatt with DUB) and larger M&A advisories (e.g. Axanta, KPMG matchmaker) entering the field. A more recent development are firm platforms as stand-alone business models based on automated-matching services (e.g. Carl Finance or DealCircle). In 2021, this paper could identify 38 firm platforms active in Germany, all of which are tailored towards the German Mittelstand and most of them not (yet) profitable.

The rise of firm platforms in Germany can be interpreted as a reaction to numerous reports by business advisors about problems in transferring the

ownership of the business within the family (Gruhler 1998). These problems include a reluctance of letting go and an unwillingness to take over (Richards, Kammerlander, and Zellweger 2019). A number of studies predicted that more and more Mittelstand firms would run into such problems given the demographic development of an aging society in Germany (Kay et al. 2018; Schwartz 2019). For example, the Institute for Mittelstand predicted in 2018, that about 150,000 Mittelstand firms would need to find new owners by 2022 (Kay et al. 2018). This issue has been of considerable concern to policy makers and industry associations in Germany as countless campaigns, handbooks, posters, brochures, and events on ownership succession document (Lenz, Schormüller, and Glückler 2020). The fear of policy makers is that if the family internal matching of current with future business owners fails, the survival of businesses and with them jobs may be in jeopardy (Freund 2004; Kay et al. 2018). The stark increase in the number of firm platforms, and especially the state's own engagement in such a platform over the past years, can be read as an indicator for the perceived urgency of a matching-problem in the Mittelstand.

Within this context, firm platforms are thus used as a way to coordinate the match-making between current and future owners of a firm that represents an alternative to family internal succession. They offer “programmable digital architecture” (van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018, 4) that expands the social radius in which current and future owners can be searched for and matched. Like other types of digital platforms, they act as network facilitators (Dolata 2019; Grawer 2014): they “create value by acting as conduits between two (or more) exchange partners who would not have been able to transact without the platform” (Grawer 2014, 1241). As such, firm platforms aim at supporting the match-making process by offering a virtual space for contact ads. For many of these firm platforms, the online mediated match-making is situated in an offline-practice of advising (Ibert et al. 2021). In particular, the *nexxt* platform rests upon an elaborate network of what they call regional partners (e.g. the representatives of the chambers of commerce, corporate bankers, or business advisors), who use this platform as a working tool during the groundwork of consulting and moderating ownership succession.

The way firm platforms organize the match-making of current and future owners of businesses is built on a market notion: here incumbents and successors meet as sellers and buyers. This notion of sales is remarkable as selling the business was long perceived as a taboo in the German Mittelstand and, if it happened, it had to occur behind closed doors. The particularity of the German Mittelstand, as Pahnke and Welter (2019) pronounce, does not merely refer to the quantitative dominance of small and medium-sized family-owned businesses in the German business population, but to “an identity of ownership and management and a sense of belonging” (p. 345). This ownership ideology of the Mittelstand is characterized by a long-term interest in the business' development and viewing the family as stewards of the

business (Berghoff and Köhler 2020). Within this ownership ideology, the business turns into a family object that is passed on across generations from incumbent to successor, and selling the business is seen as family betrayal (Breuer 2009; Stamm 2016). Given this ownership ideology, firm platforms face a challenge when organizing a market for Mittelstand firms: Potential users of their platform first need to view the business as a commodity and themselves as sellers and buyers (Jaskiewicz et al. 2016). Firm platforms must thus find a way to intervene into a non-market understanding of ownership transfer to establish a market understanding of ownership transfer.

This challenge firm platforms face resembles the more general issue of institutional change from a non-market to a market set of norms and rules for exchange. The marketization approach focuses on the strategic actions involved in such an institutional shift (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2014; Beckert 2009; Brunsson and Jutterström 2018; Fligstein 2001a, 2001b; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Polanyi (1944) described how aspects of land, labor or money can be reframed as “fictitious commodities” (see also Burroway 2020; Fraser 2014), i.e. as commodities not produced but reframed for market exchange. Reiterating this idea, numerous recent contributions on markets have illustrated how burials (e.g. Akyel and Beckert 2014), education (e.g. Verger, Steiner-Khamsi, and Lubienski 2017) or even intimacy (e.g. Zelizer 2000) have undergone marketization. They agree that an active reframing from a non-market to a market notion of exchange is needed.

Kirchner and Schüssler (2019) indicate that digital platforms can mobilize users “by framing the [...] market [...] through the use of non-market notions of ‘sharing’ and ‘community’.” Zelizer (1979) has formulated this same pattern more generally by suggesting that market organizers create the appeal of a market frame by acknowledging the non-market value of the exchanged good. Fligstein (2001a) adds that market organizers use social skill, i.e. they put themselves in the position of others and create a meaning that appeals to a large number of actors and in this way are able to motivate others to engage in collective action. As market organizers, firm platforms are authoritative agents that shape and diffuse shared expectations and meanings through their interactions with their users (Kirchner and Schüssler 2019; Vallas and Schor 2020). Following Dolata (2019), this is the truly novel aspect of digital platforms: they “act as behavior-shaping mediators” (p. 187). Koçak, Hannan, and Hsu (2013) speak of vanguard members of the market that influence the rest of the audience through direct interaction and market artifacts. Any kind of interaction with the user – such as being told about other sales, asking for a price, talking to potential sellers – brings users closer to learning about conventional market expectations (Koçak, Hannan, and Hsu 2013).

While one can agree with this conceptualization, it still rests upon the assumption that this market frame is generally accepted and appeals to the potential

users (i.e. potential sellers and buyers). Firm platforms thus have to engage in meaning-making that makes this market frame appealing. Unveiling these meaning-making strategies is crucial to understand, how digital platforms as market organizers are able to create stable and reciprocal expectations among market participants, and, on a more general level, is crucial to understand marketization processes (Akyel and Beckert 2014; Kennedy, Lo, and Lounsbury 2010; Smith 2007; Zelizer 1979).

3 Reframing Gift Exchange

In conclusion, this paper argues that it is not sufficient to describe the sale of Mittelstand firms by means of market norms and rules, rather it is important to grasp the relationship between the new market meaning and the previous symbolic and social context to make reframing strategies of market organizers visible. In order to grasp this relationship, this paper suggests using the concept of social exchange as it provides a more general notion that spans both market and gift exchange as a non-market alternative. Social exchange refers to the transfer of resources in expectation or reciprocation of a mutual transfer (Simmel 1900; Weber 1921). These resources can be tangible or intangible such as social recognition, status, rights, protection, and the granting of access to circles that guarantee high social rewards (Moebius 2006). Resources are socially exchanged within a social system that create norms of trust and commitment as well as other expectations that govern future exchanges (Hillebrandt 2009).

This general concept allows to focus on the role that norms of reciprocity, repeated interactions, and social structure play in conditioning and constraining the succession process, and within it the allocation and matching of exchange partners. Generally, two forms of social exchange are differentiated (Daspit et al. 2016; Hillebrandt 2009):

Generalized or *gift exchange* is a social exchange in which the giving exchange partner may expect no immediate or equal return (Mauss 1924). Gift exchange is not an altruistic act, but comes with the hope of a benefit or a mutual transfer (Caillé 2005). However, a long time may elapse between gift and mutual transfer establishing a debt relationship between exchange partners (Mauss 1924). In fact, gift exchanges are grounded in the notion of long-term obligations or covenants in which the relationship between exchange partners and the maintenance of the group (e.g. family) is valued more than the reciprocity itself (Daspit et al. 2016; Long and Mathews 2011). As such, gifts can aim to maintain a beneficial alliance (Mauss 1924).

In contrast, specific or *commodity exchange* is experienced as “buying and selling, and money is a self-evident means of exchange” (Hillebrandt 2009, 93). The market institutionalizes instructions for buyers and sellers on how to act

(Aspers 2011; Beckert 2009; Fligstein and Dauter 2007). Buyers and sellers expect short-term and quid pro quo returns. Commodity exchanges may facilitate formal processes, reduce uncertainty via contractual arrangements, and offer role clarity to those involved (Daspit et al. 2016). This form of exchange while possible in family exchanges, occurs more clearly in exchanges between family and nonfamily partners.

Repeated social exchanges create overarching systems of obligation, expectations, and shared frames (Mauss 1924). For example, with repeated gift exchange grows the trust of receiving a mutual transfer and also the obligation to provide a mutual transfer within a social group such as a family or a community (Hillebrandt 2009). In addition, repeated interactions also influence the types and extent of shared frames characterized by common vision, common language, common knowledge, and group solidarity (Daspit et al. 2016). These shared frames serve as reference for future exchanges within and across a social group. Over time, these frames “may be passed on to new group members as accurate, even dogmatic, expressions of the group’s reality.” (Daspit et al. 2016, 48).

These overarching exchange frames, however, never occur in their respective pure forms in empirical reality, just as gift or commodity exchanges never exist in their pure form (Mauss 1924; Zelizer 2005). For example, gifting will always involve the market price of the gift and not just its symbolic value (Mauss 1924; Hillebrandt 2009). And as research on consumption has shown, purchasing a product often comes with status, reputation or an emotional value (Zelizer 2005). Hillebrandt (2009) therefore proposes a heuristic of social exchange that situates social exchange on a continuum between gift and commodity exchange. For this heuristic Hillebrandt used Luhmann’s (1984) dimensions of social meaning: the *social dimension* clarifies who offers something to whom for exchange; the *object dimension* clarifies what resources are being exchanged; and the *time dimension* clarifies the duration between transfer and mutual transfer. These dimensions resemble common distinctions in systems theory (Luhmann 1984). This heuristic thus provides an analytical orientation when trying to understand how market organizers, such as firm platforms, reframe forms of gift exchange to market exchange.

Building on previous research on succession, this paper uses this heuristic in the following to position family internal exchange as a variant of gift exchange. This analytical exercise sketches the social and symbolic context of a non-market notion of ownership exchange that is in stark contrast to selling the business via a firm platform. Focusing on the gift exchange qualities of succession provides direction for empirically investigating reframing strategies through which market organizers refer to a non-market order.

In a *social dimension*, the circle of potential exchange partners is relatively exclusive to the kinship group (Mauss 1924). Longenecker and Schoen’s (1978) early

model of succession even entirely spoke of a father-to-son handover, and Churchill and Hatten's (1987) notion of a "biological imperative" long dominated the debate on succession. There are multiple studies discussing the inclusion of daughters in family internal succession (Vera and Dean 2005; Wang 2010). More recently, research on succession has begun to acknowledge the plurality of family forms (Bird and Zellweger 2018; Wiklund et al. 2013) and as such the social boundaries of a potential successor pool. An extreme example of these social boundaries represents the formal adoption of adult nonfamily heirs, as Mehrotra et al. (2013) has shown for Japanese business families.

In an *object dimension*, the firm is highly symbolically charged and treated as a family object (e.g. Breuer 2009; Wennberg and DeTienne 2014). The transfer of this family object as a gift is embedded in a chain of symbolic gifts and mutual gifts increasing trust, support and mutual learning. For example, an early interest of the children in the business, may be returned with easier access to resources of the business such as an internship with a business partner (Breuer 2009; Jaskiewicz, Lutz, and Godwin 2016; Stamm 2016). This gift again generates social obligation, which can be expressed in gratitude and recognition. The next generation's interest in working in the firm may be reciprocated by the incumbent generation in form of a knowledge transfer (Cabrera-Suárez, Saá-Pérez, and García-Almeida 2001). The next generation may return this knowledge gift by showing respect to the previous generation within the industry community and family solidarity (Gimenez-Jimenez et al. 2021). This chain of symbolic gifts, however, also generates dominance and creates a status difference, sometimes purposefully (Caillé 2005; Mauss 1924). Handler (1990) thus describes how incumbents and successors need to mutually adjust their various roles during this sequence of exchange relationships. She emphasizes how the transfer of the firm depends on the level of mutual respect and understanding generated from previous gift exchanges. Eventually, this chain of gift exchanges forms the basis of transferring the ownership of the firm (Churchill and Hatten 1987; Daspit et al. 2016; Le Breton–Miller, Miller, and Steier 2004).

In a *time dimension*, the chain of gift exchanges in succession can extend over an indefinite and sometimes life-long period of time (Stamm 2016). For example, Longenecker and Schoen (1978) propose that succession may begin with a vague awareness of the business in childhood. In any case, the chain of gift exchanges begins in the home prior to the next-generation family member entering the firm (Daspit et al. 2016; Handler 1990). Le Breton–Miller, Miller, and Steier (2004) view family internal succession as a process that is "a highly contingent one that defies universal standards, and is something that must take place over many years." (p. 314). A key element of succession as gift exchange is that the specification of the mutual-transfer remains diffuse and its timing remains at the discretion of the mutual-giver and thus interruption is possible at any time (Hillebrandt 2009).

This gift exchange framing of family internal succession includes specific demands for match-making during this process. Exchange partners encounter each other as incumbent and successor. The pool of potential successors is limited by family boundaries (whether drawn biologically or socially) and the socialization (making) of a successor into his or her responsibilities within the family firm is considered to be a firm part of the matching procedure (Gersick et al. 1997). In fact, nurturing the successor is an overarching theme in the literature on succession (Calabro et al. 2018; Daspit et al. 2016; Gilding 2005). Le Breton–Miller, Miller, and Steier (2004) even view the phase of nurturing and developing a successor as preceding the selection phase, which turns the selection into an act of legitimizing the successor. The match-making in family internal succession comes with a high degree of social obligation; hence, integrity and commitment to the family firm are considered important attributes (Daspit et al. 2016; Sharma and Irving 2005).

4 Reconstructing Composite Narratives on Selling Businesses

This study employs an inductive research design (Harrison et al. 2017; Yin 2014) to understand, interpret, and generate a theory on the strategies firm platforms use to reframe succession. A total of seven firm platforms were selected as cases to elucidate ways they refer to gift exchange in their reframing. Case selection followed a purposive sampling approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). The criteria for selection included the number of ads posted on the firm platform, whether the firm platforms were for profit or non-for-profit, their pay structure (free or fees), and the range of services offered. Along these criteria, the five largest and two innovative firm platforms were selected that have been most successful or creative in approaching potential sellers.

For each case, the main source of evidence represents the full websites of the selected firm platforms, including main- and subpages, which were mirrored to a given date in 2019. The content of firm websites encompasses broad information on the sales process, often taking the shape of blog contributions and tutorial videos. From the website copies, all text content was then extracted into the MaxQDA coding software. The content varied largely, ranging between approximately 44,000 and 465,000 symbols per website (counted excluding the ads). All quotes cited from the content of firm platform websites are marked as P#_.

In addition, the website content was triangulated with complementary semi-structured interviews with one to three representatives of each firm platform and 8 interview partners in total (an exception is platform 7, where participation in several meetings took place but no formal interviews were conducted) (Yin 2014). Interviews

lasted between 45 and 75 min and where fully transcribed. These interviews served to understand how the content of the firm platforms is produced and to get an understanding of the focus set by the content producers. During these interviews, the representatives repeatedly pointed to the rich content of their websites and the importance of “teaching” firm owners about the process of selling. Firm platform representatives further pronounced the importance of creating extensive content on their websites to fulfill the criteria of search engine optimizing. All quotes cited from the content of interviews with firm platform representatives are marked as P#_I_.

To analyze the data, structured content analysis was applied as text interpretation method (Kohlbacher 2006; Kuckartz 2014; Schreier 2014). In the analysis, both content of the website and of the interviews was treated as textual data. These textual data contain narratives directed to convince potential and current users of the usefulness of the website and to provide information for users and information that fulfills legal requirements. Coding the textual data thus aimed at unveiling the various narratives tainted to legitimize the underlying business model rather than evaluating the “true” content (Kuckartz 2014, 2019). The narratives found on the websites very much resembled the narratives gathered during the interviews. The interviews contained additional information on the historical and behavioral context of these firm platforms that informed the overall understanding of the role of firm platforms rather than the emerging coding structure.

In total, three rounds of coding the data material were conducted with the goal of extracting composite narratives of these firm platforms (Willis 2019). A composite narrative uses data from multiple sources and across cases to tell a single story. These stories allow researchers to present complex, situated accounts, rather than breaking data down into types or categories (*ibid.*). The material was thus coded for elements of this story, which included a first round of inductive, open coding, a second round of axial coding after consolidating the emerging narrative structure, a third round conducted by a second coder resulting in a discursive process about consistency, reliability and validity of the emerging narratives, which led to a final consolidation of the composite narratives. These composite narratives emphasize common threads and implicit strategies in reframing succession.

In this process, emerging themes were grouped according to their underlying message. More specifically, propositions and conclusions were grouped that together formed a particular argument (with a total of five arguments), and pieces of advice grouped that either pertained to behavioral norms (transfer etiquette) or to cognitive knowledge (transaction ABC) as two sets of advice. While the arguments are prevalent in most cases, some platforms utilize certain arguments more than others. The sets of advice, however, were present in all cases and dominated the arguments in terms of volume. Figure 1 provides an overview of the final composite narratives including the appearance of arguments and advice across cases.

Argument 1: The Doom of an incumbent exodus	1a P: Aging entrepreneurs	P3, P4, P5, P6
	1b P: Lack of successors	P1, P2, P4, P6
	1c C: Succession gap	P2, P3, P4, P6 P7
Argument 2: Challenges of family internal succession	2a P: Naturally to family	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	2b P: Reasons for failure of family-internal succession	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	2c C: Sale as a valid option	P1, P2 P3, P4, P6
Argument 3: A business is a life's work	3a P: Blood, sweat and tears	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
	3b P: Willingness to hand over must be present	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
	3c C: Appreciation of emotional goodwill	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
Argument 4: Personal matching as a basis for business sales	4a P: Owners look for competence	P1, P3, P4, P6
	4b P: Buyers are founders	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	4c C: Chemistry must be right	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
Argument 5: "Harvesting the laurels" through business sales	5a P: Sale is no longer taboo	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	5b P: Sale as an entrepreneurial act	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6
	5c C: Sales open opportunities	P1, P2, P4, P5
Set of Advice A: Sales etiquette	A.1 There is no second chance for a first impression	P2, P5, P6
	A.2 You should adorn the bride	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
	A.3 Be professional, polite, and respectful	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6
	A.4 Be transparent	P1, P3, P4, P5
	A.5 Be cooperative	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
	A.6 A handshake is not enough	P3, P4, P5
	A.7 Consult an advisor	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6
Set of Advice B: Transaction ABC	B.1 P as in process	P3, P4
	B.1.1 Significance of company valuation	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	B.1.2 Business plan	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,
	B.1.3 Pricing	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7
	B.1.4 Transparency	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7
	B.1.5 Due diligence	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
	B.1.6 Evaluation procedure	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,
	B.2 V as in valuation	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
	B.2.1 Duration of sales process	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
	B.2.2 Preparation of sale	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,
	B.2.3 Multistage sale process	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
	B.2.4 Professionalization of transfer process	P3, P4, P5
	B.2.5 Complex matching	P3, P4, P5

Figure 1: Composite narratives and their elements.

The occurrence and importance given to the identified narratives and their elements across cases was then compared using visualization tools offered in MaxQDA (e.g. matrixes, maps, word clouds, etc.), which allowed recognition of case-specific patterns of legitimization (Kuckartz 2019). In a final step, an assessment was made of how

each of the identified narrative elements (propositions, conclusions, pieces of advice) explicitly or latently address the dimensions of social exchange. This final step thus directly connected the composite narratives to the theoretical propositions at the outset of the inquiry, enabling a theory to be formulated on how succession is reframed as commodity exchange (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Kuckartz 2014).

5 Three Strategies for Reframing Gift Exchange

As Figure 3 illustrates, the arguments and sets of advice firm platforms use to frame business sales tackle all three dimensions of social exchange. The following explains how the arguments and sets of advice contribute to delegitimizing and symbolically charging actor groups (social strategy), how they acknowledge the personal character of objects while emphasizing their performative elements (object strategy), and how they pinpoint exchange to a certain life stage and substantially shorten the timeframe for exchange (time strategy).

5.1 Arguing From Within and Basic Advice

Firm platforms use five arguments to convince users to engage in an online search for potential buyers on firm platforms: (1) The doom of an incumbent exodus, (2) Challenges of family internal succession, (3) A business is a life work, (4) Personal matching as a basis for business sales, and (5) Harvesting the laurels. Table 1 provides detailed descriptions of the composite narratives forming these five arguments.

When arguing for online-mediated match-making, firm platforms do so from within a gift exchange frame. Firm platforms respect family members as key subjects of exchange (arguments 1–5) and refer to the firm as a symbolically charged and personal object (arguments 3–5). Most importantly, however, they depict family internal succession as typical form of transfer (argument 1–4). In organizing a market for Mittelstand firms, firm platforms thus show social skill in the sense that they are able to “take the role of the other, and work to fashion shared worlds and identities” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 17). It is from within the gift exchange frame that firm platforms critique and contest this form of social exchange.

Firm platforms further provide two sets of advice for their users intending to engage in online-mediated match-making: (1) The sales etiquette suggests: There is no second chance for a first impression! You should dress the bride! Be professional, polite and respectful! Be transparent! Be cooperative! A handshake is not enough! And Consult an advisor! (2) The transaction ABC provides basic knowledge spanning from p as in process to v as in valuation. Table 2 provides a detailed account of these sets of advice.

Table 1: Five arguments for sales.

Theme	Argument structure
1 The doom of incumbent exodus	<p>(a) Firm platforms use strong references to the demographic development of German firm owners, which creates the impression that “in the near future very many business owners” (P2_I_132) will need to find a succession solution as “more than 50 % of the German entrepreneurs are moving quickly towards their retirement” (P6_665). The use of numeric ages, percentages, or absolute numbers of aging firm owners serve as calculation instruments intended to reveal the factual character of an incumbent exodus; the use of dramatizing evaluations of these numbers emphasizes the interpretation of this development as an impending doom</p> <p>(b) The premise of a dramatic aging of incumbents is complemented by the premise of lacking successors. In particular, “the owner’s children are reluctant to succeed in their family’s” (P6_870). Firm platforms describe, analogous to the skilled worker shortage in Germany, a “successor shortage” (P6_1084; P4_859)</p> <p>(c) The conclusion of this argument reads: “there is a substantial discrepancy between the supply, i.e. the businesses ready for succession, and the adequate successors” (P4_1076). The diagnosed successor gap is “reason for great concern” (P6_704) and the continuity of many businesses in the German Mittelstand is “threatened” (P2_98). Overall, firm platforms overstate both the aging of firm owners and the lack of successors, and sober voices are the exception. One of these exceptions is represented by P3, who observed that the “range of variation is within the tenure of a normal generation—no reason to panic” (P3_1381). However, it is this afterthought (“no reason to panic”), that seems to capture to overall tune of this argument and its underlying message, which is supposed to create the impression of an inevitable and almost desperate situation</p>
2 Challenges of family internal succession	<p>(a) This argument starts by positioning family internal succession as the succession solution that most firm owners “wish for” (P6_903), as the “standard” (P4_656) succession solution that is always in the “foreground” (P2_509) of other alternatives. The preference of family internal succession is described as a naturally given circumstance that derives from familial blood bonds</p> <p>(b) Closely connected to this premise, firm platforms do not grow tired of reporting about the many reasons why family internal succession is doomed to fail. This premise further accounts for the options that business owners may not have children, do not want to demand from their children to carry the “burdens of entrepreneurship” (P2_I_85), or that there may be emotional conflict within the family. This premise argues further that “children may want to leave their own footprints in their lives” (P6_671) and that the life plan of an entrepreneur no longer seems to be compatible with “the next generation’s ideas of work-life balance” (P3_1106). Besides, successors also might not have the proper qualifications to take over the business or owners may not have adequately prepared for the handover of their company</p> <p>(c) If, as the argument concludes, family internal succession may not work out, then the sale of the firm property represents a “good alternative” (P6_1025). In this case the “rather unwanted sale then often turns into the only option especially for small and medium sized businesses” (P4_1270). Overall, this argument suggests that family internal succession is troublesome and problematic. The narrations around this argument are emotionally charged and supported by personal reports, photos, and videos. They convey the impression that firm platforms have empathy for the situation of the firm owners. The argument implies that firm platforms understand where firm owners are coming from, that they can feel their pain and present an alternative to them</p>

Table 1: (continued)

Theme	Argument structure
3 A business is a life work	<p>(a) The platforms describe businesses as the result of a "life work." Just this term is mentioned almost 30 times across the platforms and all of them make sure to state that "We secure life works!" Business owners "build a business with their labor and lifetime" (P5_32). They have put their blood, sweat, and tears to building, maintaining, or growing the business. Thus, the business is "not a standard or everyday commodity, but rather an 'achievement' built over many years with the industriousness, dedication, and time of the senior boss" (P4_1899). The business functions as a personal object and provides "daily recognition, pride for one's life work, and the feeling of being needed" (P4_776, similar P6_667)</p> <p>(b) Along these lines, the second premise in this argument suggests that the decision to transfer firm ownership requires a large amount of identity work. Firm platforms emphasize that entrepreneurs need to be "ready from the inside" (P1_1403) or that entrepreneurs engage in a long period of "inner dialogue" (P6_63) before they leave their legacy. They frame this process as a difficult and emotional "life decision" (P3_1084) that "initiates the true transfer process" (P4_1120). With this decision, however, "the entrepreneur suddenly no longer is an entrepreneur. And let me put this mockingly, no longer the king of his castle, but only a regular retired person" (P5_28). This premise not only acknowledges the investment firm owners have made into the business, but the reflection process that they have undergone in order to arrive at the decision to sell</p> <p>(c) Firm platforms conclude not only the material value of the firm counts, but also its personal, emotional, or nonmaterial value. They address potential buyers and call for an appreciation of this emotional value in the process of negotiating a price for the business. At the same time, they bemoan that business owners "often overestimate the value of their business" (P3_1298, P4_1_63) even have "unrealistic high expectations with regard to the sales price" (P3_1337). Firm platforms call business owners to reflect about this emotional value and to objectify their expectations</p>
4 Personal matching as basis for business sales	<p>(a) Firm platforms suggest that entrepreneurs seek to transfer firm ownership "to the right hands" (P4_1899). The list of what makes a "competent" successor is long—including "sales and leadership skills for sure" (P6_919), as well as "industry and methods knowledge, social skills, and an entrepreneurial personality" (P1_1508)</p> <p>(b) Firm platforms further frame potential buyers as business founders. When addressing potential buyers, they suggest that purchasing a business is an "attractive option" (P4_680) to "fulfill their dream of being self-employed" (P2_6). They describe the process of buying as "a journey to their own business" (P4_680) that comes with many advantages: "They start with an already prosperous business with a good reputation" (P4_722). These are people that "originally wanted to found a business, but then they think buying a business is much less complicated" (P5_154). The platforms agree that buying a business technically is a form of founding (P5_50, see also P1_1527) that requires taking risks, autonomy, and seeking entrepreneurial opportunity (P6_83 and P6_734)</p>

Table 1: (continued)

Theme	Argument structure
	<p>(c) The conclusion platforms draw in this line of argumentation is that business sales must rest on a personal matching of characters seeking an entrepreneurial life plan. During this matching process the “human touch plays an important role” (P3_I_88) and “at the end of the day, after all rational assessment, the gut feeling” (P4_736), “whether something smells right” (P4_959), or “positive chemistry” (P5_I_60) decides on who is a good fit. “If the seller has a good feeling about the potential buyer, even the highest purchasing price becomes secondary” (P4_959). This argument implies parallels between family internal succession and business sales as both are interpersonal processes that lead to the continuation of an entrepreneurial activity</p>
5 Harvesting the laurels	<p>(a) Platforms and their representatives observe that “in the past only every once in a while, a business communicated to the outside that it is for sale or was sold, and if they did they certainly did not shout this news from the rooftop. Now, they make positive news out of it” (P4_49). Firm platforms detect a tendency for business sales to become “normal” (P4_I_163)</p> <p>(b) And even more so, platforms suggest that the practice of selling the business is part of entrepreneurship. An extreme case of this kind is a web project (for instance an amazon shop) that “serial entrepreneurs create, and then after a few years they grow tired of it and sell the business or project” (P1_I_153). Selling the firm turns into an entrepreneurial move (P1_657) that for some is the “largest challenge in their career, which not only requires getting a fair price, but also securing the continuation of the business and its values” (P4_69). In any case, the notion of “stepping out is too negative and the totally wrong approach. That should be framed way more positive” (P4_I_61)</p> <p>(c) Finally, the descriptions of the new opportunities opened through sales reflect such a positive framing. Firm platforms suggest that through selling the business, entrepreneurs can “finally harvest the laurels of their hard work” (P1_1238). The gratification of business sales includes a quieter life and peace (P4_775), the freedom to seek new opportunities (P5_16), and, most importantly, a substantial financial reward. Platforms mainly pronounce that the sale of a business is “lucrative” (P1_1196) and may make them rich (P1_781; P2_201), or at least secure their retirement (P1_678), but, in any case, is “a way to a new and worryless life” (P6_140)</p>

Table 2: Two sets of advice for the match-making.**Set of advice A: sales etiquette**

- A1: There is no second chance for a first impression!*
 The text passages that formed the basis for this code mainly pertained to the content and design of sales ads. The platforms remind their users that these ads often represent the first contact with their prospects and this “*first impression counts*” (P6_152). They should use “*an interesting and charming text*” (P2_89) to provide enough information about the business for a prospect to “*feel informed*” (P5_382, *similar* P2_358) and to contact the user. Firm owners tend to invest less before their retirement, but in order to attract a successor it is important to “*dress the bride*” (P3_32, *also* P4_422). Firm platforms advise sellers to engage in a presale optimization process (P3_99), with the goal of making the business “*attractive*” (P4_953, *also* P1_980) or even “*sexy*” (P6_974) for potential buyers. This optimizing encompasses not only an end-to-end financial documentation and stable profits (P4_1100, *also* P1_980), but a healthy and up-to-standards business structure including good and qualified employees (P4_1090), a low dependence on the current owner (P4_953), and efforts regarding digitization (P4_561). Most importantly, however, the business should convey the impression of having a strategic advantage and a bright future ahead (P4_1878, *also* P3_30). This process requires “*meticulous preparation*” (P4_1029). The prospect needs to “*fall in love*” with the business (P5_1_320).
- A2: You should dress the bride!*
 Firm platforms remind their users that “*a professional appearance and basic politeness are tremendously important in today’s business world*” (P2_48). In this context, professionalism refers to a business approach to one’s own business and the treatment of potential successors as clients. Firm platforms call to use marketing language in the formulation of the business ad and to reply promptly to inquiries.
- A3: Be professional, polite and respectful!*
 This piece of advice critiques secrecy and exaggeration during the negotiation process. Firm platforms prepare potential sellers by indicating that they will have to disclose their financials during the sales process. For a sales transaction to be successful, it is therefore essential to explain the specifics about a business including both its strength and weaknesses. Firm platforms advise sellers and buyers that “*trust and honesty*” (P4_714) are key ingredients to build a good working relationship between both parties. Ideally, a “*smooth handover*” (P3_622) of the firm ownership includes a phase of working together or a consultation period, where the incumbent can introduce the successor to the business.
- A4: Be transparent!*
 This piece of advice refers to the contractual understanding of a sales transaction. Firm platforms remind business owners that “*a handshake is not enough: the details of a business succession need to be explicated in a business sales contract*” (P4_968). Such a contract supplements the official transfer of the ownership at the notary.
- A5: Be cooperative!*
 All firm platforms agree that a business sale should be accompanied by professional advisors or mediators. Some platforms use this advice to introduce their own services or refer to their experience in advising
- A6: A handshake is not enough!*
- A7: Consult an advisor!*

Table 2: (continued)

Set of advice A: sales etiquette

B1: *P as in Process*

This lesson bundles information on the duration, necessary preparations, and typical steps in the transaction process. Firm platforms agree that the transaction process usually encompasses 6–18 months, which does not include the time of deciding to sell the business, grooming the business, or a working together phase after the transition. During this time, both sellers and buyers are heavily engaged in the negotiation process. Firm platforms further provide “checklists, brochures and online tools that help in the preparation of the business transfer” (P5_100). The idea is to provide practical guidance along the way. Finally, the transaction process is described in its multiple phases, usually encompassing a personal meeting, due diligence, calculation of the value of the business, negotiating sales prices and transfer modalities, drafting a sales contract, signing, and closing

B2: *V as in Valuation*

This lesson bundles information on the relevance of business valuation, typical procedures to calculate the value of a business, and insights on the construction of the sales price and forms of compensation. Especially the issue of reasonable sales prices for the business is addressed in countless reiterations. During this lesson, sales platforms appeal to the commercial sense of firm owners, stripping the valuation process of its emotional and subjective side. For example: “The central question is, will the business model still be successful in five to ten years and will the business enable a refinancing of the (high) sales price?” (P4_596). As a consequence, a “convincing presentation of your business’s sustainability” (P3_2193) is essential and should be underpinned by corresponding financials. Firm platforms introduce various standard procedures for calculating the financial value of a business. In particular, “multiples” are expected to provide a “quick and first estimate of a firm’s value” (P6_591). This procedure takes previous and anticipated revenue as a starting point which is multiplied by an experience factor derived from previous sales prizes achieved within a particular industry and size-category of the business. The actual sales price, however, “forms through the correspondence of supply and demand on the market” (P4_311). Hence, the calculated value of the business and the sales price can diverge. Firm platforms insist that a professional valuation of the business is indispensable: “Only who knows which price is realistic can plan, argue and negotiate adequately” (P3_644)

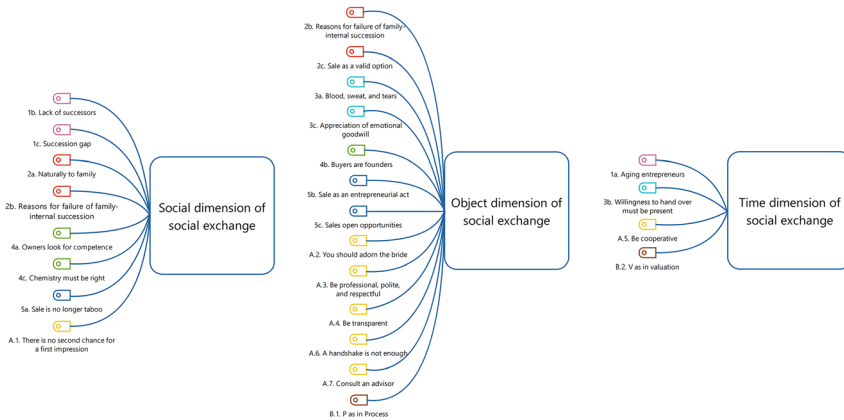


Figure 2: Arguments and advice feeding into the dimensions of social exchange.

A large portion of the content of firm platforms is dedicated to such basic explanations and giving advice, revealing an almost didactic function of firm platforms. They teach potential buyers and sellers basic knowledge about a sales transaction, drawing heavily from the terminology typically used in the M&A field. Blog posts, expert contributions, FAQs, sales anecdotes, checklists, and videos are intended to offer “accumulated expert knowledge” (P4_1808) and to provide guidance to their presumed inexperienced users to navigate the match-making in succession in a market for Mittelstand firms.

When contesting family internal succession, firm platforms address all three dimensions of social exchange. Figure 2 provides an overview of which arguments proposed and advice given reconfigures what dimension of social exchange. Each dimension is elaborated in the following and the reframing strategies found are explained.

5.2 Social Strategy: Disqualifying While Symbolically Charging

The identified arguments of firm platforms acknowledge that succession should naturally occur within the family (2a) and hence that family members form the primary circle of exchange partners. But then firm platforms account for multiple reasons for why (gift) transfers no longer work within the family (2b): inner familial conflict, the unwillingness of incumbents or the intentions to protect successors from a strenuous career, lacking offspring, or the unwillingness of successors to follow the footsteps of their parents. The following quote illustrates this thread:

After all, the wish of many SMEs is to transfer the business to the next generation. Children should continue what was so closely associated with the family and their own lives as entrepreneurs. [...] How beautiful this could be. At the same time, more and more firm owners feel that this ideal is only realistically feasible in about 40 % of family firms. Children may want to leave their own footprints in their lives. They are less and less likely to follow in the entrepreneurial footsteps of their parents. Another hurdle for a successful generational change in family firms is the permanent role change between the systems of the family and the firm. (P6_669–671)

On a more abstract level, firm platforms point towards breaks in mutual and non-material transfers (Hillebrandt 2009; Mauss 1924) necessary to uphold the chain of gift exchanges. The arguments firm platforms utilize denounce the next generation as not showing enough recognition for the performance of the incumbent generation and the transfers already made; they also denounce the incumbent generation for not being able to let go and thus to impede mutual transfers. Capitalizing on this dysfunctionality of gift exchange within the family, firm platforms emphasize a lack in successors (1b) and the doom of a successor gap (1c) as its consequences. Through the problematization of family internal succession, both incumbents and successors are disqualified as competent exchange partners and the impression of a shortage of legitimate exchange partners is conveyed.

The succession market is characterized by the fact that more and more firms are entering the handover phase and are looking for a successor. This is in contrast to the low birth rate and a very stable labor market situation. As a result, the gap between the incumbent and successor parties is widening. (P4_686)

The identified arguments and sets of advice now place the problem in a market context and introduce a new group of credible and capable exchange partners: external buyers. Firm platforms suggest sales no longer are a taboo topic (5a), enabling owners to engage in the search for potential buyers. The narratives imply a high degree of agency of owners in the sales process by suggesting that they can actively select a buyer. Firm owners search for the most competent buyer (4a) and for a buyer that the seller can relate to on a personal level (4c and 6a). Both aspects turn into new criteria that define and limit the range of potential exchange partners.

Particularly interesting is the move of firm platforms to position buyers as founders (4b), which symbolically charges this new actor group:

Succession – business start-up with benefits

As a successor, you generate sales from day one. In addition, the firm is established on the market and the employees are trained. The challenge, however, is that you have to prove your entrepreneurial skills from the very beginning. (P4_535–536)

This move personifies and disarms the unknown buyer that had previously been understood as a threat to the continuity of the firm. By suggesting that buying a business is not much different than founding a firm, firm platforms imply a continued union between private ownership and sales. Further, owners are to be reminded of their family's early days and the intentions to build a career and a livelihood for one's family.

5.3 Object Strategy: Acknowledging Personal Objects While Pronouncing Their Performative Elements

Firm platforms account for the personal and symbolic value of a firm (Caillé 2005; Mauss 1924). They emphasize that owners of *Mittelstand* firms have put their blood, sweat and tears into building the firm (3a). When transferring the firm to the next generation, as firm platforms emphasize, owners expect personal acknowledgment of their life's work and a careful treatment of their precious property. Because firms are personal to their owners, the emotional attachment of owners, as firm platforms imply, may taint a rational judgement of the "true" (i.e. market) value of the firm.

The seller has often put his heart and soul into the firm since it was founded and then includes an emotional value in the valuation. Here it is important to determine a value that is fair for both sides. (P4_1789)

Firm platforms explicitly address the value of the firm in a gift exchange frame that naturally occurs within the family (2a) and thus create an antithesis to the commodity character of sales. They account for numerous reasons, why family internal succession must fail (2b) and introduce selling the firm as a last, but valid resort (2c). This argumentative move allows firm platforms to position the firm as a symbolic object eye to eye with the firm as a commodity. This move can also be interpreted as introducing the firm as a morally legitimate object of market transaction (Aspers 2011; Zelizer 2005).

Firm platforms offer at times extensive guidelines for the valuation of the firm (B2). By means of information, they thus infiltrate the field with an alternative mean to assess the quality of a firm and derive an idea of its price (Beckert 2019). These valuation procedures treat the firm as a marketable commodity. Borrowing from Polanyi's terminology (1944), firm platforms create a commodity fiction around the firm: they introduce firm owners to viewing their firm as if it were produced for market sale. They advise firm owners that, like with any other commodity, entrepreneurs need to convince potential buyers of the usefulness of their product. This includes dressing the bride (A2), or in other words making sure that the firm is attractive to potential buyers who seek to earn an income with the firm.

To achieve this, the entrepreneur must sit down with specialists at an early stage and develop a strategy and a so-called “red thread”. Strengths must be worked out and unique selling points (USP) must be presented in a credible and sustainable manner. However, there is no firm without weaknesses. A credible process also includes naming these. However, and this is important, the seller can work with the specialists years in advance to minimize these weaknesses and thus significantly increase the attractiveness of the company. In the transaction world, we call this process “dressing the bride.” There is nothing disreputable about this, but it serves to better position the firm for continued existence on the market and thus to increase the attractiveness of the firm for a successor to buy. And, of course, to achieve a better price. (P3_1418–1419)

Firm platforms, hence, emphasize the performative elements of businesses that take the character of asset capital. Narrative elements that support the commodity fiction emphasize buyers being founders who seek to earn their income through entrepreneurial performance (4b), sales being an entrepreneurial transaction by itself (5b) and sales opening new opportunities (5c).

Closely related to firms as fictitious commodities is the advice firm platforms provide to the exchange participants (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2014): Owners of Mittelstand firms should act professionally, politely and respectfully towards potential buyers (A3), they should provide transparency about the commodity’s features during the sales process (A4), be cooperative (A5), and, finally, base the commodity exchange on contractual agreements (A6) ideally formulated by professionals (A7). At the same time, firm platforms ask potential buyers to be sensitive to the emotional value of a firm and the need of owners for recognition (3c). Nevertheless, firm platforms disembody the firm from its symbolic and personal value and instead create a commodity fiction that enables owners (and all other market participants) to perceive the firm as performance object and the sale of the firm as entrepreneurial act.

5.4 Time Strategy: Shortening the Time Frame

The composite narratives that this paper found on firm platforms connect succession to the transition into retirement. Hence, instead of being a part of an at times lifelong chain of gifting and mutual gifting, the exchange of firm ownership turns into a single event, a consciously made decision followed by a short transition:

If you decide to part with your own firm, you naturally want to be well remunerated for it. In addition, it is not always just a matter of putting a new Porsche in the driveway with the money from the sale of the firm – often the sale of one’s own firm also simply serves to provide for one’s old age. If you have not only built up your company, but also managed it successfully, and have now reached a certain age, you may simply want to take a well-deserved retirement. (P1_678)

Firm platforms point out that a key reason why family internal succession may fail (2b) is the inability of incumbents and successors to synchronize their life transitions or they initiate the transfer process too late. Firm platforms further emphasize that owners need to find an inner readiness to let go of position in the firm (3b), which reiterates the idea of a life transition and departing from the firm at a specific point in time.

Aside from pinpointing sale of firm ownership to a specific time in life, the arguments and advice firm platforms provided further define a standard duration for the commodity exchange. The central idea that a sale is an entrepreneurial transaction (5b) already implies a multistage, but termed process. Firm platforms advise exchange participants to collaborate closely during this process (A5). They are further very specific in their descriptions of this process naming typical stages and suggesting an average time frame of 18–24 months for the sales process (B2).

Through these two measures – pinpointing succession to a certain life age and determining an average duration of exchange – the time frame of succession as social exchange is substantially shortened and standardized and therefore reframed as commodity exchange.

6 Market Organizers as Cultural Trailblazers of Marketization

The focus of this study has been on the strategies firm platforms use in organizing a market for selling Mittelstand firms. More specifically, this study addresses the strategies that firm platforms use to bring owners of Mittelstand firms to adhere to a market frame and thus addresses the more general problem of how market organizers can reframe non-market to market exchanges. Drawing on the content analysis of the websites of the seven largest and most innovative firm platforms in Germany, this study shows that reframing starts with an acknowledgment of family internal succession as gift exchange and argues from within this frame for firm sales as an alternative. Figure 3 provides an overview of these reframing strategies. These disqualify family members as legitimate exchange partners and charge potential buyers with the symbolic meaning of being founders; they strip the Mittelstand firm from its personal meaning and instead emphasize the firm's performative elements; and they substantially shorten and standardize the timeframe of exchange. As such, the identified strategies reframe gift exchange in a subject, object, and time dimension toward a market exchange. Ownership transfer is no longer about nurturing a successor but about presenting the business in a way that it attracts the best possible buyer.

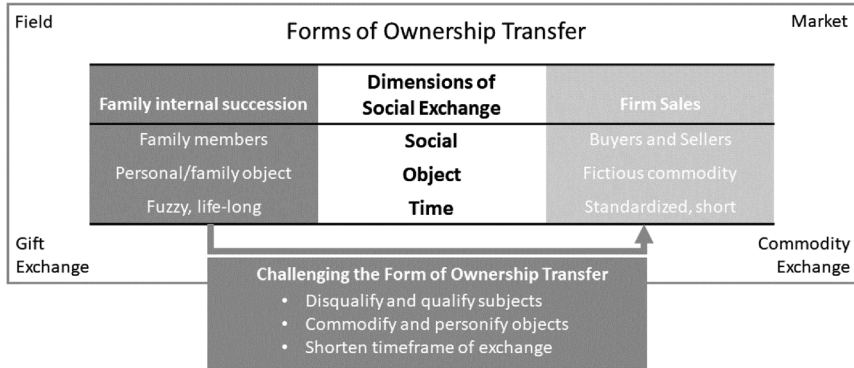


Figure 3: Shifting from gift to commodity exchange.

These empirically grounded framing strategies represent concrete ways in which market organizers are able to adapt a gift exchange perspective and alter the parameters of this perspective towards market exchange. These framing strategies are thus catalysts in what has more broadly been described as “disembedding” (Deutschmann 2020; Polanyi 1944), “detraditionalization” (Thompson 1971), or “demoralizing” (Zelizer 1979). Given the vanguard position of digital platforms in organizing markets (Kirchner and Schüssler 2019; Koçak, Hannan, and Hsu 2013), these strategies unveil how market organizers make use of their meaning-making power and function as cultural trail blazers in marketization.

The framing strategies unveiled here come with a dissemination effect that should not be underestimated. As in the case of selling Mittelstand firms, firm platforms largely influence the discourse on succession. For owners searching for information on succession online, they provide numerous blogs, posts, videos on their own websites or on subsites. They purposefully conquer a non-market topic and actively engage in reframing, which influences the whole field of succession rather than only the actual users of their platforms. Their motives can be seen, for one, in the believe that market exchange can solve a matching-problem in the German Mittelstand and, for another, in the goal of fostering what is perceived as promising digital markets.

7 Contribution to Succession, Digital Platform, and Marketization Debates

The argument that market organizers must function as cultural trailblazers to organize a market makes a significant contribution to at least three ongoing research

debates: on succession in Mittelstand firms, on digital platforms, and on the organization of markets.

First, regarding succession in Mittelstand firms this study goes beyond the current literature on ownership transfer in family firms especially as conveyed in succession models (Churchill and Hatten 1987; Gersick et al. 1997; Handler 1990; Le Breton–Miller, Miller, and Steier 2004). These models mostly focus on family internal succession and emphasize the need to nurture a successor during a lengthy process of gift exchanges. Match-making on firm platforms clearly falls outside the gift exchange frame of family internal succession and instead embraces firm sales as an alternative frame. Along these lines, the argument developed in this study largely extends prior research on the sale of family firms (Jaskiewicz, Lutz, and Godwin 2016; Wiklund et al. 2013). This research has focused on the emotional value of the firm that biases prize expectations of family business owners (Zellweger et al. 2016). Discounts for family members and a premium for the symbolic value of the firm can be explained from a gift exchange frame that acknowledges prior and future transfers of intangible resources and recognition. Both aspects are directly addressed by firm platforms when educating owners on how to sell their firm and how to find a market prize.

Second, regarding research on digital platforms (Grawer 2014; Kenney and Zysman 2016; Langley and Leyshon 2017; Srnicek 2017; Vallas and Schor 2020), this study advances insights on online-mediated match-making through platforms and their organizing of a digital market (Evans and Schmalensee 2016; Kirchner and Schüssler 2019; Trabucchi and Buganza 2020). Within research on digital platforms, firm platforms have not been studied before. The insights gained on firm platforms makes important strides towards a better understanding of the digital markets created and organized through platforms. This study reiterates Dolata's (2019) claim that digital platforms are not only technical infrastructures, but behavior-shaping mediators. Firm platforms have to act as knowledgeable and socially competent agents to argue from within the existing gift exchange frame of family internal succession in order to critique and reconfigure the exchange frame. This study shows how firm platforms as vanguard members in the meaning-making of an emergent market provide users with arguments for a different kind of match-making and educate users about the implied new form of social exchange. Finally, with focusing on firm platforms this study presents an extreme case that runs counter to typical features described for platform markets (Dolata 2019; Grawer 2014; Trabucchi and Buganza 2020). For one, the largest player in this field is state sponsored and, for another, the market organized through firm platforms is strongly focused on match-making without harnessing the potential of the multi-sided nature of the market. Although the field of firm platforms in Germany has certainly not yet matured, it is to

be expected that these particularities will remain due to the complexity of the match-making in succession as shown in this study.

Third, this study carries forward the idea that marketization includes a meaning-making project (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2014; Kirchner and Schüssler 2019; Koçak, Hannan, and Hsu 2013). It suggests that the institutionalization of a market set of norms and rules includes strategic actions by market organizers to reframe a non-market notion of exchange. As has been shown in this study, it is thus beneficial to more systematically include a broader concept of social exchange, and specifically gift exchange, into the debate on marketization (Ahrne, Aspers, and Brunsson 2014; Beckert 2009; Brunsson and Jutterström 2018; Fligstein 2001a, 2001b; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Building on a long tradition in studying social exchange that has underlined the distinctions between different forms of social exchange (Daspit et al. 2016; Hillebrandt 2009), this study contributes to examining the manifold empirical configurations ranging between gift and commodity exchange. It further advances the understanding of the strategies applied by market organizers to move from gift towards commodity exchange. These insights contribute to a better and more fine-grained understanding of shifts between frames of social exchange. These insights also carry forward what Fligstein (2001a) has called social skill and shows concrete strategies for a reframing that need to consider all three dimensions of social exchange and can only occur from inside a gift exchange frame.

8 Conclusions

This article identifies firm platforms to be vital actors in organizing the expansion of the M&A market in Germany towards the German Mittelstand and, as such, as vital actors of a marketization of Mittelstand firms embedded in a family capitalistic culture. By asking how can firm platforms as market organizers intervene to acknowledge their exchange object to be a commodity, this article addresses a fundamental challenge of marketization processes. The answer offered here is that such a reframing of non-market exchanges to market-exchanges occurs from within a gift-exchange frame. Market-organizers disqualify non-market exchange partners and symbolically charge buyers, they acknowledge the personal value of exchange objects while pronouncing their market performative elements, and they shorten the timeframe of exchange – all in order to manifest a market-exchange frame. These in-depth insights on re-framing strategies largely contribute to understand the meaning-making essential for marketization processes. It positions market organizers as cultural trailblazers for marketization.

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