



Godfather Marketing: offering favors before products

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Abstract

Disruptive shifts in the current environment are engendering uncertainty, radically changing market relationships and consumers' priorities. This challenging-the-boundaries article introduces a new marketing paradigm, Godfather Marketing, according to which firms evolve into organizations reminiscent of 'mafia families,' yet completely devoid of criminal connotations. Their aim is to deeply fulfill customer needs and desires through favors, not just product sales. This approach requires customers to adhere to a mutual 'code of honor,' where merit is rewarded and wrongdoing punished, participating in the firm's favor exchange network. Through a theoretical approach grounded in historical cultural factors, this article explores firm credibility, favor conditions, reciprocation methods, customer traits, and organizational dynamics. In an era where the quality of information will supersede its quantity, Godfather Marketing offers a distinct perspective, giving marketers a competitive edge for fostering consumer loyalty and local policymakers a potential tool for community governance, within a shared framework of careful controls ensuring the protection of individual freedoms.

Keywords Mafia-like marketing · Favor exchanges · Firm credibility · Customer loyalty · Market networks · Drivers of paradigm adoption

JEL Classification M3 - Marketing and Advertising; M54 - Labor Management

Never before in history has it been so uncertain as to what the world will look like in five, ten, or twenty years. Global instability factors, deep societal fragmentation, and rapid technological advancements are among the defining sources of disruption

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shaping our current landscape. They are so profound and pervasive that it is impossible to predict whether the jobs of today will even exist in the future (Harari 2018). Nevertheless, it remains clear that maintaining awareness of these changes is crucial for effective problem-solving.

Amidst this uncertainty, the consumers' perception of not having much time to realize their life projects, their need to acquire a certain security and social recognition, as well as their desire to join with others who can help them achieve their goals, could lead to a transformation of the relationships between supply and demand in the market. This paper suggests that they may evolve to mirror mafia-type relationships over the coming years, paving the way for a new marketing paradigm, I shall refer to as 'Godfather Marketing,' to play a significant role.

George Bernard Shaw, the renowned Irish writer and playwright, once said: "All great truths begin as blasphemies". As controversial as it may seem, this new paradigm can foster operations between a firm and its customers that resemble the bond between a mafia Godfather and those under his patronage. The central premise is a new business ethos where the firm prioritizes addressing the vital needs and desires of consumers, rather than focusing solely on the sale of goods or services. This 'Godfather firm' aligns itself with the values and the 'code of honor' of the mythologized mafia, which diverges entirely from the perverse purposes of criminality, and is rather based on its chivalrous spirit of mutual protection and assistance. This model adopts a strategic orientation that aims to encourage consumers to collaborate within a firm's network, structured according to the mafia rule of 'friends of our friends.' This collaboration, in practice, materializes as a legitimate exchange of favors and other benefits among the firm's customers, under the direction of the firm itself, thus enabling the latter to enhance its power and bolster its customers' loyalty over the long term. Should this model prove successful, with the due internal and external controls aimed at preserving the personal freedom of those belonging to the weaker and underrepresented social groups, it could be extended to broader social relations, holding potential applications also in community governance.

Our overarching objective is to offer a reflective analysis of the nature, the scope, the object, and the network of this new marketing paradigm. Godfather Marketing is not a "theory-in-use" approach (Zeithaml et al. 2020). Our approach is theoretical and its classifications grounded in an evolutionary logic, influenced by historically rooted cultural factors, as defined by Simon (1991). We aim to illustrate – rather than to advocate – how the relationships between firms and consumers could be transformed in the future, due to a series of factors that will be summarized and discussed at the end.

1 The nature of Godfather Marketing

1.1 Beyond selling products

The basic idea of this paper is that the firms of the future, whether large technology multinationals (Big Techs) or local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), will move beyond just selling products or services. Their focus will shift towards address-

ing a diverse range of relevant needs or desires consumers may have – such as succeeding in legal disputes, finding a good doctor, choosing a school for their children, or even finding a soulmate. It is not that each firm will do one of these things, but all these things together.

Until now, firms have primarily addressed consumers' everyday needs by trading goods or providing services with specific benefits (such as trips, haircuts, or shows). The future, however, will necessitate that firms equip themselves to handle consumers' existential challenges. Consider Amazon: it transitioned from a bookseller to a universal retailer, but has yet to address customers' self-actualization needs — the apex of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy, which encapsulates individuals' most intimate and ultimate objectives. A Godfather firm should aim to realize consumers' dreams or, at the very least, serve as their trusted ally in the pursuit. A day might come when a consumer asks Amazon: "I aspire to be an artist, can you connect me with an agent or a production company?" In return, the firm will seek just one thing, even above monetary gain: the consumer's unwavering loyalty. This encapsulates the spirit of Godfather Marketing: an archetypal approach to an innovative business model.

In their pursuit of benefits, consumers will engage with firms as they would approach a mafia Godfather, conscious of entering, in effect, a 'Faustian pact,' engaging – as it were – their very soul. The firm will do its best to meet their wants, but if it asks them for something in return, their unwavering loyalty must be paramount. Consumers, in essence, will become the firm's real 'products' (Guido 2014) – or rather its soldiers – tasked with solving others' problems. Those reciprocating the received favors will ascend the organizational ladder and reap rewards. Those who refuse, despite having the ability to reciprocate a benefit obtained, will confront punishments, with their betrayal ensuring inexorable retribution.

1.2 The spirit of the mafia

The Godfather Marketing approach is in no way illegal in its conception. Nor is it any more ethically contentious than any other capitalist marketing paradigms, based on exchanges, relationships, or persuasive communications. We must, indeed, immediately clear the table of any misunderstanding regarding the meaning of 'mafia' used to define it. First and foremost, we need to emphasize that this paper does not discuss mafia firms as criminal enterprises engaged in illicit activities such as drug and weapon trafficking, waste disposal, counterfeiting, gambling, exploitation, usury, extortion, and any other felony. Indeed, we present a romanticized conception of the mafia, perhaps only literary and not at all realistic, but easily understandable everywhere, for its underlying narrative which emphasizes a cultural and moral code based on such values like mutual aid, brotherhood, and loyalty. This depiction may starkly contrast with the brutal reality of 'mafia-related events' (*fatti di mafia*), but it embodies the spirit that underpins the popular mafia myth. Key-values, such as 'personal honor,' 'family pride,' and 'keeping promises' (Nicaso and Danesi 2013, p. 90), popularized by various media, reflect universal human sentiments. This version of the mafia concept transcends time and culture, as it resonates with people globally, including the younger generations.

1.2.1 Mafia's negative connotations

In this paper, when we talk about the ‘mafia,’ we mainly refer to the Sicilian ‘Cosa Nostra,’ which, unlike other mafia organizations (perhaps with the only exception of the mafias of China and Japan), has a well-defined, vertical and unitary hierarchical structure (Catino 2019). As some scholars have claimed, “the Mafia appears to be a potentially powerful metaphor for a business firm: it shares the profit motive with a corporation, but differs from it in many respects, such as the use of violence and systematic illegality” (Gond et al. 2009, p. 59).

For the sake of clarity, it must be recognized that historically, a clear distinction has always existed between the mafia as a ‘criminal organization’ (specifically, Cosa Nostra) and the so-called ‘spirit of the mafia’ (*sentire mafioso*, literally ‘mafia attitude’). The latter is more closely tied to values associated with the Southern Italian identity, representing a normative system that aims to protect and promote one’s social group without necessarily resorting to delinquency. Barzini (1964, p. 263), an Italian journalist and historian, argued that the mafia is, before even being a criminal organization, “a state of mind, a philosophy of life, a conception of society, a moral code”. The anthropologist Lombardi Satriani (2014, p. 176) concurred, stating that the mafia is not only a behavior, but also “a culture, in the anthropological sense, a way of feeling, thinking, and acting”. Even the renowned Judge Falcone (1992, p. 67), a champion in the fight against Cosa Nostra who was tragically assassinated on the orders of the mafia, observed that “for too long, the mafia has been mistakenly confused with the mafia attitude, not recognizing that a person can share such a mentality without being a criminal”.

It is extremely important, therefore, to recognize how organized crime has distorted, for its illicit purposes, those key-values of justice, solidarity, family, and loyalty, which were embedded in the Italian culture, historically giving to the term ‘mafia’ a negative meaning. Yet, when ethical practices are carried out by both internal and external entities to the firm (e.g., ethics committees, regulatory agencies, and independent oversight bodies), such dual collaborative effort can ensure compliance with many guidelines discussed in business ethics literature (Weiss 2014), such as transparency, accountability, responsibility, integrity, and lawfulness. By organizing networks based on a code of honor, Godfather firms will be able to build a strong social fabric where mutual aid and cooperation are the foundation for a fairer and more sustainable future.

1.2.2 Sharing a ‘code of honor’

The mafia – to which the Godfather Marketing model alludes – represents a shared heritage among various market actors. This heritage includes beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and even symbolic elements, all rooted in a common ‘code of honor.’ Both tacitly and explicitly communicated, this code is crafted to indissolubly bind members of the same organization over time. Values such as promise fulfillment, confidentiality, and sincerity, stand as foundational pillars for the Godfather firm aiming to engage unwaveringly loyal customers. By assuming the role of a cultural referent, the firm aligns with the captivating allure of the mafia myth and its unique aura.

The values that permeate the Godfather firm's organization delineate both its strategic orientation and the managerial approach that translates this orientation into business policies. First, Godfather Marketing represents a *strategic orientation*, as a firm, regardless of its size, opts to create a robust bond with its customers and all other market operators with whom it interacts. This bond is based on the principles of exclusivity, reciprocity, and allegiance. By doing so, the firm appeals to people's conscience, fosters aspirations for material and intellectual well-being, and instills a sense of justice and respect, rewarding the worthy and punishing the harmful. These objectives are not only commendable in any business relationship but can also produce unwavering loyalty to the firm's cause. In today's turbulent environment, marked by major disruptive forces, such a bond with customers can pave the way for a broad, enduring, and immediately exploitable competitive advantage, transcending the standard profit objectives of most business activities.

Secondly, Godfather Marketing represents also an operational and, consequently, a *managerial approach*. Indeed, to shape its strategic vision, the Godfather firm must translate these core values of the 'code of honor' into actionable marketing policies. It is crucial to note that consumers, who represent the primary counterpart of the firm, usually derive satisfaction from buying and using its products. Yet, a Godfather firm aspires to a more profound engagement with them by committing to solve – or assist in solving – their priority problems, no matter their scale, as long as they loyally cooperate (usually by providing assistance in solving other customers' problems, paying a fee, or purchasing its products). Once the pact is sealed, customers' increased engagement yields greater rewards, whereas increased detachment brings them greater penalties. This stimulus-response approach, enhanced by communication strategies that target consumer satisfaction determinants, seeks to forge a strong consumer attachment to the firm, both cognitive and affective at the same time.

1.3 Comparing Godfather Marketing to existing paradigms

Godfather Marketing does not represent a complete departure from existing marketing paradigms, but rather their natural evolution towards the concentration of power within a few large corporations. Its objectives resemble those of value co-creation, through collaborative processes with customers, to the benefit of their own causes. Its relevance for both theory and practice, respectively, relies on focusing on favor exchange and making it a valuable model for fostering customer loyalty and competitive differentiation. In an era marked by global instability, societal fragmentation, and technological advancements, the notion of individual freedom of choice seems almost illusory (De Loecker et al. 2020) or, at least, conditioned by their own inertia (MacKay and Remer 2022). Consumers are induced to purchase what such large corporations sell; see what happens, for example, in the market of smartphones, videogames, movies, fast fashion, and so on.

Following MacInnis (2011), it is critical to differentiate the newly proposed theoretical contribution from other adjacent, albeit distinct, concepts. Some of them operate on a smaller scale, yet their collective development could lead to the emergence of a new marketing framework. Based on the traditional distinction between supply and demand, it is possible to identify a list of existing theoretical benchmarks to con-

trast with Godfather Marketing. In particular, on the supply side, concepts focus on solution selling, commercial friendship, and value-based marketing; whereas, on the demand side, they center on relationship marketing, customer management (including customer centricity and success), and sharing behavior (including gift-giving theory and tribal marketing).

First of all, we consider the production and provision of offers from the supply side. *Solution selling* has been the conceptual foundation of marketing as a social exchange process since Bagozzi's (1975) seminal work, which shifted the focus from selling predefined products to understanding and solving customer problems. Although this paradigm highlighted the importance of goods as distribution mechanisms for services capable to meet each customer's unique requirements (Vargo and Lusch 2004), it relied on knowledge as the main source of competitive advantage to create value for consumer. In today's environment, where information can be easily faked (De Bruyn et al. 2020), it is not the quantity of information but the quality – read its credibility – the main source of power, that only an organization as a Godfather firm, based on a code of honor, can assure. *Commercial friendship* was another concept formed and studied in a supply setting (Price and Arnould 1999). It was described as a relationship encompassing a level of intimacy and reciprocity akin to personal friendships. The digital revolution has increasingly challenged the assumptions of such buyer-seller interactions (Ahearne et al. 2022); so that, without a mechanism to penalize consumers' betrayals of such closer ties (as forecasted by Godfather Marketing), customers could take advantage of the firm's benefits beyond fair exchanges. *Value-based marketing* was developed as an approach able to maximize returns to suppliers by building trust with high-value customers and leveraging marketing as a key-driver of growth and shareholder value (Doyle 2000). Yet, we should consider that customers who get a certain 'value,' by paying a certain price, feel free from any other obligation (see, e.g., Cook et al. 2013). Instead, in Godfather Marketing, when customers receive a 'favor,' they know it's a concession they must reciprocate, sticking with loyalty to the firm's network.

Second of all, if we consider past theories based on the demand side of commercial relationships, we see how Godfather Marketing is able to differentiate itself, also in this context, by adding original features. *Relationship marketing* literature has usually been mentioned to suggest sustaining long-term relations with customers in order to increase profitability (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006). According to it, employees have a dual responsibility because, together with their jobs in operations, they work as part-time marketers for the firm, maintaining contacts with its customers (Grönroos 1994). In Godfather Marketing, instead, the customers themselves work for the firm, making favors on its behalf, and they can be also remunerated in various forms. *Customer management* (e.g., Grönroos 2009) is another approach which could seem alike, but which is too broad and generic to be compared to Godfather Marketing. Moreover, it differs when it is aimed to improve customer centricity and success. While customer centricity shares the goal of identifying the "most valuable customers" as stated by Fader (2012, p. 10), the criteria used in customer management (i.e., consumers' spending capacity and ability to contribute to the firm's 'profits') differ from those in Godfather Marketing (i.e., consumers' promise fulfillment, confidentiality, and sincerity, capable to increase the firm's 'power'). Also customer

success management, which is defined as ensuring that customers get the most from the firm's offering, by prioritizing experience, engagement, and maximum value-in-use (Hilton et al. 2020), has different means in comparison to Godfather Marketing, where firm's offerings mainly rely on exclusivity, reciprocity, and allegiance. Finally, *sharing behavior* (Belk 2010), together with gift-giving theory (Givi et al. 2022; for a review), emphasize the strengthening of social bonds and the symbolic and emotional value of exchanges, transcending economic transactions. Although a Godfather firm's network can also become a model for open collaboration, allowing all members of a community to benefit from it, it mainly cultivates and exploits strong, loyal relations for business success. Differently also from tribal marketing (Cova et al. 2007), which is aimed to create communities sharing experiences and interactions, Godfather Marketing focuses on one-to-one relationships between the firm and its customers, aimed to enhance the firm's power and ability to grant favors to them.

2 The scope of Godfather Marketing

2.1 An irrefutable offer

For many years, sales training courses have presented a distinctive exercise to evaluate potential salespeople: the renowned 'Sell this pen' challenge. Participants are taught that to effectively sell a pen, there are three fundamental steps to follow: firstly, establish a connection with the buyer, irrespective of their status; secondly, discern precisely what the buyer wants, in relation to the pen; and thirdly, persuade the buyer of the pen's necessity, thus finalizing the sale. Yet, questions arise regarding this method's efficacy.

In an exploratory exercise within a marketing course, an instructor introduced a proposition for students to purchase an ordinary pen at a price twenty-fold its usual price. Predictably, there were no takers. The dynamics shifted dramatically when the instructor posed an intriguing question: What if the purchase could assure you success in the final examination? The consensus was immediate: every participant was amenable. Clearly, such an enticement would be not only ethically problematic but also illegal. Yet, even when the instructor nuanced the proposition, implying that securing the pen would grant only his special guidance for exam preparation, over 90% still expressed their intent to make the purchase.

The essence of this exercise transcends the mere act of selling a pen. If the instructor were to guarantee the fulfillment, within his capacity, of an individual's urgent need or desire unrelated to the pen, a significant number would likely consider the acquisition, even at an increased price. This elicits a provocative inquiry: How can the simple act of selling a pen dovetail with a commitment to deliver a service so markedly distinct? The unconventional insights of Godfather Marketing provide a simple response: It does not necessarily have to.

2.1.1 Tailoring cause-related marketing

To grasp this apparent paradox, one must recognize the parallels between the Godfather Marketing approach and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM). In CRM, a firm enhances its profitability and reputation by pledging, often through donations, to support social causes, be they environmental protection, minority rights, or public health (Varadarajan and Menon 1988). In Italy, where I live, a memorable CRM campaign from the early '90s involved a mint candy brand partnering with the World Wildlife Fund. They vowed to donate 5 cents towards polar bear conservation for every mint pack sold beyond the previous year's sales. Essentially, every time each additional mint pack was sold, some cents were finding their way to North Pole. Yet, logically speaking, what did polar bears have to do with mint candies at all? Nothing.

The same applies in Godfather Marketing, as the primary purpose of any firm is to generate sales and revenue. Whether this is achieved through selling pens or by satisfying other needs or desires it can fulfill for its customers, the outcome remains unchanged since the firm's overarching goal is to remain in the market. Indeed, if its products – in our example, pens – are not among the most wanted, it should find out (or try to influence) the needs or desires each consumer would prioritize. CRM addresses issues that affect a broader community. In contrast, a Godfather firm should identify the distinct needs and desires of each individual. By discerning precisely what is most valuable to every consumer, the firm maximizes its chances of finalizing the transaction and securing the consumer's favor. It is like in a Maghrebi market: if one product does not appeal, the vendor pivots to offer entirely different services, for the sake of profit.

In the marketing of the future, the mere sale of products or services will be seen as outdated, antiquated, ordinary. It will be the 'favors' granted to customers that will drive the sales of the firm's products and services. When consumers receive a help from the firm in achieving something they truly prioritize, that contribution becomes 'the offer they can't refuse.' They can't refuse it not because they are 'persuaded' to accept it, as traditionally taught in the 'Sell this pen' exercise, or even because they are 'forced' to accept it, as depicted in 'The Godfather' movie by Francis Ford Coppola, having a gun pointed at their temple! In Godfather Marketing, consumers can't refuse such an offer because they do not want to, because it allows them to obtain what they need or desire the most.

Suppose a consumer has a severely ill child and a footwear firm offers to find for him the best hospital for treatment: wouldn't this consumer feel obligated to buy footwear from that firm or express his gratitude in another way? Of course, he would! But one might wonder: What do shoes have to do with curing diseases? One could retort: Well, what do mint candies have to do with ice-floe plantigrades? At least in this case, the favor is done for a specific person who will be forever tied and grateful to the firm, considering it assisted him in fulfilling his utmost need.

2.1.2 A utility transfer

Some may question: What is the point for a firm to produce goods, like pens or shoes, if the scope of Godfather Marketing is to provide 'favors' to customers? Couldn't

firms simply act as ‘fixers’ (*faccendieri*), cultivating a clientele of beneficiaries, similar to certain politicians who seek votes or public perks? First of all, politicians, unlike private firms, are obliged to serve their community, rather than their own welfare or that of their electors. Therefore, if private firms align with such corrupt politicians, they commit similar illegal acts, leveraging public officials’ authority for personal gain. Secondly, Godfather Marketing recognizes that private firms possess *core competencies* (Prahalad and Hamel 1990) that cannot be disregarded. The original flaw in the traditional ‘marketing concept’ (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009) lies in emphasizing the address of consumers’ demand for specific goods and services. Yet, it is implausible to assume that a firm can easily change its production based on demand, regardless of its resources and know-how. Conversely, within the framework of Godfather Marketing, all firms can organize themselves – with varying degrees of success – into networks offering ‘favors’ to their customers. Not only do they safeguard their unique competences, but they can also earn reciprocation by receiving other favors, fee payments, or the purchase of their products.

When consumers approach a traditional firm, essentially they are seeking a solution to one of their problems through the purchase of its products. From this perspective, the firm’s products are merely vehicles to transfer utility from the firm to a customer. In affluent economies like those in the Western world, where consumers’ basic needs seem to be largely fulfilled, a product can be seen as a bundle of empirical elements, of which only a minimal part is tangible; everything else is made up of intangible or symbolic factors. Parasuraman et al. (1985) recognized well that, out of the first ten components considered in a purchase, only one had a physical, material nature: the product’s design (or styling). The other nine were intangible factors – such as reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, and consumer knowledge. These elements, constituting the immaterial aspect of a firm’s offering, correspond to services that are not independent or supplementary to the firm’s goods; rather, they are integrated with them. These services are so prominent in the firm’s offering that they define the ways, timing, and extent to which consumers experience it.

The utility that is transferred through the purchase and consumption of the firm’s offerings – according to the traditional marketing concept – constitutes the ‘value’ created for customers. According to the Godfather Marketing approach, however, this utility is represented by the ‘favor’ that the firm grants to customers. The difference is not just terminological. The concept of ‘value,’ compared to that of ‘favor,’ lies in the fact that those who get a ‘value,’ by paying a certain price, feel freed from any type of obligation; whereas, those who receive a ‘favor,’ after acquiring the utility, still feel obliged to be grateful to the firm. Therefore, those who receive a favor are more closely bound (i.e., loyal), which is the goal that all firms would like to achieve. In a sense, Godfather Marketing is the rediscovery of the ‘Law of Say’ of which the marketing concept, at the end of the ’50s, had been the reversal. Jean-Baptiste Say, at the beginning of the 1800s, argued that supply creates its own demand; or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would have summed up in his famous saying: “Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door.” Or, more recently, in the words of Trout and Rivkin (1999, p. 65): “It’s not about knowing your customers. It’s about your customers knowing about you!” If a Godfather firm has power, if

it can solve the problems of consumers, it is they who come to the firm. It does not matter what it sells: the business of the Godfather firm consists of producing satisfied consumers and, above all, loyal ones.

2.2 The pursuit of power

Whoever says that, for firms, the purpose of doing business according to Godfather Marketing is about money is wrong. The ultimate goal is power.

For those with power, money is just another form of goods or commodities they can easily acquire. Who has power can get things regardless of money. In the '60s, the eccentric painter Mario Schifano was said to pay expensive furs for his girlfriends by sketching on the spot at boutiques in Rome. Shopkeepers accepted these drawings as payment due to their anticipated high value. This painter enjoyed the *power* of his fame. Money was only a consequence of that power.

Looking ahead, it would be incorrect to assume that one can dominate the market simply with money. The ultimate goal of a Godfather firm is to acquire power over its market. Money – or, as it is said in Sicily, '*la roba*' ('the stuff,' meaning the possession of material things) – is merely a tool to gain more power. After all, achieving customer loyalty is only a means to enhance the firm's power. The sale of goods or services is not essential. For a Godfather firm, showing the power to fulfill the priority wishes of consumers is far more effective than selling products.

Even today, in affluent societies, there is a subtle parallelism between criminal mafia and big corporations. In the criminal mafia, mobsters asking for racket money essentially offer protection from themselves (Gambetta 1993). What seems a fair exchange ('If you pay, I protect you') is in reality an extortion, given that it is the mafia itself that poses the threat to non-payers. In consumerist markets, such as fashion and technology, big corporations annually shape consumer expectations through their aggressive marketing campaigns, only to later fulfill those expectations themselves. The penalty for not conforming is being out of fashion, a peculiar social stigma especially for those segments more sensitive to peer pressures, like the affluent and younger demographics (Rosenberg 2011).

Holding a grip on consumers allows a firm to maintain control over the market and overshadow its competitors. That is why, throughout the ages, losing power has always been considered a catastrophe, much greater than losing money.

2.3 The firm's credibility

Godfather firms gain power through the acquisition of a loyal clientele. Consumers, intent on fulfilling their dominant needs or desires (not necessarily related to the products sold by the firm), will seek out firms they view as credible in meeting such wants. Consequently, for a firm, projecting *credibility* will be the essential condition for engaging prospective customers, whose loyalty primarily stems from satisfying interactions with the firm. It is important to understand, however, that for this cycle to run in a virtuous manner – where satisfied customers collaborate with the firm, enhance their loyalty and, in turn, boost the firm's power and its capability to offer further favors – the firm must carefully choose consumers to grant its favors, among

those who demonstrate to respect its ‘code of honor.’ The concession of its ‘friendship,’ in the spirit of the mafia, should not be taken for granted, as it can affect, in the long term, the entire organization. Firm credibility, after all, is built over time.

According to Ohanian (1990), the credibility of an information source is typically assessed by three dimensions: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. When referring to a Godfather firm, examining each of these dimensions provides better insights into how its credibility can influence customers’ loyalty. *Attractiveness*, the first of these dimensions, refers to the appeal of the source in its representation to others. Interestingly, the term ‘mafia’ originally meant beauty, boldness, excellence (Dondoni et al. 2006). A firm adopting the Godfather Marketing approach is deemed attractive and credible, because, by fulfilling the most significant wants of customers, elicits joy. Humans need beauty to live – not only in an aesthetic (i.e., natural and artistic) sense, but also on a moral plane (Diessner et al. 2008). There is plenty of evidence from research in urban, socio-economic and interpersonal contexts (e.g., Tartaglia 2006) that beauty creates a cross-cutting environment of happiness for both individuals and communities. Under the Godfather Marketing paradigm, the finest gift a firm can give to its customers is its ‘friendship’ – offering empathy, affection, and an emotional bond as they were part of the same ‘family.’ The attractiveness of a Godfather firm for consumers stems from having this genuine ally, ready to assist, modest yet powerful in interactions, consistently engaging, and frequently even entertaining.

Expertise, the second dimension of credibility, refers to how authoritative, skilled, and qualified the source appears in carrying out its activities. In Godfather Marketing, the expertise of a firm is expressed both in an objective and in a subjective manner. For a firm, being objectively capable means to have the power to fulfill, through the favors granted, the wishes of its customers, thanks to a vast network of connections, a high level of competences, and a profound judgment capacity. Instead, being subjectively capable means to be able to manifest externally its prestige, by assuming the role of Godfather taking charge of such commitments. The production of signs that convey to potential users the power and ability of an organization is common also to historical entities like the Freemasonry and renowned universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, no matter how outdated certain symbols and rituals may seem. This duality of expertise is evident even in the criminal underworld. Judge Falcone (1992, p. 124) lamented that many *mafiosi* possessed undeniable talents, characterized by “their lively intelligence, their great capacity for work, and their excellent organizational skills”. Similarly, he observed they felt the need to discreetly yet deliberately display their prowess and status, often through non-verbal cues, to be considered reliable on a professional level.

Finally, credibility is acquired through *trustworthiness*, which concerns the level of reliability attributed to the source. In Godfather Marketing, it constitutes the essential condition for establishing a mutually beneficial relationship between firm and consumers. A firm must not promise a favor it cannot grant; but, if it commits, it must get the work done at all costs. This agreement is exalted in the spirit of the mafia which informs its ‘code of honor,’ such that a promise made on one’s word binds a party to keep it, beyond any possible impediment. Also in Cosa Nostra, the dignity and respect that a member can proudly claim is primarily based on never betraying

the trust placed in them by other members of the organization. Not surprisingly, the *mafioso* is apodictically called a ‘man of honor.’ “My word”, used to say Salvatore Profaci, an American mafia boss of the Colombo family, “is better than anything else I got to offer”. Of Mayer Lansky, from Lucky Luciano’s family, it was said that his handshake “was worth more than the strongest contracts that a battery of lawyers could put together” (Ferrante 2011, pp. 5 and 134). In Godfather Marketing, all actors involved are bound by an oath that becomes a mutual obligation. A firm must pay its debts, as it must always be able to collect its dues. Respect its customers, and demand their respect. Its success and its positive image among consumers depend on the trust it engenders in those who turn to it.

So, we arrive at the final point: for the Godfather firm, the *loyalty* of its customers is the goal that it seeks to achieve by being, and representing itself, as a credible interlocutor. The flip side of the coin is that what it demands in return, for its services, is that its customers demonstrate the same qualities, be there for it as it is for them, and be forever loyal. Like a mafia Godfather, the firm cares for its customers, is powerful, is trustworthy, but it wants the same from them: the same affection, the same respect, the same commitment. In practical terms, when providing significant favors to consumers, the objective of the Godfather firm is threefold. Firstly, once satisfied their need or desire, making them feel inherently tied to the firm by a bond of loyalty, which translates into being grateful to the firm and, consequently, faithful to it. Secondly, enhancing their loyalty by involving customers in reciprocating favors within the firm’s network, dispensing rewards or punishments that push them to strengthen this bond. And, above all, thirdly, trying to create with them, over time, a quasi-religious, emotional bond, similar to that which links a devotee to his idol, a sports fan to his team, a political activist to his creed. Such a ‘fervid attachment’ (Guido et al. 2016) goes beyond a rational evaluation of the favors received. It rather arises from a relationship that we could define ‘melodramatic,’ because it takes on extreme and opposite emotional tones (good vs. bad, right vs. wrong), aimed at reducing the customers’ willingness to defect from this bond and creating an unwavering loyalty towards the Godfather firm. On this, the customers’ satisfaction, their rewards, and, ultimately, their well-being depend.

The danger that this bond might degenerate into a subtle manipulation is real; however, within certain boundaries and with the necessary controls, it could lead to a beneficial situation, making available to all consumers, regardless of their financial resources, the fulfillment of their most pressing aspirations.

3 The object of Godfather Marketing

3.1 Granting favors

The object of a Godfather firm is granting favors to its friends. ‘Friends’ are those consumers considered worthy of being an active part of the firm’s network. The nature of such favors can be delineated according to four parameters (namely, 4 Cs): Complexity, Context, Content, and Channel.

Firstly, the *complexity* of favors refers to the firm's (high or low) level of difficulty in granting them, irrespective of favors' perceived importance by requesters – always assumed high in the Godfather Marketing paradigm. 'High-complexity favors' encompass requests that might seem unattainable by individual consumers but that are easily feasible by large corporations, like Big Techs. Similar to organizations dedicated to aiding children with severe health issues, these multinationals could leverage their vast resources – comparable to sovereign States – to realize individual customers' aspirations, instead of donating to general causes. 'Low-complexity favors,' in contrast, denote more accessible, everyday acts of assistance, achievable even by SMEs, as they require limited resources. Yet, despite seemingly trivial, they address pivotal needs for those confronting economic distress. The increasing poverty in Western countries, due to financial upheavals, demographic changes, and health crises, underlines the importance of these favors, resonating with the base layers of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy. By tackling such issues, local firms too can embrace the Godfather role, offering especially vulnerable groups, like the elderly, a 'third place,' outside of home and work, where to find support and a feeling of belonging amidst modern challenges.

Secondly, the *context* of favors refers to the main area within which the favors for the customers are requested. Whereas the complexity influences the possibility for a firm to grant a favor, the context determines its willingness to grant it, based on the opportunity for the firm. Three primary areas where a person may seek favors are health, love, and work. Rooted in human physiological and psychological needs, these domains echo Carl Gustav Jung's sentiment that health, love, and work are integral to happiness (McGuire and Hull 1987). 'Health' is not just the absence of illness; it encompasses mental well-being and a spiritual appreciation of life. 'Love' incorporates rewarding intimate relationships, familial ties, and friendships. 'Work,' especially in technologically advanced societies, extends beyond mere livelihood to include leisure and personal pursuits. Drawing a parallel from business organization, health can be considered as a 'hygiene factor' – essential but not always fulfilling by itself; in contrast, love and work 'motivating factors,' enriching life with purpose. The reference is to Elton Mayo's (1945) *Human relations movement* that, in the business field, illuminated the profound impact of motivators, like professional growth and recognition, over mere basic factors, like fair pay.

Thirdly, the *content* of favors refers to the traits that define them as potential objects of exchange in Godfather Marketing. We can identify three main dimensions. One is the 'personalization of social causes': instead of addressing a general problem for the community's benefit, the firm tackles the issue at an individual level, aiming to make a specific contribution. This is akin to saying: instead of solving the problem of lack of drinking water in Africa, I start building a well. Unlike social marketing, this strategy prioritizes customized social causes for its clients. Another trait characterizes favors as 'defined acts of consumption,' which means they are time-bound commitments for the firm. They should be concrete, measurable, and not associated with vague aspirations (like 'achieving fame' or 'becoming rich'), or it will never be known if the firm has fulfilled its obligations. They are designed to assist someone in achieving specific objectives, rather than supplanting their life journey. Lastly, favors entail 'expert advice.' Drawing from the mafia's code, where a 'man of honor' always

owes the truth to another, a firm is duty-bound to offer its client the best possible advice, based on expert knowledge, even if it might conflict with its interests. However, such advice, akin to a veiled command, if not heeded, would usually impede the customer to complain or continue the relation with the firm.

Finally, the *channel* pertains to the way of delivering favors the Godfather firm adopts to fulfill its commitment to its customers. Here, too, we can highlight three operational aspects. One regards the firm's 'intimate engagement' with consumers. Echoing the personalized interactions of bygone eras, where craftsmen (tailors, shoemakers, etc.) customized products for each customer, Godfather Marketing fosters individual solutions to consumers' problems. The relationship would extend beyond mere commerce and guarantee discretion, along with encouragement and kindness, recognizing the sensitive nature of most of the issues at hand. Another dimension involves the 'favor's presentation as a gift,' without overt expectations of reciprocity, although they invariably exist. While favors may exude altruism, they invariably serve the firm's interests (except in rare occasions for reputational gains). The Godfather firm's assistance is a concession; yet, when the time comes, its intervention demands repayment with all one has. This dynamic echoes a sentiment by Ambrose Bierce: 'The mafia is the art of converting kindness into coin.' A final aspect regards the 'legal boundary' of favors, as some of them might toe the line of legality, requiring a 'nudge' (*spintarella*) to be realized. This recommendation should not stray from merit and capability but act as a friendly push, helping achieve what might otherwise be unattainable without it. According to *Nudge theory* (Thaler and Sunstein 2022), these positive incentives can guide behaviors while respecting personal freedom. Most likely, in the future, with the proliferation of algorithms and data analytics, the Godfather firm will be able to harness vast records and extend its reach and thrust in manifold areas.

3.2 Methods of payment

Although favors, by definition, do not require reciprocity (Gouldner 1960), the 'code of honor' in Godfather Marketing entails a moral commitment, which translates into a clear obligation to repay the firm for the benefits received. The greater the favor, the more the recipient, in honor, owes the Godfather firm. Different modes of reciprocity exist (see Table 1, for illustrative purposes). We can split them into two groups: the first three better reflect mafia-style relations; the rest serve similar ends.

In Godfather Marketing, the *committed participation* of customers is crucial for exchanging favors, thereby expanding the firm's influence. Before granting a favor, the firm must assess if the beneficiary can reciprocate. Reciprocity, routed via the Godfather firm, ranges from occasional to continuous commitments. For affiliates engaged in the latter, this might involve recruiting others to benefit the firm, side-stepping formal employment and associated costs. Alongside mediating favors, the Godfather firm retains its core competencies, producing unrelated goods or services. Therefore, upon performing a favor, the firm might prompt beneficiaries to *purchase its products* – through direct buys, subscriptions, or exclusivity agreements. Crucially, the Godfather firm must ensure such purchasing feels like a privilege, not an imposition, leveraging gentle directive pressure aligned with customer wants,

Table 1 Ways to repay a favor according to Godfather Marketing

	Definition	Characteristics
Committed Participation	A method rooted in the concept of reciprocating favors, thereby broadening a firm's allies network.	The philosophy behind this exchange mechanism traces back to ancient principles, often highlighted by proverbs like "One hand washes the other." Such practices can evolve into a core activity for the firm's affiliates, enriching its network and mutually benefiting both the giver and the receiver.
Purchasing the Firms' Products	The firm expects the beneficiary of a favor to buy a specified amount of its goods or services.	The purchase should not be perceived as an obligation but as a privilege. This type of repayment can also involve buying products as gifts for others, ensuring advantages for both the firm and the individuals.
Payment of a Fee	A modest, recurring payment as a sign of appreciation and gratitude towards the firm.	This is a solidarity contribution for members of the firm, signifying a sense of belonging and acknowledgment. Such a fee acts as an exit barrier, binding clients to the firm and deterring potential shifts to competitors.
Provision of Expert Opinions	The firm engages select clients, offering them favors in return for their expertise.	These experts assess and sway the future choices of other consumers; if proven right, they can transition from external consultants into affiliated 'advisors,' playing a pivotal role in the firm's network. Association is based on their tested expertise and sustained loyalty.
Indirect Recruitment	A client is rewarded for introducing other potential customers to the firm, who can be successfully integrated into its network.	Such exchanges can arise not only from personal recommendations but also virtually. Digital influencers, celebrities, and opinion leaders are especially suited for this role. Their endorsements can enhance the firm's reputation and redefine traditional customer acquisition.
Payment in Kind (Barter)	Repayment of a favor through goods or services instead of money.	For example, a small business owner could reciprocate a favor by granting special privileges or discounts to the firm's members. Similarly, small loans can be backed by collateral.
Mixed Options	The firm can combine various repayment methods listed or introduce new ones.	Common arrangements might involve reciprocating with favors and paying a fee or purchasing the firm's products. However, any mix is viable, if it aligns with the firm's objectives.

Note The first three options are the primary methods of repayment

resulting in positive perceptions (Zboja et al. 2016). A third method to settle with the Godfather firm is by *paying a fee*, reminiscent of the mafia's '*pizzo*,' typically paid as protection insurance. The term originates from the Italian '*bagnarsi il pizzo*,' translating to 'wetting the beak,' implying taking a small share without causing significant loss (Santino 2019). It represents a modest yet continuous payment, symbolizing clan membership. It acts as a way to strengthen bonds with the firm and its introducers. Ideally, therefore, it should be collected in person to maintain direct contact with customers, especially segments like the elderly who value more consistent engagement.

In addition to these three main methods, there are other alternatives. Through the *provision of expert opinions*, the firm acquires and disseminates truthful information and accurate advice to its clients. Given the limited expertise of many consumers and the growing skepticism towards advertising and general information, some customers can repay favors by exchanging their knowledge with the Godfather firm. In turn, the firm can function akin to financial rating agencies, providing clients with trusted and personalized certified opinions. Another method, similar to promotional incen-

tives in streaming or delivery services, is *indirect recruitment*, where the price of a favor is settled by introducing potential new members to the firm. Digital influencers may be well-suited for this endeavor, given their significant reach and lifestyle alignment with their followers; yet, personal and direct channels remain just as valid. Especially when the favor complexity is low, recipients might also compensate the firm with a *payment in kind*. They could, for example, handle minor errands or, if they are suppliers, exchange only their finest products to the firm's members. The Godfather firm can even act as a pawn shop, taking valuable items as repayment. The exchanges involved in bartering preserve value, especially amid inflation, and foster trust. Lastly, every Godfather firm can craft *mixed options* of previous methods or add novel ones, consistently upholding the ethos of a 'friendly exchange' with customers.

When repaying the Godfather firm, consumers further its goal of boosting collaborations and loyalty. Through the exchanged favors, they transition into 'prosumers,' merging their roles of 'producers' and 'consumers.' They are not just passive users but active contributors to the firm's services (e.g., Xiang et al. 2022). The more they broker favors for others through the firm, the more they stand to gain in benefits.

3.3 Selective friendship

Granting a favor to a consumer who approaches the Godfather firm is not a given. Rather, it's a 'concession,' an act of acceptance and goodwill on its part. The Godfather is not a *spicciafaccende* – meaning somebody just there to serve. His bestowals are acts of generosity, because there is no obligation on his part. It is not like in 'concierge marketing,' where clients pay agencies to book tickets, pay bills, manage daily expenses, or get online tourist facilities only found in person in Grand Hotels. Here, the favors requested are almost always vital to those who ask for them – even if, obviously, they can be of different complexity. They are typically something consumers truly care about and are willing to commit to with all their soul. In Sicilian culture, a Godfather is called a *Mammasantissima* (literally, 'Holy Mother'), and is treated as an omnipotent deity, a last resort, akin to turning to one's mother in dire straits. The Godfather's ethical leadership reflects values respected across many cultures (e.g., Tsai and Tsai 2022), fostering attachment and loyalty, which are essential for forming sustainable business relationships as enduring as maternal bonds. That is why, in Godfather Marketing, even before starting an interaction, the firm has to decide 'if' and 'how' one deserves such honor, considering, respectively, the customer's qualities and the favor's conditions.

3.3.1 Customer's qualities

First of all, a firm must evaluate the seriousness of the persons requesting a favor, on which its decision to face the complexity of their request depends. In Godfather Marketing, customers are not an undifferentiated, faceless, and nameless mass, but specific 'economic agents' from whom the firm collects all kinds of information to understand their lacks and potentialities. They must adhere to a specific 'code of honor,' requiring possession of three main qualities: promise fulfillment, confidentiality, and sincerity.

Promise fulfillment entails keeping one's word: if customers receive a favor, they are expected to do what is asked of them in return and see it through to completion. Before committing, a Godfather firm should carefully assess the applicants on this point. Since the times of Aesop, the wise used to admonish: "Reflect on the people you associate with. Do they have a good reputation? Are they deserving?" Promise fulfillment is not only about the willingness to reciprocate a favor but also the capability to do so, regardless of a person's current possibilities. In other words, in Godfather Marketing, the granting of favors is based on worthiness, not merely wealth. What people without significant financial means could do for the firm, in terms of engagement, affluent consumers probably wouldn't or couldn't. No matter how poor, if showing unwavering support, they can repay a favor through their peculiar skills or services. Over time, they may even be integrated into the firm's network, fostering mutual aid and potential earnings.

Another quality to evaluate for the seriousness of an applicant is *confidentiality* – in mafia terms, one would refer to '*omertà*,' the mafia 'law of silence' (Legrenzi 1997). Essentially, it's the ability to keep private matters that are not directly related to oneself. Silence and discretion in carrying out one's tasks, along with the ability to bring them to a successful conclusion (without the help of the Godfather firm), are the values that translate into the business realm the qualities underlying this mafia concept. In Godfather Marketing, confidentiality allows the firm to maintain dyadic relationships with each consumer – that is, on a strictly one-to-one basis – and to guide them towards shared goals without fear of external interferences. Such relationships favor the asymmetry of power, being the Godfather the only depository of the right to grant favors. Any unauthorized concessions, brokered by subordinates directly with applicants, would inevitably lead to repercussions.

Lastly, the assessment of consumers' requests for favors hinges on the *sincerity* shown to the firms. This echoes the mafia's principle that members must always be truthful to one another. In particular, the Godfather acts as a confessor: one must tell him everything and never lie. In a business setting, appraising the sincerity of applicants compels the firm to carefully consider the multifaceted contexts and circumstances surrounding their pleas, even when presented with their utmost good faith. Consequently, requests could take long paths or be immediately discarded. For this reason, earning a favor should be hailed as a significant mark of trust from the Godfather firm, akin to being accepted into a prestigious institution, like Harvard or Cambridge. This comparison is not accidental, since admission to a college involves a serious commitment for the future, undertaken solely with the hope of changing one's life for the better.

3.3.2 Favor's conditions

Secondly, after assessing the potential customers' qualities in relation to the complexity of the favors requested, a Godfather firm must consider the conditions within which the context, content, and channel of such favors will be established. There are three pivotal conditions regarding how a favor can be granted: exclusivity, reciprocity, and allegiance.

Exclusivity requires customers to commit solely to the Godfather firm, without approaching competing firms with similar requests. If they breach this vow, they will face escalating censures, starting with warnings to retrace their steps, up to severe retaliations. The Godfather's acceptance can be organized as a ceremony with religious reminiscences, in the form of an initiation rite that presupposes the absolute respect of virtuous rules and loyal behaviors. To deter potential 'brand switchers' and 'variety seekers,' it is crucial to forge, for each customer, a personal connection with the leading figure in the Godfather firm. Exclusivity underscores that, no matter who actually executes the favor, the sole granter deserving gratitude is the Godfather, representing the firm's ultimate decision maker. Such a direct relationship would stimulate customers to understand the importance of their commitment and, over time, by reinforcing their loyalty towards the firm, would naturally make other alternatives unthinkable.

Another condition affecting the provision of favors is *reciprocity*, which implicitly drives the return of favors granted to customers. A Godfather firm concedes benefits based on who asks for them and knows that, once committed to a consumer's wish, it must deliver. Occasionally, newcomers may overstep, demanding favors that they cannot repay, whether in promised purchases or use of their contacts. Customers' reciprocation is more than a contract: it's a debt of honor. In Godfather Marketing, there are no 'free' lures like in promotional sales. Its code dictates giving something in exchange, since everything has a cost (contrary to the consumeristic illusion). Deviating from traditional marketing, such a perspective elevates the perceived worth of a favor, infusing it with an aura of exclusivity. It mirrors the 'retromarketing' strategies (Brown 2001), where creating hurdles to sales paradoxically boosts demand. Consumers would be captivated by scarcity, engagement, heightened anticipation, delayed gratification, and a touch of unreachability.

The third requirement is securing *allegiance*, ensuring customers' due diligence throughout the relationship. Like a bank where only the loan counters work, a firm not able to uphold its own credit is at risk of failure. After receiving a favor, the risk of customers relinquishing their allegiance increases. As Hirsch (1976) highlighted, choices seem more appealing before being made, given the illusion of endless possibilities. Relying solely on gratitude is precarious. Firms should aim to instill a sense of debt, which is a distinct construct from gratitude (Watkins et al. 2006). To turn allegiance into loyalty, the Godfather firm has three primary persuasion options (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2004). Firstly, *convincing* customers, dipping them within a make-up of reality, a world apart, heavily influenced by social "conventions, codes of behaviour, traditions" of its mafia-like network (Arlacchi 1986, p. 198). Secondly, *punishing* them, through a stringent control aimed to avoid, if possible, extreme or external sanctions. Lastly, *rewarding* them, encouraging repetition of virtuous behaviors. A Godfather firm will use all these options to transform consumers into an organized network of loyal supporters.

4 The network of Godfather Marketing

4.1 A power hierarchy

In the future, firms employing the Godfather Marketing organization might mirror the structure of Cosa Nostra, along with its dynamics and peculiarities. This is because the mafia organization has always demonstrated a remarkable adaptability to turbulent environments (Dickie 2004). Unlike many current companies, the mafia seamlessly combines the stability of its formal hierarchy with the flexibility of its external network, seeking outside competencies whenever they are not present internally.

The ‘mafia family’ (*famiglia mafiosa*) is the basic unit of the mafia organization and the archetypical model for the Godfather firm. It replaces, for its members, the natural family by establishing, through affiliation, absolute and indissoluble bonds. Whereas mafia families have historically exerted control over communities in specific territories, to minimize conflicts with allied families (Sciarrone 2009), Godfather firms, to operate efficiently, must target consumer markets defined not only on a territorial basis (extended through digital connections), but also on economic (e.g., income, occupation, etc.) and social (lifestyles, values, etc.) similarities.

The distribution of roles in a Godfather firm emulates the organization of the mafia family, following a precise vertical hierarchy that also leverages a network of horizontal relations and contacts outside its formal structure (see Table 2).

The first layer consists specifically of external *associates* (*avvicinati*, in mafia terms), who help address favors requested by customers or exchange information. They can be occasionally outsourced based on their skills – ranging from experts and students to influencers and past customers – and collaborate as part of the firm’s broader network. Then, at the base of the pyramidal chart of the Godfather firm, there is a workforce of *soldiers* (*picciotti*) formed by customers who return favors (‘prosumers’) and third parties who engage in structural collaboration. Upon embracing the firm’s ‘code of honor’ through affiliation, they become formally invested as stable members and are asked to fulfill, directly or indirectly, customers’ requests in the name of the firm.

The intermediate level comprises *caporegimes* (*capos*, or *captains*), also termed *capidecina* (‘heads of tens’) since they traditionally command around ten affiliates. They relay orders from the family head, coordinate soldiers’ tasks, and reward or penalize them upon their completion. Another supporting figure in the firm is the *adviser* (*consigliere*), not to be confused with external consultants. Recognized for wisdom and diplomatic skill, advisers offer detached and balanced counsel to firm’s decision-makers, aiming to ensure its long-term success. And, as substitutes of the family head, there are *underbosses* (or *vice-bosses*), called upon when there are numerous requests to be dealt face-to-face, for engaging customers. They must know to assess a customer’s ability to reciprocate, mirroring the Godfather’s skills and dedication.

At the top of the chain of command is the *family head*, traditionally called *Godfather* (Di Maria and Lo Verso 2007) – although, in business, there is obviously no difference in having a woman fill this role. The Godfather is elected, often by acclamation, by all family members and his opinion is pivotal when granting favors, the

Table 2 Roles in Godfather firms' networks

	Description	Characteristics
Associates (<i>Part-time workers</i>)	Associates are not 'affiliated' with the firm, meaning they are not permanent members.	Associates collaborate with firm members and can perform favors in exchange for compensation. Being part of the firm's external network, they possess a range of competencies but may not necessarily transition to formal members.
Soldiers (<i>Lower-level employees</i>)	These are affiliated members who commit to fulfilling favors for the firm. They have undergone the affiliation process, pledging to respect the firm's rules.	They carry out the orders of their bosses, earning commissions and other benefits. The number of soldiers varies based on the size of the firm and the average complexity of the favors granted. Godfather SMEs might have 5–10 soldiers, while larger firms can have up to 70–80 ^a . Digital relationships can further expand these numbers.
Caporegimes (<i>Vice Presidents</i>)	Appointed by the family head, they serve as intermediaries between the head and the soldiers.	They oversee soldiers' operations and ensure successful task completion. Their judgment is crucial in the affiliation process, as they manage relationships with associates and maintain contact with customers. They are mainly compensated based on the performances of their subordinates.
Advisor (<i>General Counsel</i>)	Acts as the right hand to the family head, chosen for proven experience and trust. There could be more than one in a firm.	An advisor provides objective insights and solutions to complex problems. Always ensuring confidentiality, sometimes an advisor can take positions even against the family head in the best interest of the firm.
Underbosses (<i>COOs</i>)	Appointed by the family head, they handle operations not requiring the family head's direct intervention.	One of them becomes the regent in the absence of the family head. They evaluate the seriousness of applicants and, if delegated, can grant favors. Their function is crucial, as they decide the feasibility and opportunity of those favors.
Godfather/ Family head (<i>CEO</i>)	He embodies the will of the firm (hence the term 'Godfather firm') and decides the distribution of tasks.	The Godfather has the final say in all significant business matters, especially affiliate approvals. His power is proportional to the firm's network. He determines if a favor is too burdensome and advises customers on reciprocation.
Commission (<i>Corporate Board of Directors</i>)	It handles common affairs and interests of firms operating in different districts. Each district is made of allied firms operating in similar markets.	The Commission (or <i>Cupola</i>) is made up of <i>district heads</i> , each one elected among family heads of allied firms operating in similar markets. It deals with shared issues like market division, recruitment rules, and brand reputation. A chair, <i>boss of bosses</i> , could be elected, among the district heads to oversee the Commission.

^aThese numbers derive from those associated with the criminal mafia (Arlacchi 1986, p. 133)

Note Roles comparable to those in today's firms are indicated in italics within parentheses

main source of his power. Finally, it's possible to replicate the mafia structure also at the level of a corporate group. When two or three nearby Godfather firms, operating in markets with similar territorial, economic, and social features, associate to form a 'district' (*mandamento*), they can elect a *district head* (*capomandamento*) to sit on the Godfather organization's supreme body, the *Commission*. This board is chaired by a *leader* (*boss of bosses*), elected as first among equals, to mediate and guide collective choices.

For a Godfather firm, it is vital that everyone knows and is motivated to perform their tasks, ensuring a clear and adaptable power chain. As Judge Falcone (1992, p.

69) noted, contrary to common belief, “the mafia is the most agile and pragmatic organisation imaginable”.

4.2 Leadership in the family

In leading a Godfather firm, overseeing the upper links of the chain is essential to thwart individual initiatives that could jeopardize the family unit. Yet, since the firm predominantly consists of foundational links, which are consumers who exchange favors in the firm’s interest, the leadership’s principal duty – in order to persuade them to continue serving its scope – is threefold: *convincing* them through an affiliation process leading to an unconditional attachment; *punishing* them when their actions are deemed unworthy beyond a certain tolerance level; and *rewarding* them by offering privileges and opportunities for career progression.

4.2.1 Convincement

In conventional businesses, membership typically involves just completing a form or paying a fee. Contrastingly, for Godfather firms, *affiliation* transcends to a profound rite of passage, echoing the mafia’s induction ceremony (Gambetta 1993). This rite seeks to deepen consumer ties, instilling a sense of belonging and marking their entry into an élite circle. This distinction is reserved for those who have consistently demonstrated prowess in favor exchanges and loyalty. Affiliation is not something one can buy with money, but a status earned by steadfast commitment to an ethical code entailing promise fulfillment, confidentiality, and sincerity. Similar rites, even found in indigenous cultures (Biss 2020), stress the need to prove one’s worth, making difficult to adhere and, in turn, satisfying desire for exclusivity – as demonstrated in much status consumption research (e.g., Kim 2018). This creates an inimitable bond with affiliates, compelling them to behave in sync with other members, ensuring lasting collaborations grounded in exclusivity, reciprocity, and allegiance.

Such solid relationships nurture what has been called *fervid attachment* (Guido et al. 2016), a strong emotional connection between affiliates and the firm, which mirrors the devotion and affection of religious individuals towards their faith. It happens when, over time, customer relationships transcend rational evaluations, turning into habits or even dogmatic acts of adherence to the firm’s ‘code of honor.’ In modern societies, such behaviors can be found in certain forms of consumption which allow consumers to express their personal identity or to heighten their sense of integrity. Antecedents of this type of attachment can be both ‘intrinsic,’ stemming from deep-seated feelings, memories, and ideals, and ‘extrinsic,’ driven by a sense of belonging, recognition, and pleasure. Essential to this construct of fervid attachment are six dimensions: emotionality, sociality, innovation, shared philosophy, universality, and certainty in choices. These traits can collectively mold customers’ loyalty, reaffirming the Godfather firm as an irreplaceable component of their life.

4.2.2 Punishments

Firms, traditionally, rely on rewards, like discounts or free gifts, to incentivize consumers. However, Godfather Marketing suggests a shift of paradigm towards incorporating *punishments* for clients who do not meet their promises, breaking the shared ‘code of honor.’ The 17th-century Cardinal de Retz, in his memories, wisely observed: “Laws without the protection of arms sink into contempt”. In a consumer context, punishments are designed to be self-contained, aiming to prevent further damages or discourage the imitation of harmful behaviors. As in criminal mafia, their entity varies accordingly to the severity of the wrongdoing. For affiliates, they are mainly centered on stripping their privileges, from temporary suspension (*posatura*) to outright expulsion. Warnings are typically for a solitary mistake, but repeated transgressions lead to stricter sanctions. They start with cautionary messages promoting continued cooperation, progressing to sterner measures such as higher prices, exclusions from firm’s digital platforms, and media pillories to foster social stigma and ostracism. At its peak, the firm may undertake direct retaliation, especially against those benefiting without reciprocating. The Godfather firm will employ all its clout and global affiliates for retribution. A pact with the Godfather is sacred. If one defaults, the repercussions might not be immediate, but inevitable. As Judge Falcone (1992, p. 52) observed: “[A]n account opened with Cosa Nostra can never be closed”.

All things considered, coercive methods, like punishments, should be reserved as a last resort (*ultima ratio*) for extreme cases. Conversely, relationships established with the Godfather firm ought to be enjoyable and fulfilling, avoiding to turn into disappointments or, worse, nightmares. Despite inevitable challenges, consumers’ loyalty flourishes when the firm ensures their satisfaction. Strategic communication, as suggested by Guido (2014), can effectively modify or reinforce their perceptions and judgments. As noted in a Harvard study, “The greater the loyalty a company engenders among its customers, employees, suppliers, and shareholders, the greater the profits it reaps” (Reichheld 2001, p. 76). Ultimately, the goal of the Godfather firm is to broaden its ‘friends of our friends’ network, increasing its power.

4.2.3 Rewards

No current business model anticipates punishing customers for not upholding promises, or demands they prove their worthiness when asking for a service and make them work for the firm. The Godfather Marketing paradigm, instead, does this. Initial interactions with potential clients enable the Godfather firm to assess their respect of the mutual ‘code of honor’ and their fully dedication to the firm’s goals. This commitment might be put to the test practically, as the firm could request as courtesy advance services, in line with the applicant’s competences. Customers who cooperate – offering favors, sharing contacts, recruiting members – can become affiliates and gain significant *rewards*. Firstly, they can fulfill, through the firm, most of their crucial needs and desires. Secondly, they can earn a percentage fee, akin to a ‘pizzo,’ each time a favor is successfully completed by their subordinates. Thirdly, they can enjoy a number of daily perks (Gambetta 1993), ranging from gifts, discounts, jobs, hospitality, free use of resources, forms of corporate participation, specialized ser-

vices (from professionals, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, etc.), various utilities to even cash payments, both for themselves and their kin.

In Godfather Marketing, customers advance their *career* by meeting the firm's demands and ethos. The firm tasks new affiliates with expanding its network while preventing them from gaining excessive power and becoming rivals. Élite selection is based on free competition, even for a boss' kin (Arlacchi 1986). Affiliate's only duty is to solve customers' problems on the firm's call. Dyadic relations between each of them and the Godfather solidify hierarchy. Independently completing a task – using kinships, friendships, and expert consultations – is prized, whereas superiors' involvement, breaches of trust, inability to secure respect and cooperation are all signals of failure. Like in the post-WWII *Japanese business model* (Monden 1983), where workers were molded into multi-skilled technicians, Godfather affiliates should ideally be capable of completing any kind of favor. More similarities involve: lifelong employment, inside the internal labor market; renouncing union demands, once aligned with firm rules; and seniority pay rewarding recruitment, over time. Same paths apply to everyone in this hierarchy, which pushed Hess (1998, p. 69) to state: “The career of a mafioso might thus be described as leading from the position of executant to that of employer.”

4.3 Clans or clubs

A knife can be used to cut bread or to commit a murder. Likewise, adopting a mafia approach in marketing is not inherently good or bad: it depends on how it is done. Philosophers and writers have long argued that morality hinges on methods and goals (Suikkanen and Kauppinen 2019). A Godfather network can privilege a few (a narrow minority) or benefit many (a broader community). As a ‘clan’ (*consorteria*), it can boost profits for a close power hierarchy; conversely, as a ‘club’ (*consorzio*), it can extend favors to each and every one aligned with its honor code, even without selling products. These, however, are not conflicting ethical visions, despite the more democratic appearance of the latter configuration. *Clans* act like any private capitalist firm, rewarding those who invest their own resources and energies; *clubs*, on the other hand, might not be so open to accommodate all and every request. Indeed, the true concern lies in the potential drift these networks can take towards unethical or illegal practices, for both methods and goals. In order to avoid the dangers of this potential pitfall and to exploit the opportunities of a correct adoption, proper regulations are essential.

4.3.1 Networks as clans

In Godfather Marketing, a firm fosters deep bonds with a selected segment of customers by offering priority favors, thereby enhancing attachment beyond mere product sales. Such a network can be conceptualized as a *clan*, a distinct “organization within the organization,” representative of the firm's most loyal clientele, evolving as part of its workforce. While attachment can amplify customers' loyalty, at its extreme, overly persuasive communications, as well as punishments and rewards, may lead them to total submission to the firm's rules. Psychological and social pressures are

common practice in consumerist markets, but become problematic if they suppress individuals' will, infringe autonomy of judgment, discriminate against meritocracy, or expose to unwanted risks (financial, reputational, etc.). No contemporary firm, to our knowledge, openly requires an undivided loyalty from its customers and a total adherence to a code of behavior as Godfather firms would do. Although they do not resort to illegal means, viewing their networks as 'clans' could pose potential threats to consumers' personal freedoms which deserve discussion here.

At the heart of networks as clans is the distinction between 'Us' and 'Them': i.e., members of the Godfather firm's partnership, and everyone outside. According to Banfield's (1958) seminal work on Southern Italian culture, families – like private firms – serve only their interests. They promise protection to members obeying a shared code of values. Central to their identity is the notion of 'honor,' regulating external interactions. Likewise, a clan functions as a 'walled garden,' with the firm acting as the gatekeeper of codes, and affiliates exerting mutual oversight. It resonates with today's anticompetitive practices of certain digital marketing apps that entice users, then hinder their exit, forcing them into increasingly unfavorable conditions, until they open an adjacent garden "where they push them as if they were cattle" (Bertola and Quintarelli 2023, p. 66).

Adopting a Godfather clan-network approach could provide a sheltered avenue for local firms' empowerment, but it might also overly amplify major corporations' dominance on markets. The Godfather Marketing ethos, though appearing dogmatic, ensures benefit distribution based on merit and commitment. Straying from this code might turn it into a 'cult,' where only the top hierarchy disproportionately benefits. A self-serving leader, abusing both within and outside the group, would be a subversion of the Godfather mentality and compels scrutiny. Already today, people are driven to exploit their private sphere to make a living, as seen with certain influencers selling their relationships, friendships, images, and even bodies on some websites (Duffy 2016). With the rise of generative AI (Artificial Intelligence), which could replace many manual and creative jobs, it would not be surprising if Godfather firms themselves could start offering consumers an income. This would be done on the condition that their very life, not just their competences or information, would be shared with the firm. Clarifications concerning their voluntariness and participation are required to avoid perilous drifts.

The discriminating factor for enrollment in a Godfather network as a clan is safeguarding each member's free will. *Voluntariness* requires not being forced or deceived, especially in conditions of vulnerability. The purpose of Godfather Marketing is fulfilling real customer wants, not like illicit Multi-Level Marketing (MLM), where the focus is primarily vendor recruitment. Those who join it must be aware that membership requires strict adherence to a code of honor, reciprocating benefits and imposing obligations. Engaged *participation* would emerge as a natural devotion to this exclusive clan from being active parts in its rituals and exchanges. Clearly, specific regulations – similar to antitrust laws – are not only advisable but necessary to prevent weaker members to succumb to pressures and top members to act greedily, leading to the same pitfalls of the criminal mafia. Introducing a new perspective on Godfather networks that engages wider audiences could potentially allow for more pervasive oversight of firm operations.

4.3.2 Networks as clubs

When a Godfather firm's network is adapted to represent the interests of an entire community rather than of a chosen few, it can be conceptualized as a *club*, that is a model of open collaboration where ideally all citizens can benefit from it, not just a selected group. Such a shift implies also an important question: if Godfather Marketing could serve as a means to manage the *res publica*, governing and addressing the interests of a population sharing similar beliefs, attitudes, and customs. There appear to be two primary conditions to realize this proposition, which are discussed as follows.

At the heart of Godfather networks operating as 'clubs' is inclusive solidarity, reaching also non-members. They evoke the spirit of the 18th-century 'mutual aid societies,' thrived on voluntary contributions focusing on mutual support without profit aims. A small, cohesive community is the first condition for a Godfather network's successful functioning as a 'club.' Indeed, a limited number of contacts typically results in deeper connections, amplifying the persuasive power of the leading actor, thus increasing group consistency (Amatulli et al. 2014). Exclusive communities like Heritage Park near Cape Town (Bauman 2000), built to provide good neighborhood, exemplify the principle, common to the mafia, of providing "a kind of instinctive solidarity in order to support one another mutually in the pursuit of their aims" (Hess 1998, p. 11). Historically, mafia families have served as 'self-help institutions,' open to those sharing the same values. Similarly, a Godfather network embodies a club ethos by pooling resources, knowledge and connections to craft a competitive advantage not only for members but also for anyone eager to exchange loyalty for mutual improvement. While seeming utopian, this vision may only be avant-garde. Championing the spirit of chivalry, epitomized by the biblical tenet "Ask and it will be given," the code of honor of Godfather Marketing could leave a profound impact on people's lives, underscoring many small acts of random generosity.

Beyond cooperation and alignment with shared principles, a second condition is crucial for Godfather networks to operate as 'clubs.' In the absence of a well-defined hierarchy or recognized arbitrators, the favors exchanged within the community should strictly address material utilities related to basic needs. The rationale is that if these favors were to concern social benefits, coveted for their symbolic value and ability to signify social status, it would be unfeasible to satisfy every member in the network without displeasing anyone. Indeed, such 'positional goods,' as defined by Hirsch (1976), are allocated as in a 'zero-sum game,' where one player's gain equals the loss of others. To overcome this limit and ensure the sustained existence of a Godfather network opened to everyone, a rule of justice anchored in merit is required. It would prevent envy and defections, balancing giving and receiving. This concept of justice should stem from the 'code of honor' grounded on the community's universally accepted rules, such as whoever does more favors or solve more complex problems deserve more.

In conclusion, it is important to mention two useful tools in this context: WOM, to communicate the network's existence and ethos as a 'club;' and SNA, to monitor and ensure its sustainability. *WOM* (*Word-Of-Mouth*), as defined by De Matos and Vargas Rossi (2008), serves as a channel for fostering credibility and attracting new

members, promoting the network's altruistic mission and its benevolent reputation – which is relevant in all services, not only those directed at the neediest (Berry et al. 2017). It mirrors *charity advertising*, by encouraging public awareness, collaborative efforts, volunteerism, and, ultimately, positive change for the entire reference community. Conversely, *SNA (Social Network Analysis)* uses statistical techniques to discern the flow of information, resources, and power within the network. It quantifies the density, frequency, intensity, and direction of members' interactions, and assesses their level of dependence from the central figures. This analysis can unveil the collective resources available to the Godfather firm constituting the extent of its 'social capital' (Coleman 1988). In Cosa Nostra, the *mafioso* is said to be like 'a spider,' whose power correlates to the size of his web of relationships. The bigger his network, the better his chances of managing requests, achieving his goals, gaining collaborations, and exercising social control (Calderoni 2018). Likewise, Godfather Marketing can emerge as a suitable tool for community governance, nurturing grassroots consensus, and facilitating resource exchanges both within and outside its core.

4.3.3 Applications of Godfather Marketing

When analyzing the novel concepts of Godfather Marketing in comparison to existing practices, they provide a more realistic, consistent with socio-economic trends, and compelling explanation of market dynamics, both for some selected players in the market, such as individual consumers in some narrow settings, and for special customers of mainly large corporations spanning across all sectors.

On the one hand, some consumers may prefer a single-point of contact, engaging with one single firm for a number of heterogeneous products and services. This could be driven by their desire for expert, trusted and appealing guidance in navigating proliferating market options and the potential dangers in decision-making processes. In families, particularly those without a tech-savvy member, or in single and elderly households, the ability to make informed choices diminishes. The convenience of relying on a singular credible supplier mirrors the confidence placed in investment funds for making optimal financial decisions. In the future, Godfather Marketing might work for particular consumers (e.g., time-pressured consumers, consumers with certain disabilities) who can need more accessible and accommodating service provisions, as well as tailored solutions more quickly and efficiently. Similarly, it might work for a particular set of services where customers face risky or repetitive choices, needed to be updated to market changes (e.g., wealth management, which brings into play investments, tax management, insurance services, estate management, and so on).

On the other hand, Godfather Marketing might work, in scale, for big corporations and small business alike, which have the power and the resources to fulfill, directly or indirectly, any want of a special class of their customers. Across various markets, from IT to fashion and technology to trade, we have witnessed in the past a concentration of power in the hands of a few large corporations. In the distribution, for example, neighborhood stores have become increasingly fewer and poorer. Small businesses, like a local liquor store, cannot surely solve consumers' vital problems as large corporations can. However, if they have control over their territory, i.e., a close

connection with the neighborhood, awareness of local events, and knowledge of people who can provide certain services, they can still address the daily problems of a segment of their customers who can reciprocate a favor and respect a shared code.

Internationally, the future dissemination of Godfather Marketing will likely be influenced by local cultural factors that can either hinder or facilitate its adoption. Cultural barriers, such as institutional restrictions and market entry challenges, can substantially impede entrepreneurship and thereby delay or prevent the adoption of new business models in certain regions (Khanin et al. 2022). Conversely, existing social exchange structures within organizations can facilitate the diffusion of Godfather Marketing. An example is Guanxi in China (Sun et al. 2024), a concept involving a complex web of personal connections, mutual obligations, and trust, which smooths business operations and bureaucratic transactions both within and beyond its borders. These dynamics underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of Godfather Marketing's potential applications globally, indicating that its effectiveness depends on alignment with local business practices.

5 General discussion

The model introduced in this article employs the metaphor of 'mafia culture,' completely devoid of its criminal connotations, to propose a new paradigm, named Godfather Marketing, centered on the exchange of favors before products. Table 3 illustrates the major differences between the traditional and the new marketing paradigms.

We live in times of epochal changes. Global instability factors, deep societal fragmentation, and rapid technological advancements are three *disruptive forces* reshaping the environment in which firms and consumers relate. Each of them drives towards the adoption of the Godfather Marketing approach, linked as they are to the intermediate tiers of the Maslow's (1954) pyramid, regarding, respectively, safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs. In affluent societies, where basic physiological needs are largely satisfied, they motivate consumers to request firms for fulfilling vital self-actualization needs and desires, at the apex of the pyramid, in exchange for their unwavering loyalty. Next, a brief discussion on the effects, marketing implications, and limitations of each of these drivers is warranted.

5.1 Global instability factors

Global instability factors include health, economic, and political hazards (such as pandemics, financial crises, and wars), predominantly related to consumers' needs for safety. When people fear that their time is running out, they shift from merely buying products to seeking engaging experiences (Gobrecht and Marchand 2023). Although most of them accept working from 9 to 5, hoping one day their savings can fund their life projects, according to anthropological studies (Graeber 2019), nearly one-third of all current jobs lacks meaning – on top of those hazardous or underpaid. On the contrary, by turning to a Godfather firm, people can find immediate support to satisfy

Table 3 Differences in paradigms

Traditional Marketing	Godfather Marketing
Basic Nature	
Selling goods and services	Fulfilling priority needs and desires
Transferring a ‘value’	Granting a ‘favor’
Anonymous customers	Well-known customers
Firm Scope	
Pursuing profit	Pursuing power
Asking for money (i.e., consumers’ income)	Asking for loyalty (i.e., consumers’ soul)
Offerings based on: Cost Leadership, Differentiation, and Focus ^a	Offerings based on: Exclusivity, Reciprocity, and Allegiance
Transaction Object	
Marketing mix 4Ps (Product, Price, Promotion, and Place)	Favor mix 4Cs (Complexity, Context, Content, and Channel)
Evaluating consumers’ spending capacity	Evaluating consumers’ promise fulfillment, confidentiality, and sincerity
Mainly monetary payments, following ‘market laws’	Mainly favor reciprocations, following a ‘code of honor’
Network Organization	
CEO, COOs, General Counsel, Vice Presidents, Lower-level employees, Part-time workers	Godfather/Family head, Underbosses, Advisor, Caporegimes, Soldiers, Associates
Leveraging knowledge	Leveraging credibility
Using persuasion and rewards	Using persuasion, punishments, and rewards

^aAs outlined in Porter’s (1985) seminal work

Source Guido (In press)

their vital needs and desires. And they are ready to commit themselves completely, because it is their own dream at stake, not someone else’s.

When global instability exposes the precariousness of existence, two important *effects* emerge. First, consumers are inclined to accept higher levels of risk (Sennett 2011). Tversky and Kahneman’s (1979) groundbreaking work demonstrated that people are ready to bear higher costs to gain greater stability. The Godfather firm, by positioning itself as a ‘family’ that offers protection, leads customers to accept its strict conduct code. Every need or desire consumers deem as a priority is, indeed, a manifestation of their insecurity, which fuels Godfather Marketing. This is apparent in contemporary behaviors as conspicuous consumption, search for personal gains or social status. Second, consumers might sacrifice their freedom for what they consider important (Bauman 2000). Modernist thought argues that a certain social coercion, like the submission to a social code (as the Godfather’s one), is paradoxically an emancipating force. Amidst prevailing uncertainties, it allows individuals securing a stable space of freedom through dependence. Stability is essential for relationships to evolve into trust. In Godfather Marketing, it is achieved through a division of roles balancing privilege and inclusivity, as well as a symbolic universe of rituals and practices maintaining the firm’s enduring values and guiding principles.

Two *implications* may stand out for marketers. First, the introduction of Godfather Marketing ‘loyalty programs,’ linked to a hotline, for selected VIP customers, to immediately handle their safety calls. These programs would require more than just a signature on a ‘loyalty card’, as it happens today, but rather a solemn oath to the firm’s ‘code of honor,’ being a true privilege to get. Second, the online ‘gamification’ of Godfather services targeting younger generations (Z and Alpha), video game fans (Ciuchita et al. 2023). Using rewards and punishments, marketers could create a real-life game, where overcoming challenges could foster a deep bond with the firm. It would mirror ‘youth gang’ dynamics in dangerous environments, where code adherence and peer support increase power and engagement, pushing to develop entrepreneurial skills too.

Two potential *limitations* should be noted. First, a Godfather firm might adopt a hypocritical stance, capitalizing on the uncertainties of the times, disguising its quest for power as altruistic support. As Judge Falcone (1992, p. 123) insightfully remarked, when assistance is needed for everything, it ends “making what are every citizen’s rights look like favours.” Secondly, Godfather firms themselves might subtly amplify people’s ‘existential fear’ – that sense of vulnerability tied to the precariousness of human life (Pietropaoli 2023) – to strengthen their bonds. This underscores the imperative of not relegating economies solely to market laws, but rather considering pervasive external controls and regulations to prevent such illicit drifts.

5.2 Deep societal fragmentation

Deep societal fragmentation is the rise in community inequalities, weakening cohesion among its social groups, and it is predominantly linked to consumers’ needs for belonging. Recent studies in the anthropological field show that people tend to gather in ‘tribes’ primarily for emotional, imitation, or attachment reasons, rather than for rational ones. Haidt (2006) notably cites ‘The Godfather’ movie to illustrate how, in such groups, reciprocation of favors and even revenge serve as mechanisms of social regulation, ensuring respect for common rules. Like in Godfather Marketing, Haidt emphasizes how cultivating values such as allegiance, honor, and duty steers people towards collaborating, thus fostering welfare and happiness.

Within Godfather Marketing, the way in which these *effects* are distributed depends on whether its networks operate more like a ‘clan’ or a ‘club.’ The former scenario leads to polarization of inequalities (Gambetta 1993), with advantages only for the Godfather firm. The adoption of a tacit code assessed by peers, a shared set of values evoking familial bonds, and the ‘sacred aura’ surrounding the firm, considered as a refuge from external pressures, together amplify the affiliates’ near-sectarian devotion and sense of belonging, exacerbating societal divides. Conversely, the latter scenario sees a Godfather firm openly extending its network for the benefit of the entire community. This multi-stakeholder view – embracing citizens, other firms, governments, etc. – emerges particularly in times of social conflicts, when the need for a ‘patron,’ historically traceable in the Renaissance, becomes prevalent (Williams 1988). In this role, a Godfather firm would serve as a cultural referent for shelter and assistance to everyone, provided they all adhere to specific shared rules and behaviors.

There are as many corresponding *implications* from these two scenarios. First, in the spirit of Godfather clans, a firm might launch an app or website to exchange favors for credits, influencing ranks. Misconduct deducts points; merits access VIP tiers. A special Blockchain currency could buy credits or bills, with value tied to endorser reputation. Celebrities might trade autographs, NFTs, or even operate as ‘favor banks.’ Second, applied to larger networks, the Godfather approach could serve to govern local territories, as in a ‘new Middle-Age,’ with a revival of grand duchies, courts, and city-states, fostering ecosystems of collaborative actors. If any, philanthropists – like billionaires, banks, etc. – could act as Godfathers, with no paybacks.

Attachment to a ‘code of honor’ universally embraced by a social community has two main *limitations*. Firstly, in the most extreme cases, this fervent emotional transport, for certain suggestible individuals, could turn into an obsession, a form of ‘limerence’ (Guido et al. 2016). Secondly, therefore, to ensure freedom of choice, promoting ‘allegiance’ over ‘loyalty’ would be preferable. Loyalty requires strict adherence to promises without any ethical evaluation; whereas, allegiance permits to act even against the Godfather firm’s will, if done with moral reasoning.

5.3 Rapid technological advancements

Rapid technological advancements, such as AI, smart devices, hyperconnectivity (Hoffman et al. 2022), are reshaping how individuals relate to the world and their own selves. They are primarily challenging needs for self-esteem, as they lead to job displacement, constant upskilling, and distorted perceptions of reality. Being over-dependent on innovations can erode consumers’ confidence and trigger a strong aversion to technology (Brosnan 2002). Godfather Marketing can alleviate such feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth, by allowing customers to be part of a solid organization with enduring values and a strong cultural identity.

This modern digital revolution has two relevant *effects*. The first is the spread of misinformation, especially through the production of *synthetic data* by generative AI – that is, algorithmically created information, often via machine learning, without a foundation in real-world events. Amidst this growing ‘infodemic’ (Rothkopf 2003), Godfather firms, renowned for their credibility, might emerge as validators, impeding misleading content going viral. The second and broader effect is the birth of what I call the ‘Credibility Economy.’ In the past, the classical factors of production were *land, capital, and labor*; then, *information* arose as the pillar of the ‘Knowledge Economy.’ In the future, the competitive advantage will not lie in the ‘quantity’ of information but in its ‘quality,’ meaning its reliability and validity. In a world where everything fake is nearly indistinguishable from real, Godfather firms will provide the scarcest resource, *credibility*, anchored in that ‘code of honor’ shared and defended by all their members.

Marketers can draw two main *implications*. First, Godfather firms can serve as rating agencies for any product, provided their network ensures objective evaluations. This would challenge consumers’ over-reliance on digital validations, like *likes* and *shares*, that could be easily manipulated. Second, they can assist consumers in negotiating a fair price with vendors, realtors, repairmen (like plumbers, mechanics, etc.),

where the feeling of having been cheated is high, as it is difficult to judge the quality of the services even with the help of technologies.

There are two *limitations* to consider. First, Godfather firms might use new technologies to spy their affiliates. While a continuous exchange of information is essential for controlling their network and effectively managing punishments and rewards, excessive surveillance could pose a severe threat to privacy. Second, Godfather firms might encourage customers to adopt smart devices that can record or photograph them, even in intimate moments, in exchange for favors. This already happens when consumers download free apps or software without thoroughly reading the terms of use. One should remember that the weakest link in a ‘Faustian pact’ has always been the contract: once it is signed, the trick is in the details!

6 Conclusions

Within the current turbulent environment, disruptive factors like global instability, societal fragmentation, and technological progress become drivers for the adoption of Godfather Marketing. Firms following this approach can support consumers in overcoming their needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem, thus pursuing higher self-actualization goals. In return, customers are only required to contribute within their natural capacities, yet with unwavering cooperation. In this context, lack of loyalty is more a problem for customers rather than the firm, considering the benefits at stake. Future research could delve into the dynamics of Godfather firms with consumers, competitors, and society in general. Possible topics might consider, respectively: exploring the ‘melodramatic’ communication – rooted in radical moral choices – used to polarize customer evaluations and behaviors; identifying ‘real’ competitors in hesitant potential clients, rather than other firms; and envisioning tightly-knit communities, based on this approach, capable of reshaping even national boundaries. All these topics carry profound moral implications, but just one conviction, the necessity to be compassionate with others. As Francesco Guicciardini, the 16th-century diplomat and Machiavelli’s correspondent, once wrote: “Since there is nothing so well worth having as friends, never lose a chance to make them. For friends help and foes hinder at times and in places where you least expect it.”

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