International entrepreneurship in small family firms: a cross-case analysis[1]

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *This study aims to identify the main drivers that spur family entrepreneurs to implement internationalization strategies in a social and geographical context that appears to be anchored in the past and does not stimulate business development overseas.*

Methodology*: This study employs a cross-case analysis, which is the most suitable method to highlight similarities and differences across cases. In order to gather and analyze the data, this study adopted an inductive approach.*

Results*: Novel best practices are revealed and help to enhance international entrepreneurship in a difficult setting of reluctance to change and loyalty to a past-anchored culture. Moreover, the findings show which elements encourage and discourage international entrepreneurship. Finally, the study offers an interpretive model derived for the interpretation of similar cases.*

Research limitations*: The main drawback of the study is its explorative analysis of a small sample of family firms.*

Academic and practical implications: *From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on the international entrepreneurship of small family firms that are embedded in hostile contexts by identifying the main drivers that promote internationalization. For practitioners, this study offers best practices to inspire successful resilient behaviors and decisions for firms that desire to sell their products all over the world.*

Originality of the paper: *The study elucidates the relevance of the family, firm and context as the main drivers in improving international entrepreneurship by balancing contextual obstacles with entrepreneurs' ambitions of international growth and development.*

Key words: international entrepreneurship; internationalization; small family firm

1. Introduction

For decades, studies on international entrepreneurship state that the entrepreneurial process across national boundaries (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005) is growing (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009). There is a similar trend in the study of family businesses; however, the framework is

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particularly fragmented in this domain because of the ambiguous traits of family firms that are either resistant (Graves e Thomas, 2008) or inclined to internationalize (Zahra, 2003). Several studies have focused on the role of family ownership and family involvement in international entrepreneurship (Bell *et al.*, 2004; Fernández e Nieto, 2005; George *et al.*, 2005; Graves and Thomas, 2008), uncovering that family contemporarily stimulates or inhibits expansion in foreign markets. The framework on this is still unclear and particularly complex to define because of family firms' heterogeneity. In addition, in accordance with Kalantaridis (2009), entrepreneurship is affected by the influence of the context in which firms are embedded, and the entrepreneur himself is embedded in a nested structure (Kenney and Goe, 2004). In this sense, international entrepreneurship also needs to be investigated by following the contextualization perspective (Zahra, 2007; Thornton *et al.*, 2011b; Welter *et al.*, 2019). Context, in fact, refers to the elements that stem from the environment surrounding firms and influence their performance, strategies and decision-making processes (Autio *et al.*, 2014).

In this sense, as suggested by Wright and Kellermans (2011), and by Boohene (2018), there is room for further studies focused on investigating the international entrepreneurship of small and medium family firms that are embedded in specific contexts, especially hostile and poor ones, and characterized by the pervasive influence of family members as the main firm decision makers. In problematizing these concepts (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), this study is aimed at contributing to the mentioned call by focusing on small and medium family firms that are entirely managed by family owners and operate in hostile contexts. More specifically, this study intends to answer the following question: *which are the main drivers that spur family entrepreneurs to implement internationalization strategies in a social and geographical context that appears to be anchored in the past and does not stimulate business development overseas?*

To answer the question this study, which is based on a cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and adopted an inductive approach (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), offers novel best practices that enhance international entrepreneurship in a difficult setting based on resistance to change and loyalty to a past-anchored culture. In particular, this study elucidates the relevance of specific elements - family, firms, and context - as the main drivers to improve international entrepreneurship by balancing contextual obstacles with ambitions of international growth and development. An interpretive model is proposed through a set of propositions.

2. Literature Background

2.1 International entrepreneurship

International entrepreneurship research integrates entrepreneurship studies and international business (Coviello and Jones, 2004; Zahra and George, 2002). Many scholars argue that the field of internationalization studies remains a young field, which, however, has made significant progress in the past three decades (Autio *et al.*, 2011; Dimitratos *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, the field of internationalization is fragmented and lacks consistency (Nummela and Welch, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2011) because of the lack of unifying paradigms (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009). Internationalization as a field of research that embraces two main streams of investigation (Covin and Miller, 2014). The first stream consists in research on new international ventures, global start-ups, or born global firms (Crick, 2009; Dimitratos *et al.*, 2012) and emphasizes the identification and exploitation of new opportunities for emerging small firms (Dimitratos *et al.*, 2012; Civera *et al.*, 2020). The second stream, in contrast, considers the entrepreneurial activities and behavioral orientation of traditional firms in foreign markets (Neill and York, 2012; Peltola, 2012; Mainela *et al.*, 2014). In other words, international entrepreneurship involves aspects of innovation, the strategic exploitation of opportunities, and renewal strategies in the international competitive business arena (Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2013). Moreover, the international entrepreneurship literature emphasizes the importance of learning in international markets (Schwens and Kabst, 2009; Bruneel *et al.*, 2010; Civera *et al.*, 2020). In fact, studies have shown that firms benefit from various forms of international learning (Schwens and Kabst, 2009; Bruneel *et al.*, 2010; Bunz *et al.*, 2017), including international adaptation (Domurath *et al.*, 2020), and the firm's market orientation (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004) together with entrepreneurial orientation (Kuivalainen *et al.*, 2007). Recently, in accordance with Oviatt and McDougall (2005) and in line with strategic entrepreneurship orientation literature, other scholars have defined international entrepreneurship as "(…) the recognition, formation, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities across national borders to create new businesses, models, and solutions for value creation, including financial, social, and environmental (...)". (Zahra *et al.*, 2014; p. 138).

Thus, as presented by McDougall *et al.* (1994) and Autio *et al.* (2000), international entrepreneurship represents a strategy for firms to create value and growth in the foreign market. These firms enact a proactive strategy and risk-seeking behavior to venture outside of the borders of their countries, in hopes of spreading their internal routines to new and different environments (Schwens *et al.*, 2018).

The choice to enlarge a business outside of its borders is a challenge that requires the adaptation of consolidated and known routines to new business environments. The decision to expand a business faces a great amount of risk and uncertainty (Mudambi and Zahra, 2007). Firms must manage risk and uncertainty to balance their performance (Sapienza *et al.*, 2006). Because firms want to preserve and increase their performance, they often engage in internationalization strategies. Subsequently, international entrepreneurship can represent a great opportunity for a firm's development, but also a risk of loss and failure (McDougall *et al.*, 1994). As Zahra and George (2002) specified, firms engage in international entrepreneurship depending on their specific characteristics and market circumstances.

2.2 International entrepreneurship in the family business domain

Although some scholars find no differences between family and nonfamily businesses in internationalization practices (Carlos Pinho, 2007; Cerrato and Piva, 2012), recent studies show that the heterogeneity of family firms and that the owners' control and influence affects international entrepreneurship decisions and behaviors (Arregle *et al.*, 2012; Sciascia *et al.*, 2012; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014).

Despite this crucial aspect, family firms often traditionally operate in the domestic market, therefore, studies on family firms' international entrepreneurship has been largely overlooked. Most studies have focused on the difficulties that family firms encounter when deciding to follow internationalization strategies (Donckels and Fröhlich, 1991) rather than looking at how and when they choose to internationalize.

Today, the search for new foreign markets is becoming an imperative, even for family firms, in order to face the increasing competition of the global market (Gallo and Sveen, 1991; Gallo and García Pont, 1996; Kontinen and Ojala, 2010).

Thus, the theme of international entrepreneurship in family businesses is growing, and many studies have highlighted that a firm's internationalization choice is affected by the nature of its ownership (Zahra, 2003; Fernández and Nieto, 2005); it is maximized when family ownership stands at a moderate level (Sciascia *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, researchers have pointed out a difference between some authors, who demonstrate that family involvement in management positively affects internationalization (Zahra, 2003; Carr and Bateman, 2009), while others argue that some aspects of family firm have a negative impact on a firm's internationalization orientation (Fernández and Nieto, 2006; Graves and Thomas, 2008).

The literature, in fact, underlines that the international entrepreneurship of family firms differs and depends on the ownership structure of the business and the effects of family involvement (Bell *et al.*, 2004; Fernández and Nieto, 2005; George *et al.*, 2005; Graves and Thomas, 2008). Thus, investigating family firms as distinct entities in the field of international entrepreneurship may reveal interesting insights.

Offering goods and services outside the home country provides fruitful growth opportunities for family firms (Claver *et al.*, 2009); however in many markets, rather than adopting aggressive strategies, family business owners prefer to maximize revenues in a limited number of foreign markets (Zahra, 2003). This effort shows contrasting results and sometimes business owners underestimate the effects of the market.

The complexity of this ambiguous scenario increases, following the perspective of contextualizing the investigated phenomenon. In accordance with Kalantaridis (2009), what concerns entrepreneurship is heavily influenced by the context in which firms are embedded, and the entrepreneur himself is embedded in a nested structure (Kenney and Goe, 2004) that affects entrepreneurial behavior (Wang and Altinay, 2012). In other words, international entrepreneurship is a contextualized phenomenon (Zahra, 2007; Thornton *et al.*, 2011b; Welter *et al.*, 2019) and for this reason, its observation cannot ignore the in-depth knowledge of the context. This refers to elements that stem from the environment in which firms operate and influence performance, strategies and decision-making processes (Autio *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, culture (Hayton *et al.*, 2002; Thornton and Flynn, 2003; Thornton *et al.*, 2011a; Kibler *et al.*, 2014), the industry and technological environment (Weismeier-Sammer, 2011; Cruz and Nordqvist, 2012; Autio *et al.*, 2013b; Broekeart *et al.*, 2016), the institutional and policy environment (Levie, Autio *et al.*, 2014), market forces (Classen *et al.*, 2014; Kotlar *et al.*, 2014), demographic aspects and spatial conditions (Drori *et al.*, 2009; Welter, 2011; Dehlen, Zellweger *et al.*, 2014), and other elements look particularly influential in relation to growth and survival opportunity. Specifically, as underlined by Hayton *et al.* (2002), firms reflect their context and have to gain and maintain context legitimacy to survive (Thornton and Flynn, 2003; Thornton *et al.*, 2011a; Kibler *et al.*, 2014); moreover, family firms appear to be particularly connected to their local contexts and roots (Dyer Jr and Panicheva Mortensen, 2005; Casillas *et al.*, 2010; Bird and Wennberg, 2014).

In this sense, as suggested by Wright and Kellermans (2011), Boohene (2018), and Etemad (2019), there is room for further studies focused on investigating the international entrepreneurship of small and medium family firms that are embedded in hostile and poor contexts and characterized by the pervasive influence of family members as the main decision makers (Dyer Jr and Panicheva Mortensen, 2005). This work is addressed to contribute to this call.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To investigate international entrepreneurship in small family firms, this qualitative study, which is particularly appropriate for studies of family businesses (McCollom, 1990) aims to penetrate the veil of the resistance of the family and avoid gathering data that is not useful (Litz, 1997).

Specifically, this work is based on a cross-case analysis, which is a suitable method to facilitate the comparison of commonalities and differences among case studies (Miles and Huberman, 1994) resulting in a synthesized outcome (Khan e VanWynsberghe, 2008). In addition, case studies are able to answer "how" and "why" questions, thus providing an explanation for events, exploring causality, and generating theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2008; Yin, 2011).

The data from the cases are organized in tables and graphs. The chosen methodology is a structured approach where the theoretical contents from the literature are first identified and then, through an iterative process, the topics are refined by means of the collection and analysis of data from the cases. Finally, the data are compared with earlier literature (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994). The selected case studies can explore the meanings and processes (Van Maanen and Van Maanen, 1983) related to individual behaviors without being influenced by the researcher's views (Finch, 1988). This is particularly relevant in investigations on the effects of culture (Howorth and Ali, 2001) and, conversely, of context. In line with other scholars (Miles and Huberman, 1994), the selection of cases was purposeful. Moreover, it also converged with Patton's suggestions (1990; 2002) that highlighted that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. In this view, information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance for the purpose of the inquiry, hence the term "purposeful sampling". This means that studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. Specifically, we use a sample of three firms, with the family business owner-manager as the unit of analysis. These small family firms are representative, as described by Howorth *et al.* (2006). Their owners can be described as "heroes," (Welter *et al.*, 2017) because they manage "everyday entrepreneurships," characterized by a blooming heterogeneity, and operate under resource constraints and adversity (Powell and Baker, 2014; Bradley, 2015).

To gather and analyze data, we used a methodological approach that was conceived by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and further elaborated in subsequent studies (Clark *et al.*, 2010; Corley and Gioia, 2011; Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

3.2 Data gathering

In the third quarter of 2018, we conducted six in-depth interviews with the family owners of three small family firms. With a prior understanding of the demographical data of each firm, two interviews were planned with each family-owner; these were conducted in person using an interview protocol. The first interview (average duration: 65 minutes) consisted of unstructured questions to gain an understanding of the firm's history and the owner's feelings. The second interview (average duration: 45 minutes) consisted of semi-structured questions to refine the information about the firm's internationalization strategies. All of the respondents were part of the board of the family firm. Each conversation was recorded for a total of 330 minutes of interviews and transcribed verbatim into 40 pages shortly after the interviews. In the case of missing information, we engaged in follow-up phone calls and gathered further secondary information, which consisted of ten business reports, three journal articles, and several official Internet pages about businesses and international entrepreneurship in the region. Moreover, we conducted five additional interviews with experts, consultants to small and medium-sized family-owned firms, and representatives of trade associations, which lasted from 30 to 50 minutes each. To analyze the qualitative data, we applied a three-step process (Mayring, 2010). In the first step, we analyzed each of the first three unstructured interviews. To do so, we created a chronological structured description of each firm with all the relevant demographic information of the family and the firm. These documents amounted to three to ten pages per firm. Two independent coders read each of the interviews, making notes about first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The outputs of this analysis resulted in three data structures (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), one for each family firm. In the second step, we engaged in a cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Patton, 1990) to identify common patterns across the sample (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and to elaborate one aggregate data structure to formulate and identify the dynamic relationships among the concepts. In the third step, we analyzed the data that had been gathered in the second semi-structured interview and summarized the answers. During the analysis, we iteratively switched between qualitative evidence and extant theory (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2001). This way, we were able to transform the static data into a dynamic grounded theory model (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), which is presented and discussed in the final section.

3.3 The sample

The sample consisted of three small family firms that operate in Sardinia, a region of Italy and one of the two major islands of the Mediterranean Sea.

These firms have commonalities in demographic and structural aspects, as well as differences in terms of their internationalization strategies. All three firms are small, managed by a family intending to transfer ownership and management across generations, embedded and appreciated in their own territory and in the regional context, and face continuous regional challenges. The island of Sardinia regularly experiences a long series of shortcomings notwithstanding its position in a well-known beautiful sea and the genuine food and hospitality of the Sardinian people that stimulate a flourishing summer tourism trade. Firstly, the low density of inhabitants results in a narrow internal market that, on the one hand, discourages new entrepreneurial activities and, on the other hand, limits the growth possibilities for existing firms. Secondly, controlling production and selling costs is difficult due to shipping charges for raw materials and selling products overseas. Thirdly, internal transport lines are problematic due to the streets and roads that are often neglected in terms of maitenance, lighting, and signage, especially in the countryside. Finally, the island's culture is anchored to the past, embedded in traditions, and hostile toward change.

This brief description of Sardinia underlines that surviving in such a context entails challenges for the selected small family firms and suggests that there may be different strategies to face challenges and guarantee long-term survival.

To assure anonymity, the firms are labeled as Firm A, Firm B, and Firm C and are briefly described in the following table.

Tab. 1: Demographical details of the firms

Firm	Generation	Industry	Revenue (Miles of Euros)	Employees	Role of family	External managers
A	II	Food	750-1.000	5-8	Main decision maker	Absent
B	II	Bread and bakery	1.200 - 1.500	20-30	Main decision maker	Absent
C	III	Water	10.000 - 15.000	20-40	Main decision maker	Absent

Source - Authors' elaboration

Firm A, founded in the 1990s, operates in the typical food market and is currently led by the second generation. Three family members are actively engaged in pursuing the founder's dream of "selling their products all over the world". The firm life cycle is characterized by an increasing entrepreneurial orientation due to the firm's interest in internationalizing the product and becoming the leader in the market. This goal is challenging because the products are considered a treasure to be preserved, anchored to past customs and local traditions and consumed only at special events. Local culture has played a relevant role in the slow development of the market. However, thanks to the spirit of the founder, a long series of innovations was introduced to improve production, selling and distribution, and change the common opinion about the product. The founder overcame ancient traditions through innovativeness, risk taking and proactivity. The local market initially disliked innovation in this traditional product, which was known to be handmade at home. The introduction of new machinery, new ways to extend shelf life, and new market strategies allowed the founder and the new generation to experience some success. Nevertheless, the small family firm also faced a crisis because of family concerns, the general economic crunch, the increasing number of competitors, a narrow market, failures in recruiting human resources, and the closed mentality of the local population. The founder's dream staggered. At first he considered closing the firm, which was a family treasure. Fortunately, the second generation united: they were interested and willing to make efforts to restart the firm. Within a few years, Firm A was gradually and laboriously able to overcome cultural barriers, renew production, enter the e-commerce platform, and expand to international markets. This situation raised revenues by about 230%.

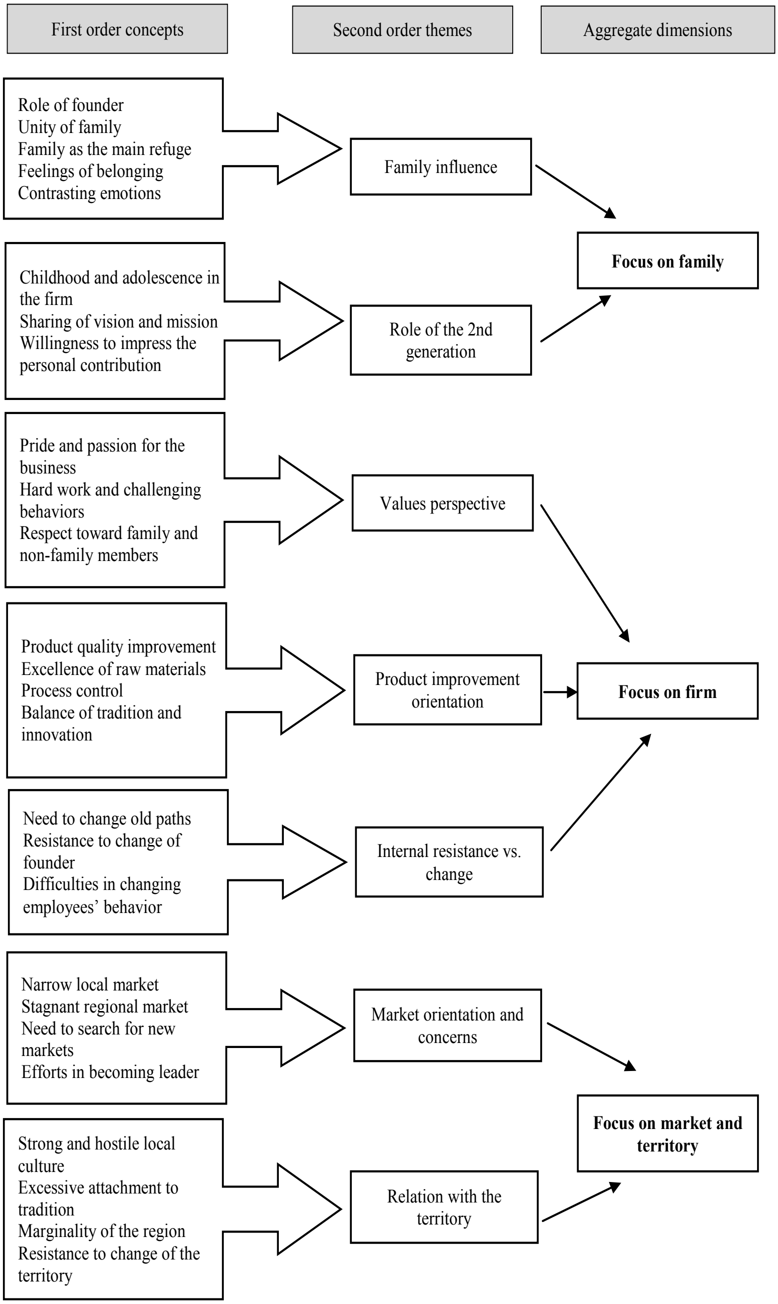
Firm B, founded in the 1950s and now led by the second generation, operates in the bread and bakery sector. Nine family members are actively engaged in the firm and hold different positions. The founder started the business by producing and selling fresh bread daily to local customers without considering increasing production, differentiating the product, or seeking to reach new and far markets. The bakery was his life and the founder met his current wife within the walls of his business. They had six son and daughters who have worked at the firm in their spare time and during their school holidays since their childhood. They acquired skills, abilities, and knowledge but, being young, were not happy about spending all of their time in the bakery. However, the founder explained that a family firm can only exist if the family is involved, committed, and interested in transferring the business across generations. In other words, the firm is a family affair and, in this view, must be managed by the family. This instilled, on the one hand, a strong attachment to the firm and, on the other hand, a sort of jealousy due to the attention that the father paid to the firm. The firm has experienced several innovations, which were generally introduced by the wife, the sons and the daughters in the course of its lifespan. One of these sanctioned the real development of the small family firm. Thanks to new machinery, product diversification and differentiation, and new market strategies, the firm started to exponentially grow and challenge international markets. Firm B was the first to produce and sell a product that was traditionally handmade by families in international markets, thus immediately gaining overseas appreciation. Over the last three years, revenues have increased by 11.61%. 25% of its market is made up of regional customers, and 75% are customers in other regions of Italy and foreign markets (Europe, America, Asia and Australia).

Firm C, a mineral water firm founded in the 1950s, is in its third generation. Five family members are actively committed to the firm in different and well-defined roles. A careful division in roles has allowed the second generation to carry forward the fundamental values of the family, which are based on a passion for work and a deep respect for the purity of the raw material offered by the natural environment, as well as for the consumers and collaborators. These values are reflected in a policy that is focused on the specific attention that is paid to all stakeholders to serve customers and their needs. There is a shared interest in the firm, with a full understanding of the importance of quality in pursuing the company's objectives. The goals of the founder and the successors were to become the first mineral water company to open a local unit outside of Italy, to make their products known in overseas markets, and to solidify the firm's presence abroad over time. Sales are made through traditional large distributors, but the small family firm has recently added an e-commerce channel. Through this, Firm C has started to embody a firm that considers tradition and its strong link with the territory but is, at the same time, capable of introducing innovative strategic solutions to gain international market share. In fact, in 14 years, Firm C has undertaken an internationalization strategy that has led to its progressive success in Europe and beyond the European market. In fact, in 2005, it started selling and distributing water in the United States, gradually expanding its market in other countries. The firm's revenues are currently increasing, albeit at a lower rate than those of its larger international competitors. However, the quality of the product and the firm's ability to effectively promote its international strategies has allowed the small family firm to face competitors and win relevant and prestigious international awards.

3.4 Findings and discussion

A two-step cross-case analysis identified common patterns and differences among the three firms. The first step elaborated an aggregate data structure (see Figure 1) to highlight first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia *et al.*, 2013), which are essential to investigating the existing dynamic relationships that emerged among the concepts during the unstructured interviews. The second step summarized the owners' answers about specific questions on international entrepreneurship (see Table 2). In both cases, in order to isolate the main relevant contents, three different scholars read and discussed the interviews to reach a shared interpretation. This led to three data structures and one aggregate data structure to show the main repeated concepts (first order) that emerged from the interviews. The owners centered their narratives around common topics (see Fig. 1) such as the role of the founder; the relevance of family unity; the entry and collaboration of second generations during childhood and adolescence; the effect of a local culture that is embedded in ancient and sometimes obsolete traditions; and the difficulties in implementing internationalization strategies.

Fig. 1: The aggregate data structure



Source - Authors' elaboration

The following exemplary quotes can better explain the abovementioned concepts:

"We are grateful for Mom's efforts. She has always showed resilience and ability in overcoming difficulties, probably because we are united and our driver is the family. For this reason, we are engaged and committed to guaranteeing the achievement of her dream, that is, selling our product in the world" (Firm A).

"When Mom decided to automatize the most time-consuming phase of the production, the local territory considered her a heretic. She demonstrated the ability to challenge these adversities and, although we initially registered losses and revenues decreased, we started to invest in the foreign market. Now, we are proud that we showed courage and determination. Our product will conquer the world [laugh]" (Firm A)

"The most important family member is our father, who is the founder of our family firm. His passion is our stimulus to continuously pursue ambitious goals. However, since we were children, he has demonstrated a strong resistance to introducing radical change within the firm". (Firm B)

"I remember my school holidays like a nightmare. Bread, bread, and bread. A trip to the sea? It was impossible for us. My father told us that the firm was a family treasure and needed the care and the attention of each of us". (Firm B)

"We have inherited a treasure to protect and preserve with the aim of passing it on across generations as our father wants with all his heart. (…) our family is our glue, a real refuge, where difficulties and crises encounter calm and serenity. (…)" (Firm C)

"Our industry is particular and the market is mainly controlled by big companies. The international award we received represented a renewed stimulus to continue in our international efforts. The quality of our product is our competitive advantage and despite its the small dimension, overseas markets are increasingly appreciating our excellent product" (Firm C)

After identifying the first-order concepts, we grouped them following a logical path that began by identifying seven second-order themes and then three aggregate dimensions. These were characterized by the three different foci that were displayed by the small family firms. The first was related to the family, the second to the firm, and the third to the market and the territory. Specifically, the findings showed that the discussion unfolded along three main routes of influence on the firms' international behavior and the owners' perceptions. For instance, "family" was the main element, from which and to which all business activities flow. In fact, family represented both a springboard for new initiatives and a hindrance to change; family can spur the development of the family business or preserve it unchanged. In addition, the early entry of the new generation fosters a strong attachment to the firm; however, it was sometimes contradictory (love/hate). The family's high level of concern and care toward the firm as a family treasure stems from the concept of family and its trans-generational view. For this reason, the "firm" is an element that affects international entrepreneurship. The proclivity of internationalization is also dependent on attention to product quality and production, the families' pride in being active in the family firm, and the continuous struggle between the desire to introduce innovations and changes and the resistance of previous generations. Finally, the market and the territory represent the last relevant element. Specifically, the narrow local market and the strong regional culture with an excessive attachment to traditions and past paths have created a hostile context in which to operate. This factor was clearly related to decisions on the possibility to succeed in overseas markets.

To understand whether the elements that emerged during the interviews were actually linked to the internationalization strategies of the firms, three other semi-structured interviews were conducted. By analyzing those responses, we found a correspondence with the first set of interviews. They confirmed the three elements that are the main devices that positively and/or negatively influence the will to internationalize: family, firm, and the market and context in which the firms are rooted. The exemplary quotes shown in Table 2 illustrate these elements.

Tab. 2: Exemplary quotes of the semi-structured interviews

What are the main elements that influence your internationalization strategies?	What are the main difficulties you encountered in choosing to internationalize?	What are the main reasons you decided to internationalize?
"(…) In choosing to internationalize, we first had to reflect on the upheaval that this would entail in the family balance (…), because this also means traveling, participating more frequently in international fairs (…). Second, we analyzed our firm and our internal structure to identify our potentiality (…), then we started to introduce product differentiation and diversification to meet international expectations. (…) Our motto is to take the assets we own outside the regional boundaries". (Firm A) "Certainly one of the main elements is due to the need to ensure a very high product quality, so as not to disappoint the international market. (…) this means working even more, paying more attention to the company and devoting even more time to our business. (…) but we absolutely want to achieve our mother's dream. This means strengthening family ties even more and giving each other strength to get out of our small local context. (…) It's about changing the culture (…)". (Firm B) "The founder's dream was not simply to create a business, but to give work to his children and to do so through the creation of a product that exalted the purity of the water that flowed from the pristine mountains of our region. Our connections with the territory and its natural riches is very strong. (…) Our goal initially was to become the first regional company capable of going outside the confines of its own small territory. Today the goal is to make the foreign market appreciate us and confirm this over time". (Firm C)	"(…) difficulties are encountered daily. Sometimes these are internal problems within the company, sometimes family discontent, sometimes they are due to small but significant failures. But undoubtedly, our territorial context, which is too sacrificed in terms of logistics, traffic and transport, has a great impact. This often causes delays in supplies and deliveries. (…)" (Firm A) "Going out of one's own borders means investing so much material and so many immaterial resources. This goes especially for those who, like us, live in a region with serious logistics and transport problems. Furthermore, being pioneers of a break with past traditions is not always easy. (…) to operate at its best it would be necessary to be more cohesive (…)" (Firm B) Water is a natural and "poor" good. (…) that has to be preserved as much as possible, in accordance with the "less is more" principle: the more the producer is able to guarantee the purity of the produced product, the greater the degree of appreciation by the customer. (…) Moreover, it is a sector with entry barriers and (…) the foreign market, compared to the Italian one, is different and characterized by the domination of corporations. (…) We are therefore a small reality and we must respond to these giants by guaranteeing excellent quality standards (…) (Firm C)	"First of all, ours is a real desire to make our traditional product known and, thus, promote our land and our culture. (…) then, personally, there is also the desire to leave our footprint as a new generation, perhaps also in response to our father's resistance to change. (…) Last, but not least, there is the need to look for new and more profitable markets". (Firm A) "Surely the desire to conquer the world with our product is no longer just our mother's, but it is also ours. (…) This is the main reason why we invest so much energy and resources in international markets. Then, undoubtedly, the desire to demonstrate to our territory that innovating traditional products does not mean distorting them, but rather enhancing them and making them usable in other markets". (Firm B) "A firm that operates abroad has to be able to meet international expectations as a specific cultural orientation that places the customer at the center of the firm strategy. (…) Our family firm creates a product that is qualitatively excellent and appreciated by customers, even international ones. The local market is limited and to grow, so we need to broaden our horizons and thus achieve the dream of our founders to create something for future generations". (Firm C)

Source: Study interview transcription and authors' elaboration

The quotes in Table 2 highlight the influence that family, firm, and market and territory have on international entrepreneurship.

Specifically, the results of the semi-structured interviews, combined with those derived from the unstructured interviews, showed a series of concepts, as follows.

A. The focus on family represents a stimulus of internationalization.

Often, as occurred in the sample firms, the ability to implement successful international strategies can be traced back to the family influence and to the role of the second generation in making decisions. Specifically, international entrepreneurship appears to be related to the will and commitment of the younger generations by virtue of a founder's dream (Firm A), the desire to guarantee the survival of the company from a trans-generational perspective (Firm C) and the response to a marked resistance to change and to a particularly autocratic leadership style of the previous generation (Firm B). In this sense, the family and the dynamic relations that emerged can be seen as drivers of internationalization.

From this circumstance, it is possible to extrapolate the following proposition:

P1. *The greater the influence of the family, the more internationalization strategies will be affected.*

From this, it follows that:

P1a. *The more the previous generations are open to internationalization, the more the firm will develop international strategies.*

P1b. *The more the previous generations are reluctant to change, the more the firm's international development will be conditioned (or influenced) by the new generation's capability to leave their own footprint by making substantial changes to the consolidated strategies.*

B. A focus on the firm represents a stimulus of internationalization.

Attention toward the firm, which is demonstrated in the continuous search to improve product quality and the production process, the willingness to invest in resources, and commitment to the development of the family business have led the three firms to expand their activities in other markets. This means that an awareness of being able to offer an excellent product (Firm C), continuous efforts to adapt organizational and production structures (Firm A) and the continuous improvement of product differentiation and diversification (Firm B) all positively contribute to push small family firms toward foreign markets.

This situation leads to the following proposition:

P2. *The greater the attention to the firm and to the product and production, the more the family firm will tend to seeking foreign markets.*

From this, it follows that:

P2a. *The higher the commitment to the firm, the more the hard work and passion of the new generations will stimulate the search for new markets*

P2b. T*he greater the attachment to the family, the greater the interest in the firm's growth and survival in foreign markets.*

C. *A focus on the market and territory represents a stimulus of internationalization.*

Very often, small family firms that are embedded in contexts characterized by marginality find it difficult to survive in the nearest market and even more difficult to identify new and more attractive markets, especially because of the limited available resources. Instead, the small family firms that were considered in this study have shown that the hostility of the context in which they are rooted and the narrow size of the local market can represent a stimulus to seek foreign markets and, consequently, to implement internationalization strategies. Furthermore, the desire to reinterpret tradition (Firm B) through the introduction of product and process innovations that are strongly opposed in the local context, can find acceptance and approval in foreign markets. The highly penalizing problems in transport and logistics (Firm A) do not prevent the pursuit of international markets. Finally, the existence of barriers to entry and the pervasive presence of large corporations (Firm C) in the market do not preclude small businesses from obtaining appreciation in foreign markets.

This situation leads to the following proposition:

P3. T*he more the market and the territorial context are penalizing, the more small family firms are stimulated to look for new markets outside their territorial boundaries.*

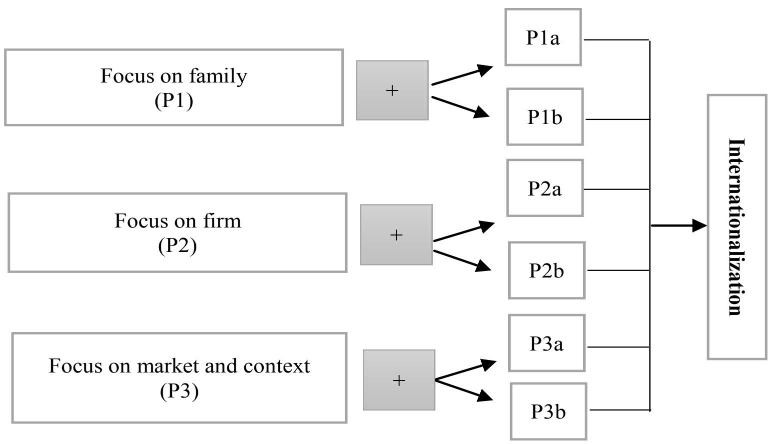
From this, it follows that:

P3a. *The more limited the market in size, the more family firms' who want to grow will have to implement internationalization strategies.*

P3b. *The more hostile and culturally static the context in which companies are rooted is, the more innovative small family firms will be interested in international markets.*

The next figure synthesizes the three propositions as concepts:

Fig. 2: A synthesis of the concepts



Source: Authors' elaboration

3. Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the ongoing debate on international entrepreneurship in small family businesses by trying to disentangle the fragmented framework that divides this kind of firm behavior in two opposite ways: on the one side, resistance to internationalization and, on the other side, ability to implement effective internationalization strategies. Moreover, this study focused on small family firms in which family members are the main decision makers that are embedded in hostile and unfriendly contexts that are characterized by practices that are anchored to past paths and culture, narrow markets, constraints on resources and resistance to change. Through a cross-case analysis and an inductive approach, the findings revealed that the ability of such small family firms is grounded on three main drivers of internationalization: family, firm, and context. Proclivity towards these drivers allows small family firms to engage in international entrepreneurship. From a set of propositions, an interpretive model was proposed to explain how such drivers affect internationalization in small family firms.

The findings have both academic and practical implications. First, this study contributes to the literature on international entrepreneurship in family businesses by identifying which elements, more than others, affect the implementation of internationalization strategies. With reference to the focus on "family", the results confirm previous studies (Sciascia *et al.*, 2012), underlining that internationalization can also be achieved in cases of the complete family's involvement in making decisions. This corroborates other studies (Zahra, 2003; Carr and Bateman, 2009), highlighting the positive role of family involvement in international entrepreneurship. In line with this, findings partially disagree with previous studies that argued that some characteristics of the family may generate negative impacts on a firm's internationalization orientation (Fernández and Nieto, 2006; Graves and Thomas, 2008), showing that conflicting family relations between first and second generations can also produce positive effects on international proclivity. As far as the "context" driver is concerned, the findings show that if the "market and territory" are particularly narrow or hostile, small family firms look to overseas markets, with the aim of spotting new market opportunities.

Second, by analyzing differences and commonalities among the three cases, the findings contribute to heterogeneity studies on family business by uncovering how the focus on family, firm and context, plays a relevant role in international entrepreneurship.

As regards the study's practical implications, the findings of the cases elaborate best practices to inspire successful, resilient behavior and decision-making. Other firms that experience daily challenges and dream of selling their products all over the world may follow the examples shown in the cases.

The main drawback that represents a stimulus for further research is the explorative character of the study. Future studies could enlarge the sample to test the propositions and extend the study through longitudinal and cross-cultural analyses, thus investigating the role of the context over time and in terms of different territorial characteristics. More specifically, future studies could be focused on family firms that are embedded in different contexts (not necessarily in narrow and hostile environments) and on other kinds of firms to understand the role played by the firm's governance, the size, and the ownership. In addition, at the current stage, the relationship between the identified drivers - family, firm, and context - and internationalization strategies could appear deterministic because they were essential for the internationalization process in the sample firms. However, in this study, we have exclusively considered family firms that are engaged in internationalization paths. This limit stimulates future studies to address this drawback in order to assess whether and how the mentioned drivers are also present in small family firms that have not pursued an internationalization path. Finally, future studies can focus on analyzing different levels of focus on family, firm and context in order to reflect on different degrees of international entrepreneurship in small family firms.

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