

# Born-again global internationalization in family businesses as a process: a dynamic capabilities perspective in the context of socioemotional wealth

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Born-again global internationalization is a rarely researched topic. Especially process-oriented studies are largely missing. In loss modes concerning their socioemotional wealth (SEW), family businesses take more risks and can be informative examples of born-again global internationalization.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This article analyzes the process of born-again global internationalization of a mature family business triggered by succession in an SEW loss mode. The interplay of dynamic capabilities (DCs) as drivers and SEW preservation guides the in-depth analysis based on an interpretative single case study design.

**Findings** – The analysis reveals a model with (1) the personal and familial level of the business family, (2) the bonding and transfer level between the business family and the family business and (3) the organizational level as three levels of DCs as drivers of born-again global internationalization in family businesses and SEW preservation as a continuously influencing context.

**Originality/value** – The article contributes to push forward the fragmented level of knowledge in the field of born-again global internationalization of family businesses. It brings together the triggering phase of born-again global internationalization with the later phases (driving successful rapid internationalization). In particular, it explores how the triggering factors on the family level can be translated into the development of capabilities on the firm level to drive successful internationalization. Based on these insights, the article offers novel implications for research and practice.

**Keywords** Internationalization, Born-again global, Family business, Succession, Dynamic capabilities, Socioemotional wealth

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The progressing globalization of the last decades has boosted the scientific and practical discussion on firm internationalization. Whereas the analysis of large, multinational companies has been an important topic in the literature since the late 1950s, the discourse on small and medium-sized enterprises started in the early 1970s and has intensified since the 1990s (e.g. Peiris *et al.*, 2012). As a result, the fields of international business and entrepreneurship converged and the field of international entrepreneurship (IE) was



established (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000). The IE literature distinguishes three patterns of internationalization, i.e. traditional (gradual/incremental) internationalizers, born globals and born-again globals (Baum *et al.*, 2015).

Regarding the internationalization of family businesses (FBs), the available research reveals inconsistent findings, indicating that family ownership and involvement can have a positive or negative impact on internationalization, while some studies find no difference between FBs and non-FBs (Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). Nevertheless, there is a high degree of consensus that most FBs internationalize incrementally (Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014) and tend to be slower in the internationalization process compared to non-FBs (Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). However, there are also studies (e.g. Graves and Thomas, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Metsola *et al.*, 2020) demonstrating that some FBs show patterns of rapid internationalization. They either start it from the beginning (born globals) or change into this mode after a long period of domestic business activity or incremental internationalization (born-again globals; BaGs), often as a result of a critical incident (Bell *et al.*, 2001; Kalinic and Forza, 2012; Sheppard and McNaughton, 2012).

Whereas the pattern of incremental internationalization has been researched comprehensively and there is also a considerable number of studies analyzing born globals, the topic of BaGs is still underresearched (Kalinic and Forza, 2012; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014; Schueffel *et al.*, 2014; Zander *et al.*, 2015). This suggests an intensified analysis of BaG firms in general (Bell *et al.*, 2001) and FBs in particular (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014).

Prior research identified generational change as an important trigger of BaG internationalization in FBs (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2012; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014; Stieg *et al.*, 2017). However, there are only few empirical findings which remain fragmented and in part inconsistent with theoretical reasoning (Stieg *et al.*, 2017). While Pukall and Calabrò (2014) stress the fear of a loss of socioemotional wealth (SEW) as mainly reactive attitude of the successors regarding BaG internationalization, Stieg *et al.* (2017) point out the proactive approach of successors toward BaG internationalization. Moreover, although Pukall and Calabrò (2014, p. 119) already suggest exploring whether SEW preservation triggers or drives BaG episodes, the available studies focus the triggering phase and thus the family level. Consequently, they fade out the further process, when the strategic interests of the successors to internationalize have to be translated into organizational capabilities and activity driving internationalization. This gap is also addressed in the recent state-of-the-art article of Metsola *et al.* (2020) who complain the limited use of a process focus in the FB internationalization literature (in general and in the BaG context). Smajić *et al.* (2022) concretize this gap and suggest to further investigate the relationship between SEW and internationalization more process-related.

Considering these gaps and suggestions, an in-depth empirical analysis of the process of BaG internationalization triggered by generational change in FBs promises valuable insights. It is useful to better understand the interplay between generational change as a trigger and the following drivers of rapid internationalization. In this context, it is especially interesting to explore how the strategic interests of the new generation can be transferred to the organizational level of the FB. This requires that typical liabilities of FBs can be reduced while capabilities relevant to internationalization can be developed (Baù *et al.*, 2021; Graves and Thomas, 2008; Metsola *et al.*, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this article addresses the question of *how succession can trigger BaG internationalization in FBs and how, subsequently, a fast and successful process of internationalization can be driven by developing appropriate capabilities*. Both parts of the question are analyzed in the context of an SEW preservation perspective, as this basic claim significantly influences the decisions and behavior in FBs on the family and organizational levels (Berrone *et al.*, 2012).

Our conception combines the rather reactive SEW view on BaG internationalization with the proactive dynamic capabilities (DCs) view. It covers a mixture of the economic and

noneconomic goals typical for FBs (Metsola *et al.*, 2020; Pongelli *et al.*, 2021) and is appropriate to capture the interplay between the family and the organizational levels: SEW is on the one hand one of the key constructs in the FB literature delimiting FBs from non-FBs (Berrone *et al.*, 2012) and on the other hand a recognized factor potentially triggering BaG internationalization in FBs. The DCs perspective is one of the current leading concepts in IE (Peiris *et al.*, 2012) as well as FB internationalization research (Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014) and an acknowledged basis for process-oriented research on (rapid) internationalization (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Metsola *et al.*, 2020; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007).

As research work (especially in sparsely researched fields) that asks “how” questions and analyzes organizational dynamics and processes in depth suggests qualitative research designs and especially the case study method (Gioia *et al.*, 2012; Yin, 2014), our analysis is based on a single case study. It analyzes an FB that showed moderate internationalization in the previous generations but internationalized extensively with the latest generational change. We position our case as an exploratory case study with explanatory extensions (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014; Yin, 2014), as it mainly deals with “how” questions and includes also some “why” aspects. The analysis starts with a frame of reference derived from the literature and significantly extends and refines it by an in-depth single case analysis resting on the inductive “Gioia method” (Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

With this focus, methodology and results, the article contributes to the literature on FB internationalization in the following ways: (1) It contributes to push forward the fragmented level of knowledge in the field of BaG internationalization of FBs by providing a qualitative empirical in-depth analysis of the entire process of BaG internationalization of an FB triggered by generational change. With this approach, the article on the one hand answers to the call to foster the process focus in FB internationalization studies (Metsola *et al.*, 2020). It brings together the triggering phase of BaG internationalization with the later phases (driving successful rapid internationalization) and contributes to better understand the different requirements in these phases. (2) In particular, it explores how the triggering factors on the family level can be translated into the development of capabilities on the firm level to drive successful internationalization. (3) Our results show that there are three important levels of drivers of BaG internationalization in FBs: The personal and familial level, the bonding and transfer level between the business family and the FB, and the organizational level. The drivers on these levels incorporate substantial intra- and inter-level interactions constituting a cumulative process of successful BaG internationalization. (4) In addition, our results show that BaG internationalization in FBs triggered by succession in an SEW “loss mode” is consistently influenced by SEW preservation. This confirms the omnipresent mixture of economic and noneconomic goals in internationalization processes of FBs and indicates (in answer to Pukall and Calabrò, 2014) that SEW preservation triggers *and* drives BaG episodes. (5) Based on these insights, the article offers novel implications for research and practice.

In realizing these contributions, the article is structured as follows: The theoretical background section starts with the BaG phenomenon in general and introduces the SEW view on BaG internationalization in FB as well as succession as a potential trigger and DCs as potential drivers of BaG internationalization. The section concludes with a frame of reference combining these elements and building the starting point for the empirical analysis. After describing the research method and the company history of the analyzed FB, the results are presented and condensed into a model. Finally, we discuss the results, and present conclusions for FB research and practice, as well as limitations of the study and possible future research options.

### **Theoretical background**

#### *Born-again global internationalization in family businesses*

Entrepreneurial internationalization is one of the major areas of IE research (Jones *et al.*, 2011). The literature distinguishes traditional (gradual/incremental) internationalization, born globals

and BaGs as typical patterns of internationalization (Baum *et al.*, 2015). In the traditional pattern, internationalization develops gradually from an existing home market, as displayed in process models of internationalization (e.g. Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). Research has shown that there are also less gradual patterns (e.g. Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Bell *et al.*, 2003). There are firms that either achieve a substantial share of international sales from the beginning (born globals; Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994) or begin internationalization in an incremental way, but change into a mode of rapid internationalization at a certain turning point (BaGs) (Bell *et al.*, 2001, 2003).

Following Bell *et al.* (2001, p. 174), BaG firms are “well established firms that have previously focused on their domestic markets, but which suddenly embrace rapid and dedicated internationalization, (...) often a result of a critical incident.” This definition received broad recognition (e.g. Graves and Thomas, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2012; Schueffel *et al.*, 2014) and is consistent with other definitions of the BaG phenomenon (e.g. Kalinic and Forza, 2012; Sheppard and McNaughton, 2012) in its central elements. Sheppard and McNaughton (2012) used the achievement of at least 25% of international sales within three years as evidence for rapid internationalization. The main critical incidents for sudden internationalization are diverse types of change in ownership and/or management, acquisition and client followership (Bell *et al.*, 2001).

Regarding FBs, the reviews of Kontinen and Ojala (2010) and Pukall and Calabrò (2014) also found all three patterns of internationalization. As in the general IE studies, the share of FBs following a pattern of gradual internationalization clearly exceeds those showing born global and BaG global patterns (Kontinen and Ojala, 2012). FBs tend to internationalize gradually and to be slower at the beginning of the internationalization process than non-FBs, but catch up over time (Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). The lack of research on BaG internationalization also (or even more) applies to FBs, with only a very small number of empirical results (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2012; Stieg *et al.*, 2017) and shortage of process-focused studies (Metsola *et al.*, 2020). In these few studies, change in ownership and/or management in the form of succession emerges as a key trigger of BaG internationalization in FBs.

#### *The SEW perspective on born-again global internationalization in family businesses*

SEW is a frequently used perspective to explain the internationalization behavior of FBs in general and especially BaG internationalization (Blanzo-Mazagatos *et al.*, 2022; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014; Ray *et al.*, 2018; Scholes *et al.*, 2016; Sluhan, 2017; Smajić *et al.*, 2022; Yang *et al.*, 2020). The SEW concept is based on behavioral agency theory and the assumption that FBs “are typically motivated by, and committed to, the preservation of their SEW, referring to nonfinancial aspects or ‘affective endowments’ of family owners” (Berrone *et al.*, 2012, p. 259). Thus, gains or losses in SEW represent key reference points for FBs in terms of major strategic decisions. When the SEW is threatened (the family is in a “loss mode”), the family is prepared to make decisions that are not driven by economic logic, but will do anything to preserve the SEW (Berrone *et al.*, 2012). This means that the nonfinancial aspect of preserving SEW is more important than economic goals. However, this also means that FB owners are not generally risk-averse or risk-prone but, depending on the situation (SEW “loss mode” vs. “gain mode”), are willing to take more or less risks (Gomez-Mejía *et al.*, 2011). To avoid losses of SEW, for example, in the situation of potential bankruptcy, FB owners are more willing to take risks than non-FBs (Pukall and Calabrò, 2014).

Summarized, the preservation of SEW can be a barrier for the internationalization of FBs, as the owners might fear losses of SEW through the risks of internationalization. However, the preservation of SEW can also be a key stimulus for internationalization when the owners are in an SEW “loss mode” (Pukall and Calabrò, 2014) and tend to take more risks (Gomez-Mejía *et al.*, 2011). This means that the risk averseness in terms of SEW takes priority over the risk averseness in terms of financial losses (Berrone *et al.*, 2012). As it takes into account the typical

mixture of noneconomic and economic goals and the permanent evaluation of which side to prioritize, the SEW perspective is particularly suitable to analyze FB internationalization with a process focus. Thus, the preservation of SEW is not only a potential trigger of BaG internationalization but this characteristic balancing of noneconomic and economic goals of FBs can be supposed to affect further important decisions in the process of BaG internationalization (Metsola *et al.*, 2020; Pongelli *et al.*, 2021; Smajić *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the conceptualization and measurement of SEW, the literature shows two partially overlapping, but distinct approaches: The SEW importance (SEWi) model (Debicki *et al.*, 2016) measuring the importance of SEW to the business family and the FIBER model (Berrone *et al.*, 2012) measuring the degree of SEW in FBs. Both concepts are multidimensional, with the SEWi model consisting of (1) family prominence (building and maintaining the image of the family), (2) family continuity (family preservation, establishing a family dynasty and perpetuating family values in the business) and (3) family enrichment (fulfillment of basic family needs, like happiness and well-being on a daily basis) (Debicki *et al.*, 2016). The FIBER model comprises the five dimensions of (1) family control and influence, (2) identification of family members, (3) binding social ties, (4) emotional attachment of family members and (5) renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession (Berrone *et al.*, 2012). In spite of their different foci, the two approaches cohere and the dimensions of the models largely overlap (Debicki *et al.*, 2016). Despite these overlaps, a key difference between the two concepts is the level of analysis: The SEWi model focuses on the level of the business family, i.e. how important SEW benefits are for family members (Debicki *et al.*, 2016), whereas the FIBER model focuses on the level of the FB, i.e. the degree of SEW reflected in the FB (Berrone *et al.*, 2012).

As BaG internationalization triggered by succession starts at the family level, but has to be translated into action on the organizational level of the FB to successfully drive the course of internationalization, both approaches are crucial for the present analysis. The following two sections will illustrate how SEW can be linked with these different phases of BaG internationalization and levels of analysis.

#### *Succession as a trigger of born-again global internationalization in family businesses in the context of SEW*

Succession is an especially promising context for researching the BaG phenomenon in FB, because new generations joining the management frequently can trigger new strategic directions, such as dedicated internationalization (Costa *et al.*, 2021; Fernández and Nieto, 2005; Meneses *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, FB research confirmed generational change as a major trigger of BaG internationalization in FBs (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2012; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014; Stieg *et al.*, 2017).

From an SEW perspective, the importance of SEW benefits for the successors will significantly influence their strategic decisions (Debicki *et al.*, 2016). If the importance of SEW is high, generations entering during an SEW “loss mode” are especially predestinated to trigger phases of rapid internationalization (Fernández and Nieto, 2005), when they expect that internationalization can contribute to return into an SEW “gain mode” (Gomez-Mejía *et al.*, 2007; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). Thus, SEW may favor quick decisions and strategic actions toward dedicated internationalization. In sum, succession in an SEW “loss mode” can constitute an especially motivating context for triggering BaG internationalization and can generate a global orientation and a long-term commitment to internationalization of the successors (Graves and Thomas, 2008).

#### *Dynamic capabilities as drivers of born-again global internationalization in family businesses in the context of SEW*

After internationalization has been triggered, the question of how it can be implemented rapidly and successfully arises. It is necessary to reduce typical liabilities of FBs prior to

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going international and to develop capabilities relevant to rapid international growth (Graves and Thomas, 2008; Metsola *et al.*, 2020).

While capabilities comprise ordinary capabilities and DCs, the first are responsible for generating value for a firm, but, in contrast, DCs extend, modify and create ordinary capabilities (Teece, 2014). Thus, DCs are crucial for rapid internationalization, because they can enhance the outcome of ordinary capabilities during the process of internationalization (Metsola *et al.*, 2020). Based on Teece *et al.* (1997, p. 516), DCs are capabilities to “integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments.” The concept has become one of the most important theoretical lenses in contemporary management research (for recent reviews on the conceptualization and measurement of DCs, see Wilden *et al.*, 2016; Schilke *et al.*, 2018 and Kump *et al.*, 2019).

DCs are also one of the concepts recently guiding IE research (Peiris *et al.*, 2012) and have expanded into FB internationalization research (Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). Regarding internationalization, the importance of organizational learning processes has been obvious since the first version of the Uppsala internationalization model (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977) and was further underlined in the revised version of the model (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). The DCs perspective refines and sharpens this importance in the sense that the ability to reconfigure a firm’s capabilities in dynamic international environments is crucial for international performance (Jantunen *et al.*, 2005).

Concerning rapid internationalization, the importance of DCs is emphasized in some of the most acknowledged works of the born global literature (Cavusgil and Knight, 2015; Knight and Cavusgil, 2004), as an innovative culture in businesses fosters the forming of particular knowledge that drives the development of organizational capabilities that support rapid internationalization. DCs help firms to alleviate their liabilities of foreignness and newness (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994). Moreover, the ability to replicate the firm’s capabilities across varied international markets supports rapid international expansion (Teece *et al.*, 1997).

A particularly comprehensive conceptualization of the capability-building process for accelerated internationalization in born global firms is provided by Weerawardena *et al.* (2007). Their DCs model builds on (1) the ability of internationally oriented entrepreneurs (owner/manager profile) to nurture DCs, which are further broken down into (2) market-focused learning capability, (3) internally focused learning capability, (4) networking capability and (5) marketing capability. Although designed for the born global context, we think that this comprehensive model constitutes a suitable reference point for analyzing the drivers of BaG internationalization, because of the following parallels of these two types of rapid internationalization: In general, Bell *et al.* (2001, p. 186) argue “that the rationale behind the ‘born global’ phenomenon needs not only apply to start-up ventures.” . . . “Rather, it may be seen as a strategy to improve firm value through internationalization.” This general conclusion is confirmed for born global and BaG episodes in FBs by Graves and Thomas (2008) as both represent rapid, dedicated and planned growth to multiple international markets simultaneously. Similarly, Metsola *et al.* (2020) point to the equal (high) speed of born global and BaG internationalization and Pukall and Calabrò (2014, p. 119) equate born global and BaG episodes.

As regards the SEW context, and thus the specification for succession in FB, the global orientation of the successors argued above in connection with succession in an SEW “loss mode” as a trigger of BaG internationalization is expected to boost the pressure for change in the organization (i.e. the FB). Thus, it favors the development of DCs. The intention of the successors to quit the SEW “loss mode” and to enter into an SEW “gain mode” through dedicated internationalization will be reflected on the organizational level of the FB. Thereby, it will influence the strategic premises and decisions leading to organizational learning processes and the reconfiguration of the FB’s capabilities.

*Frame of reference*

Based on our theoretical considerations, we relied on a frame of reference covering the entire process of BaG internationalization and a mixture of noneconomic and economic goals on the family and organizational levels. We used the SEWi model (Debicki *et al.*, 2016) as a reference point for exploring how the importance of SEW for the business family can trigger BaG internationalization. The FIBER model and its dimensions (Berrone *et al.*, 2012) guided the exploration of the reflection of SEW on the organizational level of the FB influencing the development of capabilities as drivers of BaG internationalization. As to the latter aspect, we used the model of Weerawardena *et al.* (2007), framing the capability-building process for accelerated internationalization of born-globals as a starting point for our exploration.

Following an inductive research approach with the intention of theory building, we used the frame of reference only as a starting point for answering our “how” and “why” questions. This left the interviewees plenty of freedom for their own perceptions and explanations and ourselves freedom for our interpretations.

**Methods***Interpretive single case study design*

For understanding complex organizational dynamics in-depth, the qualitative case study design is particularly suitable (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). BaG internationalization is a process of complex dynamics, allowing this method to show its strengths. In FB research, the majority of case studies follow qualitative positivism and only very few use interpretivism (Leppäaho *et al.*, 2016). However, interpretivism allows a better understanding and more awareness toward individual voices and their meaning, permits to capture more of the dynamics and complexities of FBs and makes case studies more relevant for FB theorizing (Nordqvist *et al.*, 2009; Dawson and Hjorth, 2012). Dyer and Wilkins (1991) and Gioia (2004) are known representatives of the interpretive case study design. The theoretical objective of a case is to develop a perception of the analyzed phenomenon by recognizing its specialness as well as complexity, but also the context. Providing rich data is a great merit (Stake, 1995), as it brings a deeper comprehension of the dynamics of FBs (Fletcher, 2002).

By using a revelatory case (Yin, 2014; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), investigating in depth *how* succession triggered BaG internationalization in an FB and *how* its development was driven by certain DCs of the FB, we position our analysis as a single case study with a mainly explorative approach. However, it is also tangent to explanatory aspects, as it does not fade out explanations of *why* BaG internationalization was triggered (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). With this design, we attempt to broaden and refine the theory of BaG internationalization in FBs.

*The analyzed family business and its company history*

We found access to a mature FB in the ladders industry that enabled us deep insights into the firm and its history and offered a distinctive setting to reconstruct the phenomenon. The company meets the criteria of BaG internationalization of an FB as follows: (1) It is an FB in the sense that it is 100% family-owned, in the fifth generation and the business family is involved in top management (for the components of this definition, see, e.g. Zellweger, 2018). (2) It meets the criteria of the BaG definition of Bell *et al.* (2001), which means that the FB showed moderate internationalization endeavors in the first generations, but suddenly adopted rapid internationalization. Controlling data provided by the business family shows that the international sales of the FB rose from 1–2% before generational change (1976–2003) to more than 20% three years after succession (2007) with a continual increase thereafter and the strategic goal to achieve 50% until 2025. (3) Thus, generational change constituted a critical incident triggering accelerated internationalization.

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The following brief description of the company history of the FB bases on archival sources and aims at maximizing the traceability of the context of the analyzed case:

The FB was established over 130 years ago (1885) by another business family and then owned and managed by this family and two further ones for one generation in each case. The father-in-law of the current CEO was working in the FB and acquired it upon the death of the former owner-manager (1975), as the family of the latter did not want to continue business activity. As part of this acquisition, the FB was transferred from sole proprietorship into an unlisted corporation in 1976. The FB is wholly owned by the family and its foundation. The current CEO started to work for the FB in 2000 and followed his father-in-law in 2004.

Since formation, the business focus was on ladders, scaffolding and wooden devices. During the following decades, the range was differentiated, but only regarding models and sizes of wooden devices. In the 1970s, the range was complemented by products made of metal, due to outsourcing the firefighting ladder production by one of the leading firefighting vehicle producers in the world to the analyzed FB in 1977. Today, the FB is a manufacturer and supplier of various climbing aids made of aluminum, wood, stainless steel and rubber for all the requirements of the conquest of height (e.g. façade-cleaning systems, aircraft maintenance platforms and truss bridge arch systems).

The company grew to 78 employees during ownership and management of the second business family, but downsized to five employees under the third business family. It recovered significantly during the ownership and management of the father-in-law of the current CEO and reached its peak in employment (120 employees). Around the year 2000, the FB experienced significant problems due to the increased opening of the borders for global trade and a bankruptcy arrangement had to be registered. The FB downsized to about 80 employees. This situation (a massive SEW “loss mode”) created huge pressure for change for the business family and the FB and coincided with the latest generational change.

Today, the FB shows sales of about 6 million euros and an export percentage of 25–30% (with a further ascending trend). The younger generation had sketched its own scenario for the revival of the FB and promptly started to implement its main idea – to internationalize. Within the next ten years, the FB experienced a type of rebirth and is now well represented globally, with its products in more than 20 countries worldwide.

With this history, we consider the company to be an excellent case for an in-depth analysis of the triggers and drivers of successful BaG internationalization of an FB in the context of generational change.

### *Data collection*

As single case studies describe a phenomenon richly (Siggelkow, 2007), they demand special care in data collection. Thus, we followed guidelines for collecting qualitative data (Reay, 2014) as well as for using the case study method (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014) in top-tier FB research. On this basis, we used several sources of evidence: company documents, including controlling data provided by the management; promotion photos/videos of products prior and after the start of accelerated internationalization; press texts about the internationalization; researcher’s observations during the on-site company visits and semi-structured interviews. We relied on interviews as the main source of data, with secondary data as important parts of triangulation and verification. This helped us to better understand developments as well as potential discrepancies among informants and to build a chain of evidence concerning pattern matching, exploration and explanation (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Corley and Gioia, 2004).

We used semi-structured in-depth expert interviews with key informants as a primary data source. We followed established guidelines for purposeful sampling (Gioia, 2004; Reay, 2014) to choose the key informants. In the first step, we conducted eight in-depth interviews



with family members, as well as some nonfamily long-term employees and business partners. These key informants not only used to work with the former FB owner as well as with the current one but also have detailed knowledge about specific events, including the generational change and the internationalization process. After a first round of interpretation, we carried out two follow-up interviews to get even more to the bottom of some especially interesting aspects concerning the dynamics of the generational leadership transition and its connections with the internationalization process.

Table 1 presents the two rounds of interviews and the key informants.

One of the authors conducted the interviews. When creating the interview guide, we focused on the research questions and the frame of reference. The questions marked the focus, leaving much room for non-predefined topics. The interviews were kept very open (narrative parts at the beginning of each section), followed by immanent and “exmanent” (questions relevant to the research topic but not mentioned in the interviewee’s narrative) in-depth questioning. The structure and the focal points of the interview guide are presented in Table A1. The interviews took 60–90 min per interviewee and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. This led to 145 pages of interview transcripts building the core of our analysis.

*Data analysis applying a “Gioia method”*

The Gioia method comes from the interpretivist tradition and is commonly used for in-depth content analysis of single cases. In this approach, researchers show their analytic work by using figures made up of boxes and arrows to identify data extracts grouped together according to first-order codes that are then grouped into second-order themes, which are finally refined into overarching theoretical dimensions (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2012). The goal is to build a model that is grounded in the data provided. In our case, we used the SEW and DCs dimensions from our frame of reference as a starting point and verified, specified and refined this frame with our interpretations grounded in the perspectives of the

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Interviews/key informants first round

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- (1) *Current CEO*: Has been part of the FB since 2000 and has been managing it for about 15 years (following his father-in-law). He immediately initiated the rapid internationalization
- (2) *HR director (wife of the CEO and daughter of the former FB owner)*: Knows the history of the FB very well, personally met three former generations and worked together with her father in the FB
- (3) *Head of international sales*: Spent the last 35 years working for the FB and (as the only nonfamily member) had a key role in implementing the internationalization strategy
- (4) *Head of production*: Has been a part of the FB for the last 20 years and is able to provide information regarding the impact of succession and internationalization on manufacturing
- (5) *Management consultant*: Has been consulting the company for the last decade and is supporting it to reach the goal of 50% exports by the year 2020
- (6) *Country sales manager*: Is responsible for the home market and has been a part of the FB for 25 years experiencing the development from mainly local to international sales from the very beginning
- (7) *A major distribution partner*: Has been holding exclusive rights for selling the company’s products in Germany for the last ten years and cooperates with the company worldwide
- (8) *A major supplier*: Has been supplying the FB for the last 20 years with raw materials for the production of its core products for the local and global markets

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Interviews/key informants follow-up round

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- (9) *Group interview*: Current CEO and his wife (HR director and daughter of the former CEO)
- (10) *Head of international sales*

**Source(s)**: Authors’ own creation

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**Table 1.**  
In-depth interviews  
with key informants

informants and the secondary data. We started on the level of the individual interview transcripts by compiling a list of preliminary first-order concepts. The list was continuously complemented and revised on the basis of information from the further interview transcripts and the additionally analyzed secondary data. To secure validity of the findings, the first author acted as a critical reviewer of the second author throughout this phase of analysis. In the second phase of analysis, both authors together aggregated the first-order concepts into second-order themes and dimensions to reach a higher level of abstraction. The authors discussed differences in their assessments until a consensus was reached.

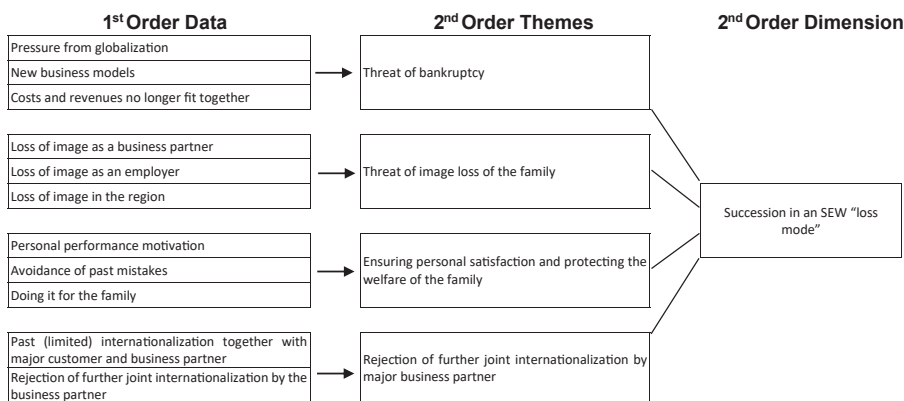
Figures 1–4 illustrate the steps of this process from first-order concepts out of the perspectives of the informants and the information in the secondary data, to more abstract researcher-induced second-order themes and aggregated second-order dimensions. Figure 5 is an overview of the core dimensions and their relations in the sense of the emerged grounded theory model. In the following section, we present our findings (i.e. the dimensions of the emerged model) gradually.

## Results

### *SEW preservation as trigger of the born-again global internationalization*

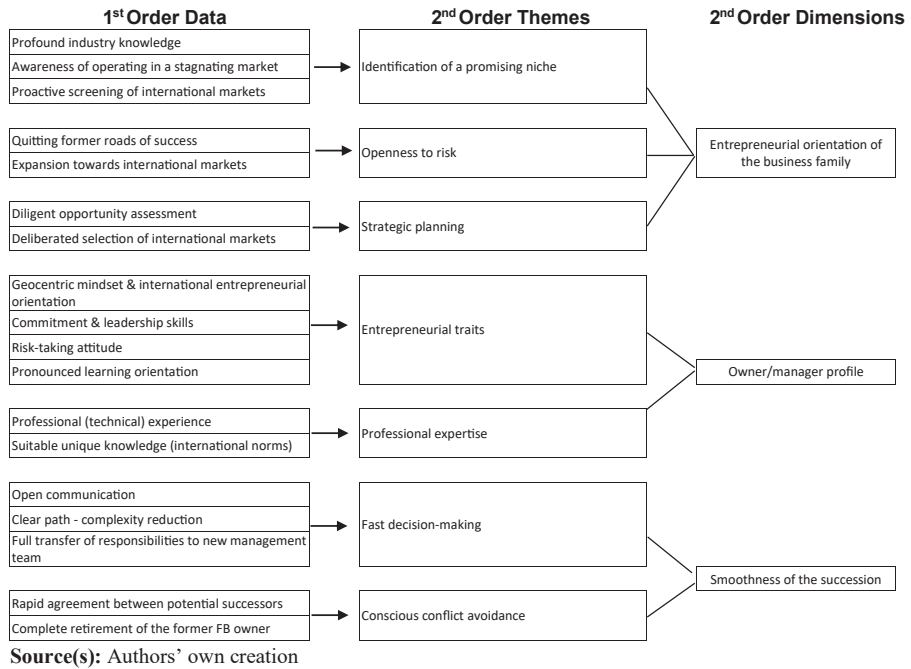
*Importance of SEW preservation.* First, we examined to what extent and how SEW preservation constitutes an important parameter in the business family of the FB, influencing the explored relations. As shown below, the business family and especially the new generation display the basic values associated with SEW intensively. The subsequent parts illustrate the importance of SEW in more depth.

Regardless of all troubles, continuing the family legacy has been the main objective. Thus, selling the FB was never considered. Instead, the business family intensively thought about who should be the successor. Maintaining the business for the upcoming generations was the main long-term goal. *“All held together during that time and moved in the same direction, otherwise the FB would have been smashed,”* the local sales manager remembers the time around the bankruptcy (Int. 4, 49). The emotional bonds in the business family are not only very strong but also helped the family members to maintain a positive self-conception and relations of trust with the stakeholders for decades, as pointed out by the long-term company’s supplier: *“I feel an extreme emotional attachment of the family to the FB and to what they do. It has been standing for over a hundred years for a quality product [ . . . ]”* (Int. 8, 68–70).



Source(s): Authors’ own creation

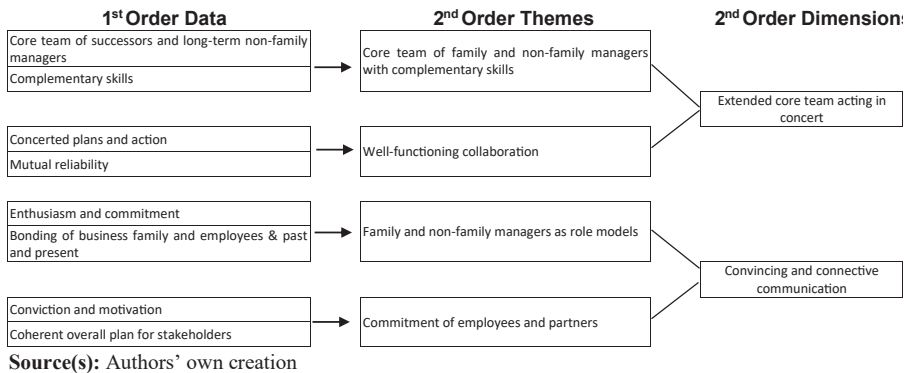
Figure 1.  
Data structure  
triggering factors of  
BaG  
internationalization



**Figure 2.**  
Data structure  
personal and  
familial DCs

All interviewees agreed that leadership and control as well as the strategic decision-making lie always in the hands of the family members in the management team. Since the succession in 2004, these management team members have been the son-in-law in his position as new CEO and his wife, the daughter of the former CEO, as HR director. However, in operational decisions and at times even in strategic questions, the long-standing nonfamily senior executives (heads of production, procurement and sales) have a certain influence (Int. 1, 51–57; Int. 2, 43–51). The long-time mutual trust between the business family and these key employees together with their special standing in the FB contributes to reaching and implementing decisions quickly. The family always selects nonfamily managers itself. The new CEO had already selected a part of the middle management after some time working for the FB in other positions and screening their willingness and ability to support the new path (Int. 3, 23–42; Int. 4, 14–27).

The family members not only have a very strong sense of belonging to the FB but also to its employees and the region, as the following quote from a long-term supplier exemplifies: “*The entrepreneurial family is very deeply rooted here [ . . . ], there is a strong connection.*” (Int. 8, 73–76). This is corroborated by a statement of the CEO: “*[ . . . ] it is a philosophy of the company, to preserve our Austrian-based production, and to choose our employees from the region, [ . . . ] although it is not always easy to produce here, compared to the competition. And we have employees who are [ . . . ] over 35 years with us [ . . . ], and that’s good [ . . . ].*” These statements and many other descriptions of the business family confirm that it has an intense sense of social responsibility for its (especially long-term) nonfamily employees, who are seen as an extended part of the business family, but also for the homeland and the region. These attributes have shaped the image of the business family in the region and the business family is proud of this image and attaches great value to maintain it.



**Figure 3.**  
Data structure bonding  
and transfer  
capabilities

This also results in a high level of performance motivation and satisfaction with what has been achieved by the business family and especially the new generation. Avoiding bankruptcy had a great deal of personal meaning and came along with a high degree of self-affirmation.

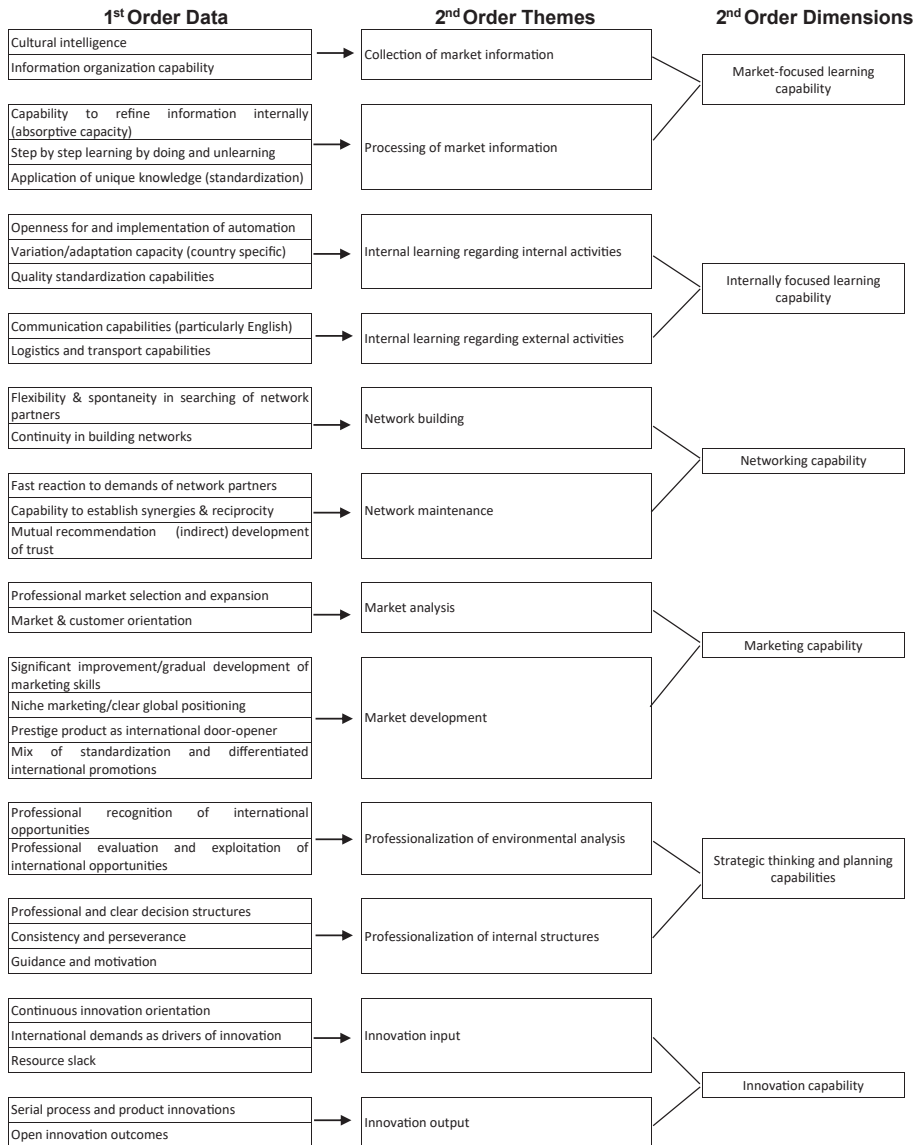
After having worked out the high importance of SEW preservation for the business family in general, the next part will focus on how the BaG internationalization was actually triggered.

*Triggering factors.* As regards the concrete triggering factors of the BaG internationalization, Figure 1 presents the grounding of the main results in the data. Subsequently, we illustrate these results in more detail.

“Global trade had given rise to new business models [...], which the company was not prepared for [...]. Costs and revenues no longer fit together. That’s why a bankruptcy arrangement had been registered around the year 2000. This was a very heavy blow for the former CEO, my father-in-law. But, as a result, succession was suddenly a hot topic [...] and everybody talked about that the next generation, if it should be able to continue, should work on reorganization measures. And that was the big cut, in the year 2004, I took over the position of the CEO and my father-in-law officially retired [...]” (Int. 1, 11–29). This statement of the current CEO illustrates the situation of the FB around the turn of the millennium. Being very close to insolvency put the FB and the business family under great pressure, which led to succession. The succession suddenly changed the behavior of the business family and especially its risk-taking behavior. Even external partners recognized the change triggered by the impending bankruptcy, as the following quote illustrates: “Bankruptcy sharpens the senses of all involved [...], it creates pressure, especially in an FB. So, one wants to secure the heritage and to move forward, and commitment increases [...]” (Int. 7, 174–177; 196–201).

Due to the strong identification of the business family not only with the FB but also with the region and the people involved, the decision to change the strategy was of great weight. Clients, business partners, employees and local organizations know the business family and associate it with the FB’s products and services. According to the current CEO, this fact was another important reason to attempt to save the company (Int. 1, 66–67).

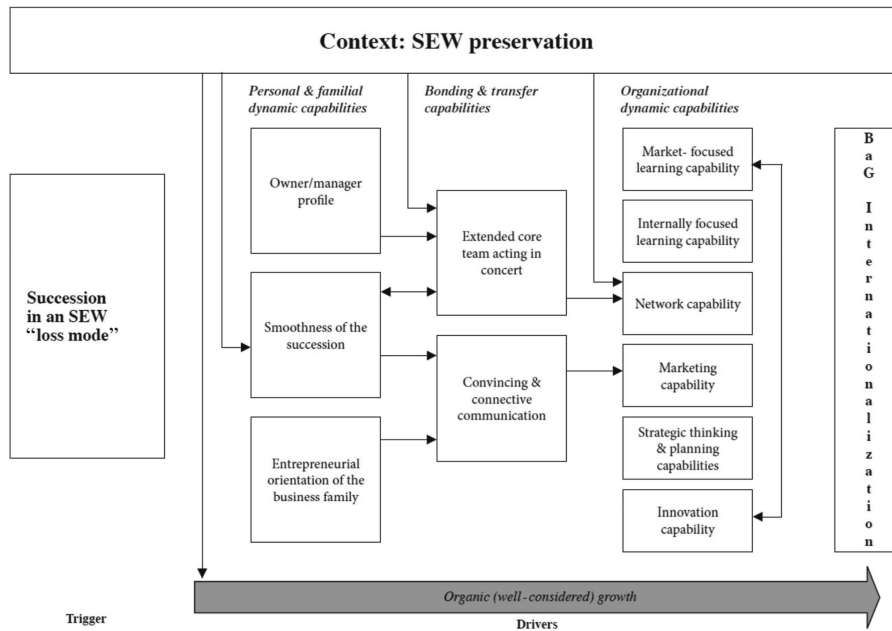
In addition, the performance motivation of the new CEO and his wife and their personal impetus to protect the welfare of the business family played decisive roles for the new attempt and the strategic reorientation. The company’s success or failure was considered as their own, as the CEO stated, “[...] and definitely there was an intention to do it for the family [...]. But also, for one’s own ego. So that one can say – we can do this, we are going to make it.” (Int.1, 67–69). A successor wants to prove him/herself, especially when taking into consideration



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 4.  
Data structure  
organizational DCs

how close the FB was to bankruptcy. Therefore, the new generation wanted to avoid repeating past mistakes and to search for new ways to maintain the FB and to be considered as a successful next generation. In the particular constellation of the analyzed case, the new CEO as son-in-law of the prior CEO and relatively new member of the business family may have been less concerned with SEW loss issues. However, this was compensated by his strong motivation to protect the welfare of the family in the future.



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 5. Overview of results

Initially, the repositioning plan was to penetrate segments of the domestic market (focus on key products, e.g. fire ladders). This plan became crucial for the internationalization as well, as the wife of the CEO explains: "There was an idea to specialize and we found a niche not only in Austria, but worldwide, because there were not many providers in this specific area" (Int. 2, 8–19). This implies that the initial plan to specialize went hand in hand with a significant international expansion. Thus, the BaG enterprise was born – at least in the minds of the new CEO and the top management team (Int. 9, 602–640). Unexpectedly, another crucial factor emerged: the most important network partner's rejection of further joint internationalization, which was an additional triggering factor for the independent internationalization.

The new strategy to considerably internationalize was very emotional for the business family, because nobody knew if and how it would work. Reconstructing how the business family acted and why reveals the typical shift in the risk attitude known from the SEW literature (Berrone *et al.*, 2012): The risk averseness in terms of SEW preservation took priority over the risk averseness in terms of financial losses. Undoubtedly, the preservation of SEW triggered the rapid internationalization in this constellation of succession in an SEW "loss mode."

The next part presents the factors which drove the realization of the rapid internationalization.

*Dynamic capabilities as drivers of the born-again global internationalization.* Our analysis revealed three major blocks of capabilities driving the rapid internationalization: (1) *Personal and familial DCs* on the side of the business family as well as (2) *organizational DCs* on the side of the FB. However, a third group of capabilities emerged from the data, characterizing the necessary connection and transfer capabilities conveying the aspiration for and targets of rapid internationalization from the family to the business level, i.e. (3) *bonding and transfer capabilities*. We will now present the results of these three blocks of DCs starting from the family side and ending with the business side.

*Personal and familial dynamic capabilities.* Figure 2 summarizes how we grounded the personal and familial capabilities leading to the rapid internationalization in the perspectives of the informants. Again, we provide more details and illustrations via direct statements of the interviewees afterward.

*Entrepreneurial orientation of the business family:* The business family did not only intend to avoid bankruptcy but to exploit new entrepreneurial opportunities. Having realized that they had been operating in a stagnating market, they were not satisfied with plans for improving their position in this market, but used their profound industry knowledge to proactively screen international markets for appropriate niches.

This screening process produced fire ladders as suitable niche products. The international expansion boosted the market potential of the repositioning but, of course, also the risk for the FB quitting former roads of success. The strategic planning of the repositioning and deliberate selection of international markets are confirmed by a statement of an external partner: *“The new CEO communicated explicitly: we are going to capture the global market with our fire ladders as a niche product, one country after another.”* (Int. 5, 40–42).

*Owner/manager profile:* The new CEO's traits, abilities and experiences were a major driver of the rapid internationalization. First, the geocentric mindset and entrepreneurial orientation of the CEO were stressed by the interviewees. He not only has a great willingness to travel on behalf of the FB but also an open-minded attitude toward other cultures. This is an interesting facet, as the CEO did not have any previous extensive international work experience. Instead, his pronounced learning orientation and ability to adapt to foreign markets, customers and partners must be emphasized (Int. 2, 202–231; Int. 3, 167–182). Moreover, the interviewees describe the CEO as a committed leader with a strong strategic decision-making ability, perseverance and willingness to accept the consequences of his decisions. The risk-oriented attitude of the CEO is a further trait that contributed to the rapid internationalization (Int. 8, 143–145).

As a second major aspect, the previous professional expertise of the CEO had an important impact on the FB's international success. His wife describes it as follows: *“It's also his technical knowledge. My dad was more the businessman, and my husband is initially from the watchmaking industry and the technical stuff is his nature. He helps to develop products as well. In case of this innovative ladder [ . . . ], he was constantly ruminating with technicians, and proposing ideas how to possibly proceed.”* (Int. 2, 211–216). In particular, the prior experience in standardization institutes helped the CEO to learn quickly what has to be considered to follow the standards of different countries and how this has to be considered in product development or adaptation (Int. 5, 113–118).

*Smoothness of the succession:* Finally, the smoothness of the succession was a major driver at the family level. A key for keeping the succession smooth was the open communication between the new generation and the former CEO. The situation around the bankruptcy enabled them to make it a condition of the succession that they can go their own way: *“Please do it’, my father said, and we answered: ‘Yes, but only on our conditions’”* (Int. 9, 773–774). Selling the FB or closing it down were out of the question for the former CEO and, thus, he supported the plans of the successors and transferred all responsibilities to them. This enabled the successors to produce clear strategic plans, reducing complexity for all stakeholders and leading to fast decisions.

The smoothness of the succession was also related to conscious conflict avoidance between the family members. This started with a rapid agreement between the potential successors – another (older) daughter of the former owner and her husband abstained from succession (Int. 9, 98–100) – and continued with the complete retirement of the former owner. Regarding conflict avoidance, the wife of the former owner and a long-term nonfamily manager played key roles: On the one hand by convincing the former owner to withdraw and let the successors go their own way, on the other hand by convincing the successors to go

their own way without coming into conflict with their father(-in-law) too much (Int. 9, 365–366; Int. 10, 52–54).

*Bonding and transfer capabilities.* Figure 3 depicts the grounding of the bonding and transfer capabilities in the data, followed by their description and illustration.

*Extended core team acting in concert.* Together with the successors, some long-term nonfamily managers (the heads of international sales and production and the country sales manager) built the core team for internationalization. Their complementary skills resulted in concerted plans and their collaboration showed a high extent of mutual reliability. It has been repeatedly confirmed that the success of internationalization was especially driven by the abilities and high internationalization commitment of the head of international sales. His important role was highlighted by the CEO: “[. . .] he is a salesperson, who simply approaches other people and likes to adapt to people. In the beginning, we were traveling together and the people, no matter in which culture, appreciated his approach very much.” (Int. 1, 192–195).

*Convincing and connective communication.* The enthusiasm and commitment of the core management team toward internationalization had an important role model function. The composition of this team created a bonding function in two respects: On the one hand, its composition of family and nonfamily members contributed to the bonding of the business family and the nonfamily employees. On the other hand, the long-term experience and reputation of the nonfamily managers significantly contributed to unite past and present in the FB, helping the successors to develop trust and acceptance vis-à-vis the stakeholders. This created a climate of conviction and motivation for the internationalization of the FB, conveying a coherent overall plan to the stakeholders.

*Organizational dynamic capabilities.* Figure 4 summarizes how we grounded the organizational DCs leading to the BaG internationalization in the data. Our analysis confirms the importance of the dimensions of the born global model by Weerawardena *et al.* (2007). However, it shows some significant deviations in their specifications. Strategic thinking and planning capabilities and innovation capabilities emerge as two further important organizational DCs. The following parts illustrate the dimensions.

*Market-focused learning capability.* As a basis for market-focused learning, the FB has established a solid level of cross-cultural intelligence, which we see not only on the surface by the adaptation of materials to the demands of each new cultural environment but primarily in the basic readiness to invest in market preparation. This goes hand in hand with curiosity, respect and positive attitude toward other cultures. Not only the management but also the employees are encouraged to learn about and from new cultures (Int. 3, 176–178). Related to knowledge acquisition, various market-based linguistic, cultural and technical adaptations have been required. For this purpose, different external experts, such as translators, intercultural trainers, country-specific export consultants and internationally experienced logistics experts have been consulted.

The processing and refinement of market-related information usually take place in-house. To enable this, English-speaking employees were hired. Although the foreign language competence within the FB has grown significantly over the years, professional translations of marketing material into five further languages were ordered (Int. 3, 183–229). When technical adaptations due to foreign standards were required, they were implemented without external support. The CEO has this knowledge from his previous positions and is constantly monitoring standardization trends (as a member of committees of standardization institutions) (Int. 6, 169–199; Int. 7, 323–363; Int. 8, 148–170). Concerning the integration of new knowledge and the unlearning of obsolete knowledge, the wife of the CEO describes it as “*learning by doing and step by step*” in order to seize the opportunity (Int. 2, 240–243; 255–256).

*Internally focused learning capability.* Due to the internationalization combined with niche specialization, production was expanded and largely automatized. Additionally, the FB itself and most units were restructured and some, such as quality management, were established.



*"We learned that we had to bring more added value into the company [ . . . ], automation was implemented [ . . . ] and it was also vital to become more flexible [ . . . ], in order to suit foreign markets. So, we reacted [ . . . ] and due to the flexibility of the new in-house design- and engineering [ . . . ] also our quality standards increased in order to avoid complaints from abroad,"* explains the head of production. This shows the necessary learning process of the FB reacting to the demands of international markets. This led to a large automation boom with robots and serial production, which also demanded openness for innovation, new responsibilities (in-house construction), skills and employees (Int. 4, 205–214). Besides, the entire distribution was professionalized, especially regarding communication skills in English and digital communication (Int. 6, 203–211).

Another major transformation occurred in logistics. The FB learned soon to take precise care of changes in terms of packaging, which were needed due to export regulations and the requirements of overseas transport (Int.1, 347–385; Int. 2, 265–298; Int. 4, 289–292).

*Networking capability:* The FB benefited from the interplay of private and business contacts, which ultimately also boosted its internationalization. At the beginning, due to the refusal of the key business partner (the world's largest fire truck manufacturer) regarding the joint internationalization, the FB had the flexibility to look for local partners (official distributors or partners for local tender procedures) and customers (local producers of firefighters' trucks). The FB has found them gradually and continues to develop new contacts. To develop complementary resources, the company did not shy away from establishing contacts via recommendations of existing network partners. *"We really use the synergies. It's a give-and-take on both sides,"* as the head of international sales specifies (Int. 3, 267). Sometimes, also coincidences led to important international business deals and partnerships, because of the flexibility and spontaneity of the FB to seize these opportunities (Int. 2, 307–314).

The networking capability is very crucial for the internationalization success of this FB, because it never stops investing time and money in networking. Thus, the following summary by a major supplier seems to be deserved: *"I think, if you look at the internationalization from the networks perspective, this company will probably be at the top of the list."* (Int. 8, 194–196).

*Marketing capability:* Marketing was characterized by all interviewed as previously being severely underdeveloped, since the former CEO considered it not important. It has developed with the succession and, above all, through internationalization. The professionalization of marketing ranged from a more professional selection of new international markets to a more professional market development. Due to the decision to concentrate on fire ladders, niche marketing has emerged, leading to a clear and recognizable global positioning and a very positive international image. Regarding the marketing measures, field-specialized B2B fairs proved to be very effective.

Moreover, the FB implemented many product adaptations, on the one hand, to satisfy the demands of international markets due to different foreign regulations. On the other hand, the FB was inspired by the international experience itself and achieved remarkable product innovations. The most remarkable is the innovative "Gantry Ladder," which is well known in the firefighting industry and became a prestige product and international door opener.

This was followed by a substantial adaptation of sales promotion, such as a multilingual homepage and multilingual catalogues. The FB has also increasingly used standardized promotion elements, which require no translation or adaptation, since they are self-explanatory all over the world. An example of this is a professionally produced film showing how a fire brigade operates the ladders of the FB (Int. 3, 313–318).

*Strategic thinking and planning capabilities:* The FB had to develop strategic thinking and planning capabilities during internationalization. This was not on the agenda previously and emerged from the accelerated internationalization. It was both, a result of the openness toward foreign markets and new opportunities as well as a prerequisite to exploit these opportunities. Furthermore, this increased strategic orientation functioned as a guidance and

powerful motivator for the entire FB. The wife of the CEO explains this as follows: “*After one of their trips, our head of sales international and my husband set the strategic goal to become the world leader for fire fighter’s ladders. That was a huge motivator for the entire company. We want to go there, so we align ourselves with this goal. From then on, this has been consistently pursued and still works.*” (Int. 2, 196–199).

Regarding strategy development and implementation, the mixture of consistency and perseverance on the one hand, and flexibility and efficiency on the other hand proved to be a key capability of the FB. This mixture was particularly attributed to simple and clear decision structures and the strong influence of the business family (Int. 5, 104–107, Int. 8, 143–146).

*Innovation capability:* The final capability identified is a pronounced innovation capability. It is based on a continuous innovation orientation of the management that aims to extend this orientation toward the employees. It has become a habit to think and talk in terms of innovation potential and innovative ideas on a regular basis, which is, for example, routinized via monthly innovation talks (Int. 3, 389–395). The innovation orientation is persistent and fault-tolerant, underpinned by a certain resource slack and does not stop at the company boundaries but also includes developments together with customers in the sense of open innovation (Int.1, 595–599).

This innovation orientation is stimulated by the internationalization of the FB, as differing demands function as drivers of innovation (Int. 4, 381–383, 400–414). Overall, this leads to serial process and product innovations. The process innovations are improvements compared to prior company processes (and do not result in new standards for the industry), whereas on the product innovation side, the FB has created some high-quality innovations (such as the Gantry ladder) that are unique for the industry and have set new international standards. This innovation orientation and innovation results enable the FB to stand out from competitors and to eschew the existing international price competition (Int. 5, 201–205, 210–215).

## Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this article is to investigate how succession in an SEW “loss mode” in an FB can trigger and how certain capabilities of the FB can drive successful BaG internationalization. Our frame of reference draws upon the dimensions of the DCs that were shown to be essential for accelerated internationalization in a born global context and without focus on FBs (Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007), assuming that similar DCs could be decisive in an FB BaG context. Thus, our main intent was to demonstrate connections between our data and theory (Gioia *et al.*, 2012) in terms of verification, specification and extension of these parts of the theory against the background of a BaG internationalization good practice case.

First, our results show that a combination of the SEW and DCs views is suitable and very efficient for explaining BaG internationalization in FBs. Succession in an SEW “loss mode” proved to be a major trigger for the rapid internationalization of the analyzed FB, and SEW preservation turned out to be an omnipresent context of the internationalization process. Equally, the DCs view permits the explanation of a wide range of factors that drove the BaG internationalization, and the DCs model of Weerawardena *et al.* (2007) for the born global context covers also important parts of the capabilities driving BaG internationalization in our case. However, the results also indicate substantial specifications and extensions of the triggers and drivers of BaG internationalization in FBs. Moreover, the analysis revealed some crucial interrelations between the dimensions (see Figure 5).

### *Extensions to the frame of reference*

First of all, our results show that DCs on three different levels drove rapid internationalization. Besides personal and organizational DCs, familial DCs and

particularly DCs enabling the bonding of the business family with the FB and the transfer of the aspiration for and targets of rapid internationalization from the family level to the business level emerge from our analysis. Regarding the organizational DCs, strategic thinking and planning capabilities as well as innovation capability complete the picture.

Relating to the familial as well as bonding and transfer capabilities, these extensions and differentiation can be explained by the role model function of the business family as regards perseverance combined with entrepreneurial orientation (reorientation along international opportunities). In such a context, it is of major relevance that the business family keeps (or regains) its balance as well as the overview and is able to communicate a realistic and feasible way forward to the employees and other stakeholders. In this connection, the capability to ensure a smooth succession is of vital importance. In an established FB (in comparison to a born global), long-term nonfamily managers embody efficient links between the business family and the FB and may create a form of quasi-family (Karra *et al.*, 2006). Thus, an extended core team of family and nonfamily managers (ideally with complementary capabilities) acting in concert and convincingly supporting the way forward is especially connective in the sense of a joint role model function.

As regards organizational DCs, the analysis revealed strategic thinking and planning capabilities and innovation capability as additional dimensions driving accelerated internationalization of an established FB. The additional importance of strategic thinking and planning is conclusive, as a mature company can be supposed to have more strategic planning routines at its disposal than a recently founded venture. However, these routines were underdeveloped in the analyzed FB before, but were professionalized in the course of accelerated internationalization. The former weak strategic thinking and planning capabilities contributed to ignore the threats but also the opportunities of globalization. Thus, the strengthening of these capabilities is crucial for successful BaG internationalization. This emphasizes the complex and intriguing dual role of globalization as a threat but also the opportunity for contemporary (family) business management (Fernández and Nieto, 2005).

The relevance of the innovation capability can be explained by the fact that this capability lay dormant in the FB and its excellent industry-specific know-how, but was strongly stimulated via internationalization (Kafouros *et al.*, 2008). This can be attributed to the differing demands on international markets that were detected via market observation, combined with the higher extent of risk-taking of the new management that together created the necessary tension (in the sense of triggers for innovative ideas) to continuously exploit this innovation capability. A high extent of market orientation, especially for FB, often supports gaining regular customers (Frank *et al.*, 2012).

#### *Relations between the dimensions (particular role of SEW preservation as a context)*

The condensed results show a consistent and interwoven picture of succession in an SEW “loss mode” as a main trigger and diverse DCs as drivers of accelerated internationalization in the context of SEW preservation. Above all, the preservation of SEW indeed can be a very influential context of BaG internationalization in FBs. Coming back into an SEW “gain mode”, the FB made its decisions concerning further internationalization and growth well-considered, favoring organic growth and avoiding excessive risk. Besides this general effect, all three emerged levels of DCs indicate significant and well-explainable relations to SEW preservation: First, on the family level, the smoothness of the succession (as a major prerequisite of the following developments) has to be seen against the background of the concern of the business family to preserve SEW. Furthermore, SEW preservation contributed to unifying the extended core team of family and quasi-family managers on the bonding and

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transfer DCs level, as well as to build and maintain long-term network partnerships based on mutual trust and reciprocity (Fink and Kessler, 2010) on the organizational DCs level.

But there are also several key relations between the DCs on different levels, suggesting a cumulative process of development of drivers of BaG internationalization in FBs: All three emerged drivers on the personal and familial level contribute to build up DCs on the bonding and transfer level. In this connection, on the one hand, the entrepreneurial traits, leadership skills and professional expertise of the successor as well as the smooth succession significantly contributed to build up, remotivate and unify the extended core team. In turn, this core team contributed to the smooth succession. On the other hand, the entrepreneurial orientation of the business family and the smooth succession enabled a convincing and connective communication of the internationalization plans and goals to the business level. Subsequently, the drivers on the bonding and transfer level contributed to develop essential organizational DCs. The most remarkable relations in this respect are the positive effects of the balanced core team on the capability of the FB to build and maintain network partnerships and the positive effects of the convincing and connective communication of the extended core team on the international marketing capability. Regarding the first effect, the high level of binding social ties between the extended core team, the employees, national partners and the region are reflected in the international networking capability of the FB. As to the second effect, the convincing and connective communication is reflected in the international marketing of the FB in the sense of a high-quality supplier with a long tradition and regional attachment. Finally, the interplay of the market-focused learning capability advanced through accelerated internationalization and the innovation capability significantly boosted the innovation output.

#### *Implications for research and practice*

The first fundamental implication for research is that FBs in a “loss mode” regarding their SEW, combined with generational change, indeed constitute rich cases for studying the BaG phenomenon (see also Fernández and Nieto, 2005; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). In this respect, the combination of the SEW and DCs views constituted a very suitable frame of reference for covering the process of BaG internationalization. The DCs model by Weerawardena *et al.* (2007), designed for accelerated internationalization in a born-global context, proved to be well applicable to a BaG context in FB and revealed informative extensions and specifications. Given the small share of replicative study designs in social, management and entrepreneurship research (Neuliep, 1990; Davidsson, 2016), this can be seen as an encouraging example to employ replicative designs more frequently to determine the generalizability, extensibility and need for specification of existing models and findings.

Regarding content, we highlight the following contributions of our analysis: We show that there are three important levels of drivers of accelerated internationalization in FB: The personal and familial level, the bonding and transfer level between the business family and the FB and the organizational level (FB). The DCs on these levels incorporate substantial intra- and inter-level interactions constituting a cumulative process of successful BaG internationalization. Neglecting these levels and interactions may produce a picture of BaG internationalization separating the family from the business level as well as noneconomic and economic goals, which does not display the characteristics of FBs adequately. Rather, future research should build on, consolidate and verify these findings in similar and other contexts (e.g. BaG internationalization in FBs in an SEW “loss mode” without succession background). We further show that the process of BaG internationalization in FBs triggered by succession in an SEW “loss mode” is consistently affected by SEW preservation, resulting in a combination of rapid internationalization with organic, well-considered growth strategies. This answers the question of Pukall and Calabrò (2014, p. 119), whether SEW preservation

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triggers OR drives BaG episodes, with: "It does both!" It can pivotally trigger the process and subsequently drive it into a direction combining economic and noneconomic goals, shaping the development of capabilities on the personal/familial, bonding/transfer and organizational levels. Thus, future research should intensify the process-oriented analysis of BaG internationalization in FBs. Further results on these connections and their effects can be informative regarding the question of how far peculiarities of the case analyzed here have possibly contributed to this finding or whether it is more generalizable.

Regarding implications for practice, first of all, it is our conviction and recommendation to not try to imitate any good practice case, but to reflect on it and learn from it against the background of one's own business. However, there are some basic conducive factors and relations in this case that could be promisingly transferred to other FBs with plans for accelerated internationalization. FBs should be aware of the fact that a promising way into accelerated internationalization demands conviction, commitment and capabilities on the family and the business levels. First of all, it is important to develop a shared, convinced and committed plan for internationalization within the business family. In order to develop such a plan, it can make sense to use informal and formal family governance measures such as family meetings, family councils and family constitutions (Suess, 2014). In this context, it is also important to question potentially contradictory expectations of the family and business systems in relation to the internationalization plans in order to be able to balance them out as far as possible in the long term (Frank *et al.*, 2022). To transfer this conviction and commitment from the family to the business level, capabilities of the (extended) business family to communicate a feasible way into accelerated internationalization to the employees and other stakeholders are crucial. Long-term nonfamily employees with mutual trusting relationships to the business family and a high recognition amongst the staff may be excellent connecting links. In order to transfer the conviction and commitment to internationalization to other groups of employees, it makes sense to create personal development and career opportunities in connection with taking on responsibility for internationalization. This should go hand in hand with the promotion of specific further training opportunities (e.g. foreign languages, intercultural training, international marketing and international business law). It is particularly effective to bring entrepreneurially minded personalities into these new responsibilities so that they can gradually expand their expertise in the new markets, establish and expand contacts and identify and seize further entrepreneurial opportunities. If business families ignore the necessity of this transfer, the efforts may remain ineffective.

To start this process, FBs should reflect on the opportunities of globalization and on their core competencies, in the sense of potential international niches, where the FB can offer something truly outstanding. Preferably, these core competencies should be grounded in a long-standing tradition of the FB. This contributes to the identification with the internationalization on the business level (employees and possible investors) and enables the authentic international positioning (Ranfagni *et al.*, 2021) as a traditional unique-quality supplier. Ideally, an eye-catching primary product can be used as an international door opener. From this basis, it is advisable to gradually develop further, making use of an appropriate international network. In this context, it is important to allow SEW to act as a guiding principle of internationalization and not to rely on rapid internationalization at any price. This creates an authentic way of internationalization that expands trusting stakeholder relationships internationally and credibly expands competitive advantages achieved on national markets in the direction of international competitive advantages. Special attention should be paid to realize and seize the potentials for innovation that emerge from specific demands on international markets. In this regard, strategic planning should increasingly complement entrepreneurial intuition, as entrepreneurial activity in (more distant and less familiar) international markets requires more systematic market research and planning.

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Intuition based on previous entrepreneurial experience is often not very effective here or leads to wrong conclusions with regard to the evaluation of entrepreneurial opportunities and risks. It is therefore about gradual personal and organizational learning against the background of the development and exploitation of company-relevant international market potential.

#### *Limitations and possible future research directions*

Of course, this study is subject to some limitations: First, the case shows some peculiarities, raising the question of to what extent the results can be extended to other cases. The FB operates on a special (mainly business to business) market, which is partially regulated through standardization. Thus, it is questionable how far the identified relations can be extended to other types of markets. Second, the fact that our findings are based on a case embedded in a certain geographical and sociopolitical context (in terms of the home and the served international markets) prompts us to be cautious about the generalizations we derive. Although it is generally problematic to argue generalizability from case studies, our analysis and implications reveal some relations that are likely to be transferable to other cases, at least in similar contexts. Third, noting the fact that our interviews and observations took place at a time of already advanced internationalization, the data and results may be subject to retrospective bias to some degree.

For future research, a more intense scientific activity regarding BaG internationalization in general and particularly in the FB context is appropriate to further strive for reliable and valid findings. As to qualitative research, which proved to be especially suitable for the analysis of this complex phenomenon, further case analyses in other contexts (e.g. industries, cultures and markets) will strengthen the external validity of findings in this yet underresearched area. More extensive and cross-contextual findings will allow the derivation of a solid basis of hypotheses that can be tested in quantitative studies. However, quantitative studies have to overcome challenges with regard to limited number of available cases and the coverage of complex relations concerning the emergence, development and success of BaG internationalization.

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**Appendix**

- (1) Opening sequence, as a narrative part in which the interviewees were asked to describe the field of activity of the FB and their positions and main tasks in the FB
- (2) Questions regarding the main triggers of the rapid internationalization and especially whether, how and to what extent the generational change might have triggered the internationalization
- (3) This narrative part was followed by immanent and "exmanent" in-depth questioning regarding to what extent and how the SEW dimensions triggered the internationalization
- (4) A general discussion about the development of the international activities (including their scope and speed), as well as their drivers and outcomes by analyzing the internationalization of the company as a process
- (5) Again, this narrative part was followed by immanent and "exmanent" in-depth questioning that attempted to determine if and how the focused capabilities (owner/manager profile, market-focused learning capability, internally focused learning capability, networking capability and marketing capability) and/or other factors contributed to the BaG internationalization

**Note(s):** Structure and focal points

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

**Table A1.**  
Interview guide

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