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Total Quality Management as Driver for Internationalization. A Case Study of a Small Family Firm

Abstract

Purpose of the paper: This study investigates the relationship between Total Quality Management and internationalization in small family firms, focusing on the role that the dimensions of Total Quality Management may have as strategic resources to implement successful internationalization strategies.

Methodology: Building on the Resource-Based View, this study is based on a single case study, and data were gathered through in-depth interviews with the family owner-manager.

Results: Findings show that small family businesses that aim to operate in international markets have to invest constant attention toward Total Quality Management by developing strategies able to achieve excellence. More in detail, for small and medium family firms, Total Quality Management represents a driver to internationalize. Therefore, family-owned managers sustain that internationalization success depends on the increasing attention exhibited towards the following dimensions of quality, specifically on three main pillars: relationships, professionalization, and long-term vision, which appear to be strategic resources in international markets. An interpretive model is proposed, with a set of propositions.

Research limitations: The main drawback refers to the fact that results stemmed from one single case study. Further studies could deepen the analysis on multiple cases.

Academic and practical implications: Scholarly implications are threefold. Firstly, findings contribute to the Resource-Based View theory by introducing the long-term vision as a strategic resource able to activate a loop between Total Quality Management and internationalization success. Secondly, results contribute to Total Quality Management literature, highlighting that it represents a driver to internationalize, and, following a long-term perspective, its enhancement is stimulated by internationalization. Thirdly, findings contribute to Family Business studies, underlining the relevance done of owners on professionalization as a strategic resource to ensure excellence, and obtain success in overseas markets. The proposed case study represents a best practice and can stimulate other entrepreneurs and consultants to invest in Total Quality Management to thrive internationalization strategies.

Originality of the paper: This study, elucidating that Total Quality Management is the driver to stimulate family business internationalization, proposes an interpretive model to study Total Quality Management and Internationalization in small and medium family firms.

Keywords: TQM; Family Businesses; Soft Dimensions of Quality; Hard Dimensions of Quality, Single-Case Study

Introduction

Understanding how family businesses act is important because they represent the most popular kind of firm throughout the world and, operating in different territories, have to face social, political, economic, and cultural changes and challenges (Tobak and Nábrádi 2020). This implies for family firms the necessity to develop strategies able to compete in different territories considering differences and aspects related to the place where they decide to move. In line with this statement, one of the most significant challenges that family firms have is to handling internationalization (Fernández-Olmos et al. 2016; De Massis and Kotlar 2014). Internationalization for family firms, especially for small family firms, signifies an improvement of resource commitment (Lahiri et al. 2020) as well as major risks and difficulties related to unexperienced localities and higher managerial capabilities (Fernández and Nieto 2005).

Recent studies have found that family businesses differ from their counterparts in promoting and implementing internationalization strategies because of the heterogeneity of these firms and the owners' control and influence (Arregle et al. 2012; Sciascia et al. 2012; Merino et al. 2015). Scholars have focused on the difficulties that family firms encounter when deciding to follow internationalization strategies (Donckels and Fröhlich 1991) rather than how and when they choose to internationalize. Internationalization shows in family firms studies a sort of dilemma where scholars interpreted the decision to internationalize as a bet, where from one hand the firm may gain outcomes, and, on the other hand, it may reach losses both for the family and the business (Alessandri et al. 2018).

Today, the search for new foreign markets is becoming imperative, even for family firms, to face the increasing competition of the global market (Gallo and Pont 1996). Often, family managers prefer to focus on domestic markets, shying away from internationalization even if it means missing valuable growth opportunities and economic advantages (Fernández and Nieto 2006). Culture (Kibler et al. 2019), industry and technological environment (Broekaert et al. 2016), institutional and policy environment (Levie et al. 2014), market forces (Kotlar et al. 2014), and spatial conditions (Dehlen et al. 2014) seem to be the most influential drivers in internationalization opportunities for family businesses. In this regard, Bannò, Pisano, and Trento (2018) have identified three main scholarly perspectives. The first includes those who believe that the presence of the family in the firm has a positive impact on the path of internationalization of the business. The second underlines the existence of a negative relationship between family involvement and internationalization. The third highlights how some of the specific resources of family businesses can inhibit or sustain their propensity towards internationalization.

Recently, scholars have found that Total Quality Management (from here TQM) represents a

powerful way to compete in international markets (Valmohammadi and Roshanzamir 2015; Mehralian et al. 2016; Pantouvakis and Karakasnaki, 2017; Hilman et al. 2019; Shafiq et al. 2019).

As family firms appear to be pervaded by a continue tension towards the excellence (Vallejo 2009), and quality is considered as a one of the main family firm values (Aronoff 2004), probably TQM may provide good opportunities for family firm internationalization. To our knowledge, studies in this sense appear to be limited (Kuratko et al. 2001) and deserve more scholarly attention to investigate how family firms' quality is enhanced and how TQM philosophy embraces the entire family firm strategy, leading towards successful internationalization strategies. In other words, there is room for more studies that investigate the role of TQM in family business internationalization (Abrunhosa and Sá 2008; Corredor and Goni 2011; Camisón and Puig-Denia 2020). Aiming to fill this gap, answering the recent call launched by many scholars (Wright and Kellermanns 2011; Boohene 2018; Etemad 2019; Debellis et al. 2020) in intensifying the research on the internationalization of small and medium family firms, this study, building on the Resource Based View theory, problematizes the topic (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) positing that family businesses possess unique resources that can sustain internationalization, and tries to answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: "Is TQM a driver to promote internationalization for small and medium family businesses?"

And, if yes,

RQ2: "Which are the main dimensions of TQM that spur small and medium family firms to conceive internationalization strategies?"

To find an enlightening and interesting answer to the mentioned research questions, this study analyzes a revelatory case study of a family business that operates in the bottled water sector and that have received many international awards for its product. Findings show interesting insights and scholarly implications are threefold. First, the study contributes to the Resource-Based View theory by introducing the long-term vision as a strategic resource able to activate a loop between TQM and family business internationalization success. Second, results contribute to TQM literature, highlighting that it represents a driver to internationalize, and, from a long-term perspective, its enhancement is encouraged by internationalization. Third, findings contribute to Family Business studies, underlining the relevance done of owners on professionalization as a strategic resource to ensure excellence, and obtain success in overseas markets. For practitioners, the proposed case study represents a best practice and can stimulate other entrepreneurs and consultants to invest in TQM to thrive internationalization strategies. Finally, the main drawbacks open new streams of research and suggest further studies.

Theoretical background

Quality and TQM in family businesses

Due to the wide range and perspectives of the concept of quality management, it is difficult to reach a consensus on its definition (Idris and Zairi 2006). In a broad sense, the concept of quality over crosses the focus on physical and technical features of products and services, by including a systematic way to lead the firm to be competitive and able to outperform (Valdez-de la Rosa et al. 2020; Yu et al. 2020). In this view, it enriches its sense and becomes a managerial philosophy called TQM (Martínez-Lorente et al. 1998; Aquilani et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2020). Following Miller (1996), this study considers TQM as an ongoing process whereby managers stimulate who operates in the firm to perform and achieve results that meet or exceed internal and external stakeholder's expectations.

TQM provides competitive advantages, especially for small family firms (Upton et al. 2001), even if studies in this sense appear to be scant (Kuratko et al. 2001) and principally practice-oriented (Danes et al. 2008). Family-owned firms, here defined as those businesses fully owned and managed by members of the founding family, with the clear intention to pass the firm to their offspring, and perceive the business to be permeated by family beliefs and values (Aronoff 2004), seem to be in a privileged position to manage quality. This advantaged situation derives from several family business features, like as the only characters and resources (Danes et al. 2008), the values (Aronoff 2004), the innate tension towards the excellence (Vallejo 2009), the role of the owner (Arsić et al. 2018), the ability to build long-lasting relationships with customers (Dessi and Floris 2010) (Dessi et al. 2014). For these reasons, family businesses are a suitable scenario to investigate how quality is enhanced and how TQM philosophy embraces the entire family firm strategy.

Tan (2013) has proposed a structural model to investigate the relationship between TQM constructs and family business organizational performance. The author has identified six constructs, namely, leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, human resource management, process management, and information analysis. These constructs appear to have an impact on organizational performance, which will be reflected or measured through employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, product quality, and strategic business performance. Building on the mentioned model, Tan and colleagues (Tan et al. 2015) have argued that as the family-owned business is an entity cannot do without the influence of family element and interact with the resources and constraints in business, the injection of TQM practices to enhance the family-owned business performance would provide a further avenue for improving the family-owned business performance. In this regard, many scholars have highlighted that family businesses create a high level of commitment of family

and non-family employees (Vallejo 2009; Mahto et al. 2020), spreading quality within the whole of the firm and pursuing organizational goals (Zahra et al. 2008). Moreover, strategic planning in family businesses is often informal, unstructured, flexible, and stimulates the spread of an organizational culture based on quality (Fernández and Nieto 2006). In addition, family businesses experience strong relationships, known as “family capital”, that develop trust and cooperation among firm members (Hoffman et al. 2006). Therefore, because of the name of the family is strongly linked to the brand of the firm, family-owners operate following reliability, trust, reputation, and product quality (Binz Astrachan et al. 2019). As a result of this care, Carrigan and Buckley (2008) suggest that customers show a higher expectation of the product quality of a family business than a non-family counterpart. In the same line also Binz Astrachan and Botero (2018) underline the role of the family history, identity, and values in promoting quality to achieve competitive advantages and obtaining a positive external image. More in detail, intangible assets (Menéndez-Requejo 2005) and family business values (Mahto et al. 2020) sound to achieve high quality and positive performance (Tàpies and Moya, 2012), as the basis to support a long-term vision (Zahra et al. 2008), and to guarantee longevity (Tàpies and Moya 2012). Especially this last family business aspect, that is, the long-term vision, is in line with the application of TQM practices that require patience and a long-time to experience benefits and positive results (Allen et al. 2018). Because of the mentioned intrinsic resources of family businesses, these intuitively show a propensity towards soft rather than hard dimensions of TQM. Soft dimensions are related to management perceptions, human aspects, customer focus, employee relations, and leadership (Dahlgaard-Park 2012; Leavengood et al. 2014). Hard dimensions refer to tools, techniques, and technical aspects (Vouzaz and Psychogios 2007), and include process management, and product/service design (Imran et al. 2017). In this scenario, family businesses show a sort of inborn possession of soft dimensions, rather than hard dimensions, even if they experience difficulties concerning the professionalization of the firm members. In fact, “professionalization is a critical family firm strategic behavior to acquire and accumulate professional norms by the functions of non-family professionals as well as family members” (Fang et al. 2012), and often is low in family businesses and create an obstacle to pursue positive performance (Faghfoury et al. 2015). On the opposite side, non-family firms appear to be more attentive to enhance hard rather than soft dimensions of TQM (Douglas et al. 2015).

TQM and Internationalization in family businesses

Recent studies have argued that TQM is an effective way to compete in international markets (Valmohammadi and Roshanzamir 2015; Mehralian et al. 2016; Pantouvakis and Karakasnaki, 2017; Hilman et al. 2019; Shafiq et al. 2019). Internationalization concerns the relationships

between the firm and its international environment, derives its origin from the development and utilization process of the personnel's cognitive and attitudinal readiness and is concretely manifested in the development and utilization process of different international activities, primarily inward, outward and cooperative operations (Pisani et al. 2018). Intuitively, TQM can sustain internationalization strategies (Jiménez-Jiménez et al. 2015). As underlined in the previous section, family businesses show an intrinsic ability in mobilizing soft dimensions of TQM, thanks to their particular essence. At the same time, however, this unique ability is not adequately valorized to expand the firm in foreign markets. Often, family-owned firms prefer to operate in the domestic market, as a result of their strong local embeddedness (Bird and Wennberg, 2014) and of a lack of professionalization (Allen et al. 2018). Compared with non-family counterparts, family firms have a different propensity towards risky initiatives, tend to pursue non-financial goals by nurturing socio-emotional wealth, and show peculiarities in investment preferences (De Massis et al., 2015; Memili et al., 2018), especially when small-sized and characterized by resource-constrained (Lahiri, Mukherjee and Peng 2020). In addition, family owner-managers appear to be conservative and perceive internationalization as a strategy that could negatively affect family business control, family wealth, family reputation, and generate family conflicts (Arregle et al., 2012; Carney et al., 2015). Moreover, the literature on family firm internationalization shows that the heterogeneity of family firms and the owners' control and influence affects internationalization decisions (Arregle et al. 2012; Sciascia et al. 2012; Pukall and Calabrò, 2014). Offering goods and services outside the home country provides fruitful growth opportunities for family firms (Claver et al. 2009); however, rather than adopting aggressive strategies in many markets, family business owners prefer to maximize revenues in a limited number of foreign markets (Zahra 2003). This effort shows contrasting results; sometimes the business owners underestimate the effects of the market, especially if family firms are strictly embedded in their local contexts, from which they capture culture (Hayton et al. 2002), and obtain legitimacy (Kibler et al. 2014). In the light of these inconsistent results, some scholars (Boohene 2018; Etemad 2019) suggest to investigate family business internationalization, to identify the main drivers that can help these firms to overcome their local boundaries. The strategy tripod framework, developed by Lahiri, Mukherjee and Peng (2020), describes small family firms' internationalization behaviors synthesizing an interesting review of the literature that identifies different factors coming from the resource-based factors, institutional theory, and industrial-based factor.

Graves and Shan (2014), comparing family and non-family businesses, have noted that family-owned firms lack managerial abilities and adopt TQM practices less than their non-family counterparts. Therefore, the authors have noted "the awareness that family businesses can grow internationally despite having less managerial capabilities when compared to their non-family

counterparts should encourage greater effort by family businesses to overcome any real or perceived barriers to commence international activities” (Graves and Shan 2014). This suggests that family firms can obtain positive results in international markets by identifying and isolating their unique resources to gain international opportunities. In this sense, the intrinsic quality proclivity is particularly suitable to be leveraged (Amorós et al. 2016; Verbeke et al. 2020). Pukall and Calabrò (2014) have proposed that the family firm's history can play a relevant role in the overseas markets Reputation, trust, and reliability that characterized family firms are fundamental in international markets and allow them to recognize their brand and name as a warranty of quality (Pukall and Calabrò 2014). Lages and colleagues (2009) underlined that obtaining success in international markets requires increasing attention to TQM. However, family business scholars have paid little attention to the investigation of TQM and studies in this sense are very few. The most relevant is that of Ellington, Jones, and Deane (1996), which have studied the adoption of TQM practices in family-owned businesses, founding that family businesses are less inclined than non-family counterparts to adopt rigid TQM practices (Guldbrandsen, 2005). However, in the same period, Dunn (1996) sustained that the intense effort to maintain the family reputation stimulate family firms to create excellent and quality products. Recently, scholars have found that quality represents a value for family-owned firms that, due to the intent of producing an excellent product respectful of the family name, use excellent raw materials and method of production that exalts this excellence (Vallone and Iannone, 2020).

Similarly, also other scholars sustain that family firms tend to the excellence in terms of products (Dettori, Floris, Dessì, 2020) and customer relationships (Dessì and Floris, 2010). In this more recent views, family firms differ from non-family businesses regarding their distinctive propensity towards quality, considered in a broad sense, with specific reference to long-term human relationships that embrace ties with family members, employees, customers, and suppliers (Miller et al. 2008). This relationship capability is appreciated in international markets and generates cooperation with international partners by sharing and spreading firm values and allowing better known foreign markets (Lages et al. 2009). Graves and Shan (2014) have highlighted that while family firms lack in hard dimensions of TQM, they possess good opportunities to internationalize thanks to their conglomerate of unique resources that can be included in the soft dimensions of TQM.

This study, based on the assumption that family firms' ability to expand internationally successfully is strictly related to having the capability to configure firm-specific resources to compete in the international marketplace, builds on the Resource-Based View theory (Barney 1991).

Resource-Based View approach to the study of TQM and Internationalization in family businesses

Several studies focused on internationalization are built on the assumptions of the Resource-Based View (RBV) with knowledge being a resource for capability creation and underline that, to successfully compete in foreign markets, family firms need an adequate stock of resources and human abilities (Graves and Shan 2014). Moreover, RBV allows examining not only how the firm's resources affect its proclivity to internationalize, but also which of them can play the most relevant role, concurring to achieve better performance results (Golovko and Valentini 2011; Jiang et al. 2020). This perspective has also been followed in TQM studies, to find out how and which distinctive resources are prone to stimulate TQM practices and how and which specific firm's resources that arise from the introduction of TQM have effects on firm performance (Tena et al. 2001; Silva et al. 2014). From the RBV perspective, TQM is an inimitable resource (Powell 1995) that generates competitive advantages for its adopters (Savolainen 2000).

By following this approach, this study posits that the family firm's ability to expand internationally successfully is related to the capacity in adopting TQM practices by selecting, isolating, and leveraging on the set of unique resources that family firms possess to compete in international marketplaces. This theoretical perspective allows verifying the extent to which TQM principles can be considered as a driver for family business internationalization and which are the dimensions of TQM that, more than others, can guarantee a family firm's success in overseas markets. Family-owned businesses show a higher possession of soft dimensions concerning the hard ones, mainly because of their lack of managerial competencies (Graves and Shan 2014), their scarce financial resources, and their strong resistance to involving external professionalisms (Graves and Thomas 2008). However, the RBV perspective sustains the relevance of other intangible resources that sounds as soft dimensions of TQM and that are based primarily on the relationship ability of family firms (Graves and Shan 2014).

Methodology

Utilising a case study research design, grounded on the RBV perspective, we investigate if TQM is a driver to promote internationalization for small and medium family businesses and we explore the main dimensions of TQM that spur small and medium family firms to conceive internationalization strategies.

Case studies, as a research strategy, "focus on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 534), and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin 2003, p. 98). The case-study approach was deemed as particularly

suitable to answer the problems posed in this research project on family business (Kotlar et al. 2014) because it allows to analyzed a contemporary phenomenon based on real-life contexts; the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly identifiable; and it is unique and revelatory (Yin 1994). Moreover, it's in line with Patton's suggestions (1990), that underline that the "logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton 1990). In addition, the selected small family firm can generate innovation and is representative, as described by Howorth, Rose and Hamilton (2009). Their owners can be labeled as "heroes", (Welter et al. 2017) as they manage an "everyday firm," characterized by a blooming heterogeneity and that operates under resource constraints and condition of adversity (Powell and Baker 2014; Bradley 2015), and they need to implement strategies to identify new markets.

Research context: the bottled water industry

Bottled water is becoming one of the fastest-growing markets in the beverage industry globally (Bii et al., 2019). This industry is characterized by the presence of a limited number of large firms that have the national authorizations to act.

The product, water, is necessary to satisfy a basic need. It is intrinsically poor and healthy, and for this reason, bottled water has to be preserved in its pureness, avoiding treatments. Business competition is based on promotion, image, and ability to propose the most endearing packaging to be preferred by customers, with great attention towards product quality and environmental sustainability. These last elements are stimulating the firms that operate in the water industry to concentrate their efforts in the green economy. To do this, firms are challenged to conceive and applied green innovations to improve the sustainability of packaging and other used materials. This is a critical point: plastic is the most used material for bottled water. Thus, communicating the firm's care towards sustainability becomes imperative to acquire the fidelity of responsible customers. In this regard, several firms have started to prepare their social balance to highlight their strategies and policies based on environment respect, waste reduction, energy saved, and carbon footprint.

Plant localization is a substantial barrier to expand the firm market and, thus, internationalizing. The plant has to be built near to the water sources; consequently, internationalization is possible only through export and not by production delocalization, as can happen for manufacturing and other industries. In other words, export represents the sole way to sell water overseas, and this inhibits the possibility to obtain cost advantages that generally production delocalization allows.

Other relevant aspects are the barriers to entry that exist in the market: firms have to possess

specific governmental authorizations to act and utilize water sources that are temporary to guarantee environment safeguard. Permissions need an annual fee that in some territories is reduced when firms are virtuous and pursue green policies (glass bottles), possess environmental certifications, and are located in disadvantaged and poor areas. More precisely, if firms are attentive towards social, economic, and environmental sustainability can obtain fee reductions.

In brief, the bottled water industry, characterized by the presence of a few large firms, shows difficulties for small and medium firms because of the competition and the specificity of the market and stimulating challenges for those that aim to internationalize their products.

The case study

The case study, A.L.B. S.p.a., is a small Italian family firm that operates in the bottled water sector. The firm, which details appear in Table I, was founded in 1979, when the founder decided to continue the tradition of his family, with his wife. His dream was creating a firm to pass from one generation to the others, able to produce unique bottled water that embodied the pureness and the healthiness of the water that flows from the pristine mountains of Sardinia, an Italian region. From 2005, the family firm is managed by the second generation, with a clear organizational structure and a firm culture based on shared family values. Passion, reliability, and quality of products, processes, and relationships are the most relevant aspects that inspire firm management. Stakeholder satisfaction, care for local expectations, attention towards customer needs, and employees emerge in each instant of the firm life.

The product is representative of the family firm, as a business strictly embedded in its local territory, respectful of tradition, and proud to be the ambassador of Sardinia around the world. In fact, in the last years, A.L.B. S.p.a. has started to internationalize its strategies with success in Europe and outside. The founder's mission was to become the first Sardinian firm in the water sector able to overcome the regional boundaries. From 2005, this goal has been achieved with the second generation. Now, the family firm sells its product in several international markets: England, France, Spain, Denmark, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, Principality of Monaco, Far East, Qatar, Emirates, and USA. Revenues are not in line with those of the leaders in the bottled water industries, but this has not inhibited its international expansion, thanks to the product quality and reputation. The family firm applies innovative technologies that perform over 100 daily checks of the water as it flows from the source, ensuring features of the water is always the same. Within the family firm, quality represents an imperative that permeates each business philosophy, strategy, and management that involves all people involved in the firm, under the indications of the Quality Manager, an individual outside the family. Total Quality directs towards production's procedures and processes, and customers and stakeholders care, as a strong orientation rooted in the ownership

willingness, and as a fundamental part of the company mission. In the company's management, the product, customers, the environment, and employees constitute the main reference that guides the execution of the various activities, focused on compliance with rigid and constantly updated procedures obtaining a standard-compliant product. This effort is evidenced in the firm's quality policy, according to which the firm undertakes to:

- always improve customer satisfaction;
- constantly improve the quality level of the products;
- train, involve and enhance the human resources necessary for the pursuit of company policies;
- keep the facilities in excellent conditions to ensure their proper functioning in obtaining safe products that meet the customer's requirements;
- use the best technologies available to ensure safety in the workplace and avoid environmental damage;
- improve their performance by reducing, in an economically sustainable way, any negative impact on the environment.

The product is made with state-of-the-art systems, systematically expanded and updated to meet the needs of a market that requires high and constant quality standards over time. The bottling lines are ultra-clean, with automatic washing and sterilization systems that guarantee high levels of hygiene and are part of a fully computerized production complex to ensure the traceability and controllability of all the operations performed.

The staff in charge of the plant, whose number changes during the periods of maximum production, is constantly updated on the methods of bottling and conservation and on the strict procedures to be observed in the various stages of production. The same seasonal workers who temporarily expand the workforce to cope with peak demand are placed in the workplace only after a training course. Employees generally represent a crucial resource for the organization. Most of them have been part of the company for more than 5 years, a circumstance that should facilitate a full understanding of the objectives and mission to be pursued.

All these elements are reflected in the characteristics of the output obtained, whose qualitative standards, already high in themselves for the properties of the input that is extracted from granite rocks that act as a natural filter, are checked through more than one hundred daily analyses carried out at the firm's laboratory.

The presence of an internal laboratory is not legally compulsory. Still, it represents a further element that is part of the Total Quality policy that is attentive to the reputational aspect of the product and its actions, as it testifies how the company, as an alternative to the simpler solution of commissioning such analyzes externally, is willing to make significant investments to directly manage and control such a delicate activity to maintain product standards and consumer safety.

It is also part of a general investment plan in Research & Development, aimed at introducing new products and searching for innovative solutions for existing ones and packaging. In this sense, several projects focus, for example, on monitoring the shelf-life of the product or on the study of effective methodologies to increase the maximum time within which the "defined quality" of the asset does not deteriorate, despite the stages of distribution, storage and display.

Thanks to the firm's TQM policies, over the years, the main products obtained many different certifications, such as the ISO 9001 (Quality System), the ISO 14001 (Environmental Quality), and the ISO 45001 (Safety). As a result, in 2012, the company earned a Certification of Excellence established by Certiquality. Moreover, from 2012, the family firm sold its product also through the online channel and a well-structured e-commerce platform. With this strategy, the firm has been recognized in Sardinia as the first mover in the online commerce of bottled water, and this decision represented the main innovation able to increase export. As regards the Italian market, the online channel is managed by a subsidiary of A.L.B S.p.a., Nuragheland Srl, through the site www.smeraldinashop.it. At the same time, for exports, the company has recently entered the Alibaba portal, which is a B2B sales site.

Nowadays, the bottled water of A.L.B. S.p.A., labeled "Smeraldina" because of the well-known Costa Smeralda, from which the brand name derives even if the place where the source of water originates is Tempio Pausania, a town about 60 km from the Costa Smeralda, is enormously appreciated all over the world. The product has won several international awards. Specifically, Smeraldina Water was twice ranked Gayot trusted guide to the good life as one of the top ten best mineral waters in the world. In 2019, it earned the Gold Medal as the "Best Tasting Water in the World" in the Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting Competition, and in 2020, it has reached the Silver Medal for the same award. Bottled from a single source, Monti di Deu, or Mountain of God of Sardinia, the natural artesian water beat out more than 110 entries. Smeraldina is distributed worldwide to foodservice and retail operations offering glass-bottled, PET product, Tetrapak, and private label lines of product. Currently, they are the only Italian producers to make the 0.5-liter tetrapak package called "Paper Water". Furthermore, as regards the glass line, "Smeraldina Griffe" was recently launched on the market, a product of the highest level designed for customers who are attentive to quality, image, and design.

Consequently, A.L.B. S.p.A represents an impressive small family firm that, encompassing the described difficulties of the bottled water industry, has affirmed itself in international markets by leveraging on the quality of the product, as confirmed by experts worldwide. Stimulated by this fascinating case, this study investigates how TQM influences internationalization and which dimensions of TQM are particularly effective to guarantee successful internationalization strategies for small and medium family businesses that, as underlined in literature, lack in professionalization.

--- Table 1 around here ---

Data collection

Multiple data collection methods provide triangulation of the evidence and strengthen the findings (Eisenhardt 1989; Creswell and Miller 2000). To achieve this, the following data collection techniques were used: a) semi-structured interviews b) archival data from both internal and external organizational sources c) business publications d) official websites, corporate materials and other documents related to the bottled water industry, to understand the specificity of the market and the firms' behavior. Table 2 presents details of these sources and how they were used in our data analysis.

--- Table 2 around here ---

In addition, several informal follow-ups by e-mail and telephone were conducted, and because of the exploratory nature of this study, additional interviews were administered since when theoretical saturation was reached (Walsh and Bartunek 2011; Yin 2013). Finally, direct observations inside the firm helped to clarify some unclear issues related to the production process and products. Interviews and conversations were registered and transcribed. Ethical aspects were taken into consideration and respected throughout the implementation of the study, with the filling of a document for the consent. Moreover, the goal of the research was clearly expressed and presented to the respondents before proceeding with the filling of the questionnaire. Anonymity was guaranteed, and authorization was obtained to gather data and to use the collected information for scientific and academic purposes. These data allowed us to know the history of the family firm, the adopted strategies, and the role that TQM shows on the internationalization perspective. Throughout the process, triangulation with other sources and comparisons of interviewees helped us to refine and strengthen our interpretations (Yin 1994).

Data analysis

As underlined, this study is carried out through an in-depth analysis of a single case study. To analyze our data, this study has applied a two-step process (Mayring 2010). The first step was to analyze the in-depth interviews with the family owner-manager, representative of the second generation. The interviews were conducted in person, following an interview protocol (Morris 2018) that avoided technical terms and was intended to stimulate the respondent to freely discuss

his experience and personal viewpoint about the primary competitive resources that characterize the firm's success in international markets.

Three independent coders first read the transcription of the interviews (about 60 pages) and further materials and look over them for emergent themes that seemed to be relevant in explaining family firm internationalization and TQM. Moreover, the three coders coded any statements referring to TQM and internationalization success. These constructs were iteratively adapted throughout the entire data analysis process. Regarding TQM, family owner's responses were the most important sources to understand how TQM dimensions stimulate successful internationalization strategies. More specifically, the three readers independently read and coded the interview transcripts concerning the statements indicating TQM practices and dimensions, and internationalization. Following the TQM literature, the readers distinguished between soft and hard dimensions, to understand the family owner's perception about which dimensions, more than the others, sustained successful internationalization.

Then, in the second step, this flow of information was mirrored by informal conversations with employees, direct observations, press releases, and other business documents. During this analysis, the coders identified "relationships", "professionalization", and "long-term vision" as constructs that appeared to be important in linking TQM and family firm internationalization.

Findings

TQM proclivity and attention are clearly expressed already by the mission declared in the official website of the firm: "*Collaborate seriously and reliably, to provide customers with the products required, safe, with high-quality standards, in the total respect for the environment and the health and safety of its workers*". Qualitative data have confirmed this assumption and allowed framing the extent to which TQM affects the family firm's success in international markets.

The main findings of the large amount of qualitative data collected can be synthesized in three main key points: "relationships", "professionalization", and "long-term vision". To clarify these constructs, several quotes have been extrapolated and transcribed word-to-word to preserve what family owners said. In the following, exemplary evidence of findings is presented.

Relationships

The first observation was that relationships play a fundamental role in ensuring high-quality in the whole of the firm lifecycle. The family owner has underlined that relationships are crucial within its family firm, especially in terms of customer care, management-employees ties, and relationships with the context (local and international).

With reference to the first, the owner has revealed that TQM practices implement customer satisfaction and retention and, contemporarily, motivate employees, as the following quote illustrated:

“Our TQM policies allow us to improve product quality, enhance customer satisfaction, motivate employees, assure safety in the workplace, guarantee a stimulating organizational climate, adopt innovation and technologies, promote sustainability, and pursue increasing performance”.

Relationships with stakeholders are also handled in the plant. The several certifications (ISO 9001, ISO 14001, OHSAS 18001, Certifications of Excellence, and BRC, FDA, and Kosher certifications) are hung on the wall of the plant entrance, as a sort of business card to show the attention that the firm has towards quality and towards foreign customers. With this regard, the family owner has underlined:

“Especially in international markets, a firm must have straight answers for customer needs. Each customer is a great value for us, and we have to ensure high-quality in terms of product, but also in terms of relationships. (...) this is particularly challenging and stimulating, to grow and overcome our limits. Quality is the key to obtain success abroad, and we have to improve it with continuous efforts to create strong networks with customers. Our certifications, in this sense, help us in creating these strong relationships, especially with foreign customers and, in a certain sense, act as glue within our family firm because they are the result of collective efforts that involve managers and employees”.

This quality orientation requires a culture that considers customers at the core of the firm processes as underlined by the informant: *“(...) details’ attention is relevant and allows us to put customers at the focal point of our firm. (...) product and process quality are fundamental to retain loyal customers and capture new ones, above all in international markets.”.* Thanks to this evident attention *“(...) our firm has created long and lasting relationships with our customers. (...) The network is fundamental to survive in international markets, and we invest many efforts to maintain and enlarge it”.*

Therefore, building positive employee relationships is a further dimension of TQM. Employees’ care is taken into account and ensured because they are considered as the most relevant resources within the firm, as emerged from the following exemplary quote:

“(...) our employees are our force, our richness, our driver. Thanks to them, quality is ensured during the entire firm life because of their commitment and their competences. We thank them for their irreplaceable role in our family firm.”

Finally, special attention is recognized in firm-contexts relations. The owner said *“(...) our firm is of its stakeholders and, firstly, of the territories in which we operate. Our product owes its high quality to the purity of the environment in which is embedded; therefore, we have great*

responsibilities towards our territory that represents our overseas success". To ensure this attention, the firm promotes actions of social responsibilities as sponsorships, philanthropic initiatives, and others, in the local and international markets. *"We believe that these are important initiatives to demonstrate our interest in preserving social, economic, and environmental sustainability. (...) this represents a strengthening of our tie with our territories"*.

Based on the observed pattern, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Positive relationships between the family firm and customer, employees, and local territory ensure high standards of quality and, thus, contribute to promoting and enhancing TQM practices.

Professionalization

The second observation was related to professionalization. The family owner spent more time describing how professionalization is essential for the firm TQM policies and how they invest in technology, especially in green technologies, to ensure product excellence.

About employees' professionalization, this aspect has emerged from several quotes, one of them is the following:

"(...) employees are our main resources, and they share our vision and our mission. We invest in positive relations with them by promoting continuous refresher courses on the most current bottling and conservation methods, as well as on rigorous procedures to respect during the production process".

The same treatment is reserved for seasonal workers that *"temporarily expand the staff to cope with peaks in demand, and they are inserted into the working context only after a training course during which they are instructed on the procedures to follow"*. As underlined, the firm valorizes both stable and seasonal employees, considered as crucial for firm success. Then the long and lasting presence within the firms does not represent a discriminant for professionalization.

Therefore, professionalization appeared strictly linked to internationalization, as clarified by the following quote:

"(...) professionalization is basic to compete in our markets, especially in international markets, where we have to be able to ensure a high standard of quality and then we have to possess the best employees and guarantee them adequate training and courses."

In addition, the family owner has shown his pride in the firm laboratory that ensures enhancement and improvement in professionalization and quality attention. The following quote was particularly exemplary:

"We possess an innovative laboratory for our analysis. For law, it is not compulsory, but for us, it represents an additional element in our TQM policies that ensures at least 100 internal control of the product and positively affects our reputation in international markets because

it is a warranty of reliability and quality”.

The laboratory is part of a *“large plan of R&D, focused on the constant introduction of new products and the search for innovative solutions for packaging and shelf-life of the product”.*

Finally, the owner has highlighted the vital link between professionalization and technology adoption. This concept has emerged from the following quote:

“(...) the high-level of employee professionalization opens new doors towards technology usage. (...) technology and green innovation are relevant to ensure high-quality standards of our products. These are realized with high-tech plants, systematically improved, and upgraded to better answer to the increasing market requirements. Our lines of bottling are ultraclean, with an automatic sterilization system that ensures a high level of clean and monitoring. Monitoring and verifying of these processes need a strong effort of employees that have to be adequately professionalized”.

Consequently, we propose the following:

Proposition 2: Professionalization of employees and technology adoption are fundamental to assure high standards of quality and, thus, contribute to promoting and enhancing TQM practices.

Long-term vision

The third element that has emerged was a long-term vision. This observation was particularly interesting because it has spotlighted on TQM and internationalization as keys to surviving successfully across generations. More in detail, internationalization has been perceived as an outcome of TQM practices and, at the same time, represents the central stimulus to improve the same TQM practices to obtain success in international markets from a long-term perspective. In this sense, the family owner explained:

“(...) how quality can be guarantee overtime? Simply... by looking for more and more high quality. International markets, in this sense, are a strong stimulus: entry is difficult and requires high quality, but staying means improving this quality and continuously tending towards excellence. (...) internationalization is a fascinating challenge, a work in progress that helps firms to grow and improve product quality in a sort of virtuous circle.”

The goal has been clearly defined: enduring in international markets by enhancing quality, as a way to survive over time and guarantee increasing standards of quality. In other words, if the owner has perceived TQM as a sort of requirement for internationalization, this last represents a further incentive to improve TQM, and this concept emerges from the following quotes:

“(...) quality calls increasing quality, and international customers are very demanding. (...) consequently, we have to assure our excellence”.

“(...) when we decided to offer our product in international markets; we immediately analyzed the quality of both the product and the process used. We have undoubtedly

improved many processes, standardized some practices, and managed to achieve a good result. After entering the international markets, we immediately understood that the standard of quality, although adequate, represented a good starting point, indeed not a destination. Hence our orientation towards a continuous quality policy, which aims at excellence, to confirm and, above all, increase our presence in foreign markets also for the future”.

In a few words, an interesting detail emerged from the interview with the owner, namely has been that TQM and internationalization become the cause and effect of the same process in the long term. Moreover, this ongoing process has allowed the firm to

“increase the quality of packaging, by carrying out in-depth research to reduce carbon footprint and introducing other materials as Tetrapack and glass bottle. (...) in all of our markets, locally and internationally, green policies are fundamental, and, for us, being sustainable is a must that, in part, is present in our TQM practices and in the other part, is leveraged by internationalization. (...) glass line is very successful in international markets.”.

Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: TQM is a driver to pursue successful internationalization strategies.

Proposition 4: In a long-term perspective, TQM and internationalization influence each other.

Discussion and conclusion

From the interviews, three primary resources have emerged: relationships, professionalization, and long-term vision. These resources are defined as soft dimensions of TQM (Imran et al. 2017). This means that soft dimensions are considered as strategic for family owners and able to ensure TQM practices and then, drivers for successful internationalization strategies. These findings can be summarized in the following interpretive model, with a set of propositions (Fig. 1).

--- Figure 1 around here ---

The model explains how TQM influences internationalization. Relationships and professionalization enhance TQM, as the primary strategic resources (P1 e P2). TQM, based above all on the mentioned resources, stimulates successful internationalization (P3). In the long-term perspective, that is, the third strategic resource of the family firm, TQM, and internationalization influence each other, by increasing quality and contemporarily, by increasing the possibility to obtain success in overseas markets (P4).

This model evidence that TQM is a driver to promote internationalization for small and medium family businesses (**RQ1**), and the main dimensions of TQM on which internationalization

strategies are conceived and implemented are mainly soft dimensions and, specifically, are relationships, professionalization, and long-term vision (**RQ2**).

The novelty of this study is the proposed model that allowed framing the main findings, which have revealed exciting insights that extend previous studies on TQM and internationalization in family businesses.

Results present several implications and contributions for scholars and practitioners.

Scholarly implications are threefold. First, findings contribute to the Resource-Based View theory by introducing the long-term vision as a strategic resource able to activate a loop between Total Quality Management and internationalization success. Previous studies have underlined that to obtain success in international markets, family firms need an adequate stock of resources and human abilities (Graves and Shan 2014). Contemporarily, other studies have analyzed how and which specific firm's resources that arise from the introduction of TQM have effects on firm performance (Tena et al. 2001; Silva et al. 2014). Long-term vision, in this study, represents an intangible resource of family businesses that acts as a continuous enhancement of quality to survive in foreign markets. Thus, managing following a long-term perspective consists of a strategic and inimitable resource that spurs firms to outperform, by building on an increasing quality to be preferred in overseas markets. Finally, findings corroborate previous studies by noting that family businesses pay particular attention to soft resources, like relationships, to build their success overseas (Graves and Thomas 2008), but also invest in other unique resources, as professionalization and long-term orientation.

Second, results contribute to TQM literature, highlighting that it represents a driver to internationalize, and, from a long-term perspective, its improvement is spurred by internationalization. This last, in other words, becomes a stimulus to pursue a higher level of quality to stay successfully in foreign markets. In the long run, TQM and internationalization trigger a mutual feeding mechanism, creating a sort of loop that generates positive effects in both and, consequently, making an organizational and managerial context that tends to excellence to survive over time also in international markets. Moreover, being long-term orientation a specific element of family-run firms (Zahra et al. 2008) that guarantee their longevity (Tàpies and Moya 2012), this study showed contradictory findings with reference to previous studies that sustain that family businesses are less prone to adopt TQM practices than their counterparts (Graves and Thomas 2008). The case here discussed has shown that family firms are in a privileged position to adopt TQM practice, especially as a result of their long-term vision that is a practical resource to follow TQM practices, because these require patience and a long-time to experience benefits and positive results (Corredor and Goni 2011).

Third, findings contribute to Family Business studies, underlining the relevance done of owners

on professionalization as a strategic resource to ensure excellence, and obtain success in overseas markets. These results highlighted a contradiction to what emerges in the literature. Previous studies have argued that family firms lack in professionalization (Fang et al. 2012), with negative results on international performance (Faghfour et al. 2015) and pay more attention to soft rather than hard dimensions of TQM (Douglas et al. 2015). Findings have shown that the analyzed family business invests in employee professionalization, considered as one of the three most relevant resources that allow operating with high-quality in international markets. Moreover, technology and R&D are taken into account to ensure increasing quality. The proposed case study, in other words, has highlighted that family businesses may have the same opportunities as their counterparts, in terms of professionalization, by investing in employee training. This aspect, mainly critical, deserves more attention and investment to assure success in international markets.

For practitioners, this study synthesizes the best practice, able to stimulate other entrepreneurs and consultants to invest in Total Quality Management to thrive internationalization strategies. Findings provide an opportunity for critical reflection about false myths that describe family businesses as those that experience less growth than the non-family counterparts do, especially in foreign markets. This thought depends on the fact that sometimes the focus on human elements, necessary to ensure an equilibrium of the intertwined business/family systems, leads to making choices that prevent the development of all those practices and procedures that engage formal structures and managerial skills. The case analyzed, on the other hand, highlights the ability to jointly channel attention towards soft and hard dimensions, ensuring the maintenance of the family-business balance, with growth prospects in international markets through adherence to TQM principles.

Notwithstanding the mentioned implications and contributions, this study is not exempt from some limitations, which, however, may represent opportunities for further future studies.

The main drawback is related to the fact that the proposed model has derived from one single case study. However, as this is a pilot study, future researchers could be oriented to enlarge the sample, test the proposition, identify measurable variables, and calculate indexes. Moreover, having involved only the owner-managers could appear a limit, even if they are the leading decision-makers. They are advocated to make strategic decisions and trait managerial behavior. However, further studies could be focused on identifying a match (or mismatch) between owners' and employees' perceptions by engaging them in a survey through questionnaires and subsequent statistical analysis. Therefore, future studies could be oriented to analyze other cases in different settings, such as various industries and countries, to capture the relevance of the context in which family firms are embedded. Finally, the same study can be repeated at other times, to investigate the role of different events that can happen during the family firm lifecycle and that, often, derive from

the family dynamic.

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Table 1: Firm details

Sector	Year of foundation	Generation	N. of Family owner-managers	Revenue (Euros)	Number of Employees	Italian Market	International Market
Bottled water	1979	2nd	5	13 mln	36	95%	5%

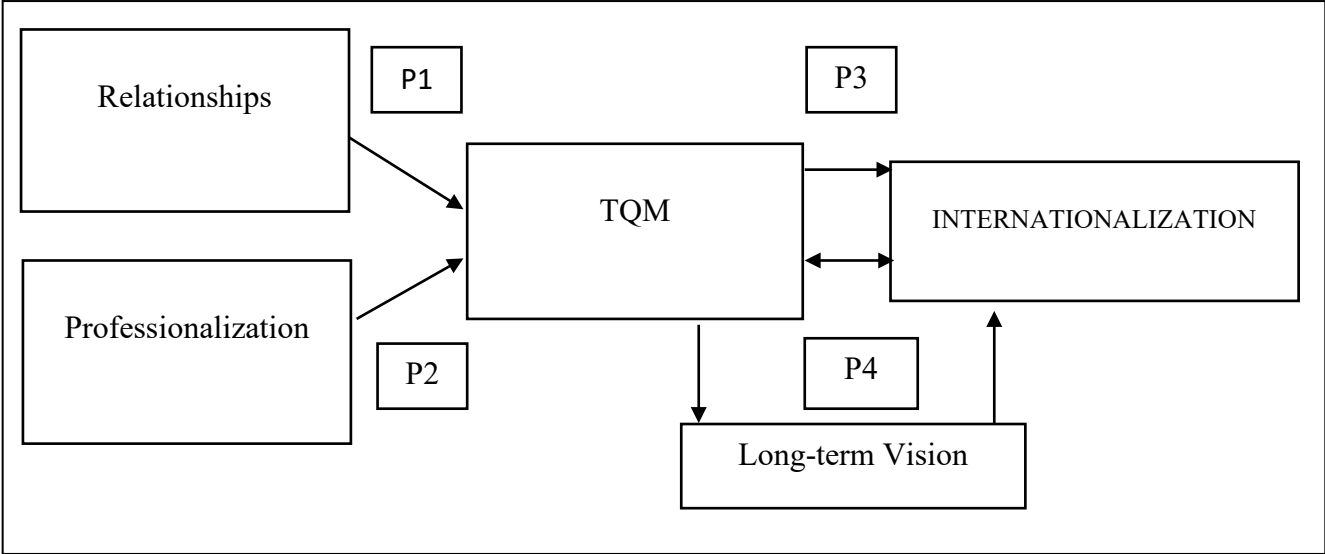
Source: Authors' Elaboration

Table 2: Data sources and use

Source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Interview and informal conversations	Summer 2019 Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 family owner-manager • 2 family members Informal conversations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 employees Interviews were registered and transcribed for a total of 60 pages.	Gather information regarding the family firm. Understand the history of the case-study. Gather data about the internationalization and the main dimensions of TQM of family firm.
Archival data	Internal and external organizational sources	Understand the real-life context of family firm.
Business publications	Sustainability reports	Triangulate facts
Official websites, corporate materials and other documents related to the bottled water industry	Press articles	Understand the specificity of the market and the firms' behavior

Source: Authors' Elaboration

Fig. 1: The Interpretive Model



Source: Authors' Elaboration