The Strategic Realignment of Paradoxical Family and Business Goals in Family Business: A Rhetorical History Perspective

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Abstract

Family firms are paradoxical by nature due to the interplay of two distinct goal systems: the family and the firm. These systems involve nested tensions that can create apparent paradoxes over time. Taking a rhetorical history lens, we explore how family firms can dynamically produce temporal equilibria between goal systems through the strategic use of history. Empirically, we investigate the emergence and development of two apparent paradoxes unfolding through the history of the growth of Alpha, an Italian family firm in the packaging industry. Our findings suggest that rhetorical history can alleviate the tensions emergent from the paradoxical goal systems of family businesses. Our research provides a unique contribution by revealing the emergence and agentic process of the co-construction of rhetorical history, which involves multiple agencies from both family and non-family employees. Moreover, such co-created rhetorical history can dynamically produce temporal equilibria in family business's persistent paradoxical goal systems.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Family firms are among the oldest surviving organizations in the world (Ciravegna et al., 2020). This makes family businesses particularly history-dense organizations (Colli & Rose, 2003), unique due to the interplay of family and business goal systems that might be aligned or conflicting (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013), thus, resulting in a persistent paradox (McAdam et al., 2020). To survive and prosper across generations, family firms, like their non-family counterparts, must evolve and constantly reconfigure their resources and capabilities to cope with environmental changes (King et al., 2022; Bowman & Singh, 1993; Chua et al., 2012; Daspit et al., 2018; Steen & Welch, 2006). However, family firms show unique "competing logics of 'money' and 'heart' in tandem" (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2018, p. 1392). These become particularly relevant with strategic decisions, such as acquisitions or initial public offerings (IPOs), where the business sphere affects the family sphere or vice versa (Chrisman and Patel, 2012; Chua et al., 2018; Gomez- Mejia et al., 2001, 2003, 2007; Howorth et al., 2016). For example, while restructuring might contribute to the firm's evolution and its long-term economic wellbeing, it can stir relations between ownership (e.g., family involvement in the firm) and control (with the blurring of family and firm), harming socio-emotional wealth (SEW) (King et al., 2022).

However, maintaining control of daily operations (Chrisman et al., 2012; Chrisman & Patel, 2012), having less formalised HR policies (De Kok et al., 2006), and resistance towards professionalisation (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011) are attempts to maintain the family's SEW agenda. It is the importance of SEW, which consists of the emotional and affective endowments stemming from ownership and control of the business (Berone et al., 2012; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007), that triggers specific business practices within a family firm, such as risk-averse growth strategies (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). However, these behaviours might not necessarily be in line with a healthy economic agenda for the firm, resulting in a persistent paradox between family and business goal systems (Vardaman & Gondo, 2014). This paradox, and the nested tensions it implies (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013; Le and Bednarek 2017; Smith & Lewis 2011), can surface throughout the history of the family firm, in the form of apparent paradoxes.

As such, a key challenge for family firms is to manoeuvre through the competing and often conflicting logics of economic and SEW goals (McAdam et al., 2020; Vardaman & Gondo, 2014). This has far-reaching implications, as goals are a decisive driver of firm behaviour (Levenson et al., 2006; March & Sutton, 1997) and the paradoxical nature of family

businesses, involving a business and a family goal system, implies that these firms host an even broader range of, potentially conflicting, goal systems (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013). Family firms are history-dense organizations (Colli & Rose, 2003) and the paradox among goal systems is persistent but not static and evolves over time.

Building on the longstanding relationship "between history and what is now known as "organization studies"" (Üsdiken & Kipping, 2014, p. 33), recent research has started to historicize organisational research (Maclean et al., 2021) to develop a contextualised understanding of organisational dynamics and developments. Within this tradition, rhetorical history takes an interpretive lens and reveals history "as a combination of subjective and objective reality through which the past may be persuasively reinterpreted" (Maclean et al., 2016, p. 619) "to manage key stakeholders" (Suddaby et al., 2010: 157). More specifically, this interpretive view of history is more attuned to revealing the performative dimension of the act of narration (Suddaby et al., 2010, 2020), rather than focussing on immutable events of the past as facts (Popp & Fellman, 2017). In the context of family businesses, rhetorical history plays a crucial role as family businesses strategically narrate their histories to productively manage paradoxical family and business goal systems (Suddaby et al., 2020; Ge et al., 2022; Labaki et al., 2019).

In this paper, we understand history in its rhetorical form constituting a strategic resource that can be used and exploited (Suddaby et al., 2010; Smith & Simeone, 2017). Following this line of enquiry, our research aims to advance our understanding by investigating the underlying mechanisms linking family history to the strategic re-alignment of paradoxical goal systems in a period of profound changes. In particular, we aim to understand how the emergent tensions between family and business goals can be managed in a productive way when they come to surface in the form of apparent paradoxes. We investigate the firms' pluralistic goals and contradictory stakeholder expectations and objectives, and how key events are shuffling the dual-goal system of the family firm until these tensions dynamically produce a temporal state of equilibrium (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Le and Bednarek, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Empirically, we look at the paradox emerging from competing and conflicting goal systems of a thriving Italian family business (thereafter Alpha, a pseudonym) since 1969 and aim to understand *how can family businesses use rhetorical history to productively manage paradoxical goal systems between the family and the firm?*

For answering this research question, we draw on the history of Alpha, an Italian family firm in the third generation in the packaging industry. As one of the authors is related to the Alpha family, we were granted access to information resulting in rich data and exclusive insights into the family dynamics and the firm. We argue that Alpha is a relevant case for our rhetorical history analysis as Alpha has grown and transformed itself from a local firm to a player with international ambitions that professionalized over the years. Further, the history of Alpha contains various rare strategic events that shuffled the goal systems of the family and the firm. Our analysis builds on 23 interviews with family members, and non-family executives and middle managers conducted in 2021. This data is complemented by secondary data, including internal and public documentary materials, YouTube videos, and internal newspapers where the changing narratives materialize. Our analysis reveals how rhetorical history has been employed to productively manage the persistent paradox of family and business goal systems when it manifested. Over the period of our analysis, the nested tensions of the paradox came to surface twice, resulting in two apparent paradoxes – happy family vs. successful business, and a traditionally-managed family business vs. a professionalized firm. We find that the love of the family towards the company contributed to solving conflicts within the family. At the same time, the use of rhetorical history created a sense of family within the firm. Further, we show that rhetorical history can be used to rationalise or support conflicting family decisions or to justify the role of family members in the organisation in a period of professionalisation.

Our research makes important contributions to the literature combining family business research and history. First, rhetorical history is a source of competitive advantage "that can be shaped and manipulated to motivate, persuade, and frame action" (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 147). We find that rhetorical history is co-constructed and used by multiple agents such as family business decision makers, employees, and family members to dynamically produce an equilibrium between family and business goal systems. We show that rhetorical history acts as a sense-giving device helping individuals, by giving purposive meaning to events and developments and ultimately creating a narrative to alleviate nested tensions between family and business goal systems.

Second, we find that rhetorical history in a family business is the interwoven history of the firm and the family that spans generations. Previous research, for example, highlighted the role of rhetorical history in developing entrepreneurial legacy in family firms (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015), in reaching family firm homeostasis (e.g., Labaki et al., 2019), and in creating competitive advantages (Ge et al., 2022). Yet, family business research typically understands

the family as the agent for change, leaving the firm as a passive object in their relationship. Our research complements this line of enquiry by showing that rhetorical history acts as a glue - in a connected, relational, and malleable way - between the family and the business and constitutes an important frame for dynamically producing an equilibrium between paradoxical goal systems. This also emphasises that rhetorical history is not just a resource that can be employed by decision makers but rather matures through a dynamic process with multiple authors.

2. History in Family Business

While history has seen its renaissance in family business research only recently (e.g., Suddaby et al., 2021), history and organisation studies have a long-standing relationship (Üsdiken & Kipping, 2014; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014). This has resulted in a historical turn, an "epistemological shift" (Maclean et al, 2021), as well as a methodological one (Kipping et al., 2014), within management and organisation studies, namely historical organisation studies. It is widely accepted that such historical turn provides valuable insights, as it understands history not as "sliced into discrete moments" (Bryant & Hall, 2005, p. xxix), but as a dynamic process. As such, this body of research addresses the constraints of the common focus on contemporary dimensions of organisations (Maclean et al., 2016, 2017) to "generate historically informed theoretical narratives attentive to both disciplines" (Maclean et al., 2021:4), history and organisation studies.

Situated within this tradition, an interpretative view of history, encompassing rhetorical history, focuses "less on the immutable events of the past, and more on how those historical events are interpreted. In this view, managerial agency arises from how the past is narrated in the present, assuming thereby that the act of narration is highly agentic" (Maclean et al., 2016, p. 533). Rhetorical history is thus typically understood as a valuable and malleable resource for managers to shape the strategic direction of the firm, or a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders (Suddaby et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2011; Anteby & Molnar, 2012).

Investigating the history of long-lived businesses from a rhetorical history perspective offers profound and relevant scholarly insights (Wadahani et al., 2018). In the context of this research, rhetorical history offers a perspective on family businesses that goes beyond the analysis of unchangeable events (Suddaby et al., 2020) but aims to understand the strategic use of the past, which forms competitive advantages, identity and legitimization, or entrepreneurial attitudes (Labaki et al., 2019). Through a rhetorical history lens, researchers can grasp

narratives that act as "a social and rhetorical construction that can be shaped and manipulated to motivate, persuade, and frame action, both within and outside an organization" (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 147). As such, strategists and managers can use rhetorical history to manage internal (on culture and identity) and external (on legitimacy and authenticity) stakeholders of the firm (Foster et al., 2017). Understanding history from this lens allows to go beyond the past, but rather to focus on understanding the purpose, timing and contents of the history communicated (Foster et al., 2017).

In family firms, the interplay of a family and the business past creates a unique history that can be seen as a resource (Foster et al., 2017) potentially constituting a source of competitive advantage (Suddaby et al., 2021), contributing to family businesses' continuity and long-term success (Smith, 2014). For example, Schellong and colleagues (2019) found that by simply mentioning the family values, customers make positive judgements towards the business. Through in-depth research on the strategic statements of Japanese family businesses, Sasaki et al. (2019) found that they strategically narrate histories to impact and even reverse strategic directions. Ge and colleagues (2022) revealed that through scripted history a three-generation Chinese family restaurant in Manchester formed idiosyncratic sources of competitive advantages – including a broadened customer base, perceptions of longevity, and innovative activities – resulting in national fame. The strategic use of history is also found to influence core managerial issues in leadership (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020).

While research in family business started to reveal the potential of the strategic use of history, it is important to understand the inherent complexity of family and business goal systems, e.g., SEW and financial goals, creating a paradox. This paradox involves nested tensions that put firm survival and profitability at stake (Daspit et al., 2017), and often result in family businesses becoming battlefields where competing narratives of history are in constant negotiation for recognition (Hjorth & Dawson, 2016). For example, research emphasises the tensions between family goals like continuity in family leadership (Sharma et al., 1997), and the potential of using history to legitimize succession (Dalpiaz et al., 2014), or to align family and business goals (Ge et al., 2022).

Collectively, previous research provides resounding support for the vital role of rhetorical history in family business management and success. However, how rhetorical history can contribute to productively manage paradoxical goal systems between the family and the firm, remains largely unclear.

3. Paradoxical Family and Business Goal Systems

Firm goals are important as they determine organisational behaviour (Levenson et al., 2006; March & Sutton, 1997). However, an isolated perspective on strategic goals and decisions is not sufficient, as for example business restructuring is interrelated with other activities (Teerikangas & Coleman, 2020) and embedded in an organisational context (Rouzies et al., 2019). As such, firm goals interact with other activities and goals within and beyond an organisation. In family firms, goal setting and strategic decisions are an even more complex endeavour due to the dynamic interaction of family and business systems and the corresponding goals (Habbershon et al., 2003).

Family-centred goals in family businesses are often the result of the influence the family has on firms' decisions (Chrisman et al., 2012; Chua et al., 1999). As the family increases its presence in the company (with new members joining in or occupying positions of authority), family-centred goals become more salient (Cyert & March, 1963) and their adoption increasingly more complex (Chrisman et al., 2012; Chrisman et al., 2005). While in general family firms have greater stocks of social capital and slack financial resources that support an economic long-term survival (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Sirmon & Hitt, 2003; Tokarczyk et al., 2007), these resources also affect and interact with non-economic goals of the family firm such as SEW (Basco & Rodriguez, 2009; Chrisman et al., 2004; Gomez-Mejia et al, 2011; Stafford et al., 1999), constituting a paradox in goal systems. As such, the involvement of the family in the firm adds complexity to the management of the firm, as the dominant coalition of family members can implement their family goals as firm goals. Subtly, the family's values become part of the family business's culture, forming its uniqueness (Aronoff, 2004). As a result, family goals can have a strong imprint on the strategy (Chua et al., 1999), managerial attitudes and values, as well as resource allocation patterns (Sharma & Sharma, 2011). In cases of conflicts within the family or between different coalitions, or in cases of rare strategic events (such as acquisitions or an IPO) where the equilibrium of goal systems is shuffled, competing or conflicting goals (Gersick et al., 1997) might blur the strategic vision and direction of the firm (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Grote, 2003; Sorenson, 1999), with potentially dramatic consequences.

Simply, when ownership and management overlap with the family system, family businesses see the adoption of family-centred goals (Chrisman et al., 2012). Social interaction processes are thus the key to maintaining such goals in place, and to ironing out any emerging

resistance to the family coalition. For example, creating familial social interactions within the firm can enable organisational members to identify and/or support the family's interests and reinforce commitment towards family-centred goals (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013). In times of change, such as when succession is imminent (De Massis et al., 2008; Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004) or after an IPO, new stabilisations occur after a period of freezing and unfreezing of family and business goals during and after the event (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013). For this reason, events like IPOs, acquisitions and succession represent interesting historical moments for a firm and provide a context for further analysing the interactions between the family, the ownership, and the business systems (Habbershon et al., 2003; Steier et al., 2009). Understanding the interactions between the family, the ownership, and the business systems is key to productively manage paradoxical goal systems that often result in conflicts within organisations impacting organisational performance and commitment (e.g., Al Zalabani & Modi 2014; Colbert et al., 2008; Joshi et al., 2003; Kochan et al., 1976; Vancouver & Schmitt 1991; Violanti & Aron, 1993; Witt ,1998; Witt & Nye, 1992).

Combined, in cases where family- and business-related goals are aligned, they might have complementary effects, however, there is also evidence highlighting substituting effects on firm performance in cases tensions between different goal systems come to the fore (Chua et al., 2018; Martin & Gomez-Mejia, 2016) resulting in an apparent paradox. When considering the longevity of family firms, we need to recognise that goal conflicts are dynamic, might change, or alleviate tensions over time (Sharma & Sharma, 2011) in one sphere affecting the other one as well. For example, a family might resolve their internal goal conflicts which in turn might alleviate firm goal conflicts resulting in aligned goal systems by using rhetorical history. In what follows, we elaborate on the paradox of competing logics of family and business goals. By considering the dynamic and changing but persistent character of these paradoxical goal systems, we ask *how can family businesses use rhetorical history to productively manage paradoxical goal systems between the family and the firm?*

4. Case and Method

We focus on Alpha[1], an Italian family business operating in the packaging sector, due to the exclusive access and complex, yet highly successful, development of the family business. We

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[1] All data has been anonymised, including the name of the company.

recognise the history of the family and its relation to the business is far more intricated – and distinct – from the rhetorical history we focus on in this paper.

Our methodological approach is based on Kipping et al.'s (2014) approach to historical analysis. We identify texts, including written, video recorded and spoken words that trace the past of the company. These sources are not a direct observation of practices and are a fragmented and arbitrary source of evidence. However, they constitute important material to better understand how different actors actively produce narratives of the past to guide a future direction. Particularly, we gathered multiple sources aiming to understand different interpretations of the history of the company (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

Established in 1969, Alpha is a typical family business that involves multiple generations and has a sizable employee base. We interviewed 23 managers and decision makers of Alpha, including the CEO, and members of the C-suite. Interviews lasted on average 49 minutes and aimed at capturing the perceptions employees and members of the family have towards Alpha, perceptions of family businesses in general and of working for such type of organisation, the values, the growth trajectories, and goals of Alpha. Participants ranged in their experience within the organisation, with the eldest son of the founder joining as early as 1982, and the newest non-family member joining in March 2021, following the acquisition of his company by Alpha. Appendix A offers further details on the interview material. We were also given access to documentary material, of both public domain and internal to the organisation (see Appendix B) that range between December 2013 to November 2021. We analysed material relevant to answer our research question, and specifically: 11 YouTube videos of Alpha (see Appendix C for details), and five newspaper editions that circulated internally in the organisation, containing different news of the company. The following table summarizes the data used for the analysis.

----Insert table 1 about here----

This study draws on a grounded theory approach in the data reduction process (Gioia et al., 2013; Nag et al., 2007). The datasets were first coded separately, resulting in the data analysis structures in appendixes D and E. Overall, we identified 102 first-order codes in the interview data, and 64 in the supporting material. First-order codes were developed close to the data (Charmaz, 2006) and described actions such as explaining, perceiving, and identifying. For example, when participants discussed the necessity of eliminating some family dynamics in the business, we coded this in their own words, as "Getting rid of some family-related ways

of doing was essential for growth". Second, we synthesized first-order codes into second-order themes, describing patterns of actions, such as "associating growth to a historical shift in ways of working and decision-making". Third, we combined second-order themes into aggregate dimensions, identifying macro-areas of processes, such as "Growth entails a shift in goals and ways of achieving them", among others.

Given the depth of the data collected, not all macro areas of processes were relevant to address our research question. We focused on those second-order themes that related to the nested tensions deriving from the paradoxical goal systems, between family-oriented goals and business-oriented goals.

We organise the history of Alpha as it has been narrated through the interviews, triangulated with the supplementary material collected: internal documents and externally available documents, such as the sustainability report and the YouTube videos, among others. We visualise the history of the family and the business in figure 1. We do so to illustrate what the top management and the family considered as key important milestones of the business and how they utilised rhetorical history to navigate the tensions emerged through the company's re-organisation and expansion. To our surprise, as we will discuss in the findings, we found non-family members also actively constructing these narratives.

-----Insert figure 1 about here -----

More specifically, we identify moments in which the paradoxical goal systems surfaced in what we termed as two apparent paradoxes. The first relates to the family dis/harmony, where the rivalry between the two brothers is exacerbated into an unresolvable situation. This came into tension with the firm's serenity goal and need for growth. The second apparent paradox emerged as soon as the first paradox seemed to be productively managed, with the new CEO aiming to internationalise and professionalise the family firm through various key moves (the restructuring of the family businesses, the IPO, and the acquisitions). Yet, the company seems to be still managed as a family business and relying largely on family ties. The apparent paradoxes are organised in our text according to a threefold narratological division (Pavis, 1998): a) birth of the conflict; b) collision: the conflict emerged intensifies to a tipping point where actors have no choice but to confront themselves; c) paroxysm and reconciliation[2]:

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[2] Please note: While the narratological division uses the term 'reconciliation', we refer to this phase as a productive management of paradoxical goal systems.

the climax moment where spiralling of emotions come together in a dénouement, reaching a state of equilibrium. In what follows, we present how rhetorical history has been used to navigate these tensions.

5. Narrating history in the family business

Alpha is a family business operating in the packaging sector. Acquired in 1969 by Aurora, it was transformed from a box company to a packaging production and services company. Alpha is a family business in essence: it reflects Aurora's late husband's last name. Further, the family is involved in different ways in key management and board positions of the company. Today, Alpha is a Group, including different acquired companies, and is part of A49, the holding company that gathers all the family's businesses (farming, real estate, and packaging). The family named the holding after the last name of the brothers, four (signalling the number of brothers) and nine (number of the grandchildren). The name of the holding company signals the embeddedness of the family in the business. In our analysis, we mainly focus on the development of the paradoxes in Alpha, which is the largest business of the holding. The following table visualises the involvement of the family in Alpha.

---Insert table 2 about here-----

Throughout the years, Alpha has grown and transformed itself, it shifted from being concentrated on local ties to opening up to national and international markets (through two acquisitions and an IPO), by hiring external managers and directors that supported the growth vision of the family CEO. While all family members have been entrepreneurial by nature, the power within the business progressively became concentrated on one person (Flavio). This process created various tensions and the interplay of firm goals (based on his vision and goals) and family goals were strong triggers for bringing the paradox to surface.

Below we discuss our historical study of Alpha from its founding stage to the present and the involvement of the family. We identified two apparent paradoxes induced by the collision of family and business goals. We explain how the paradox came to surface through different instances, how the tensions created a collision, and how they were productively managed by the family business through rhetorical history.

5.1. The early years: a matriarchal management of Alpha (1969-mid 1970s)

'"Innovation in tradition". Sums up the history of the company Alpha. It began in 1969 when the two founding members, Aurora and her brother-in-law, took over a small box factory and

started to produce cardboard packaging in an industrial building of 1400 square meters. The two partners combined their commercial and organisational skills with the technical competencies of the former owner of the box factory, who became foreman.' (Company profile, pg.2)

The first chapter of Alpha's history was mostly written by Aurora. The business was born out of Aurora's financial necessity: *"I had the business idea after the death of my husband and with four children to support"* (Aurora, 50th Alpha anniversary video). However, Aurora transformed the small box factory in her hometown into a packaging production company. Aurora recalls in the video that running the company came with a hardship that was justified as a sacrifice for the family, waking up at 4am, managing the second family business (the farming company), sending the children to school, and running back to Alpha: *"All that I did was done for my children, for my grandchildren, and I hope this will continue"*. This sentence illustrates the importance of business for the family. Simply, the firm was seen as **a vehicle for the financial survival and later well-being of the family**. The company proved to be successful from the very beginning and thus, could enter a new chapter of its history.

5.2. The introduction of a new generation and the evolution of the product (late 1970s-1990s)

In the second chapter of Alpha´s history, two sons of Aurora joined the business, Flavio (the eldest) in 1982 and Riccardo (the youngest) in 1986. Despite Aurora having brought her sons in with the spirit of shared responsibility and ownership, the two brothers developed over time different management styles and diverging interests within the company. These different approaches towards the management of the firm were illustrated by Riccardo: *"When we entered the company our mother was giving us responsibilities slowly, then we took it. It was a hard growth for my brother and myself, very hard. We have two personalities and two ways of seeing things and saying things that are completely different, almost opposite"*. Interestingly, the opposing opinions are simply a reflection of diverging goal systems. While Riccardo, like his mother, still understood the firm as a vehicle for the financial survival and well-being of the family, Flavio saw the potential in the firm to develop something bigger. This is also seen by employees, who often describe Flavio as a visionary innovator: *"it is evident that he is ahead of everyone else, this is my personal opinion [...] The success he has had and he keeps having demonstrated his very high skills." (Alfredo, production director at Trait).* Flavio's ideas were beyond the family as he outlines: *"The pollution made by the matriarchal management of Alpha*

and its lack of recognition for the competencies for the sake of harmony is a disease." He also criticized that "*many companies I know in the area failed because the objective from the family was to leave in the company the least possible. [...] to invest in the company and not inside the family was perceived as wrong [...] and this was the case for Alpha.*"

These quotes illustrate **the emergence of the first apparent paradox - Happy Family vs Successful Company**, where family goals conflict with economic goals of the firm. As both brothers were seen as potential successors during this time, they competed for a legitimate future leadership (Dalpiaz et al., 2014; McAdam et al., 2021), harming the family harmony as well as posing danger to Alpha's growth. Simply, the future of the business was at stake as the family's desire to control the business was not unified due to divergent opinions of the dominant coalitions within the family.

In this period, Flavio pushed for his agenda and in 1996, Alpha opened a new site (with offices, production and design facilities) in the same town. Further, Alpha moved its focus from packaging production to designing personalised packaging solutions, creating a new process for the making of conducive cardboard. Flavio fully attributes these changes to himself: "*what we have built here, and I did the planning and design, the flooring, the stairs, they are all my ideas.*"

At the basis of this move was the commissioning of dedicated solutions from an international IT company with a base in the region. However, towards the end of the 1990s, Alpha lost this main client due to their relocation to another country. This loss was shaking the goal system of one part of the family, namely that the firm is a vehicle to finance the family but also putting the survival of the firm at risk. While Aurora tried to maintain the family's harmony, the tensions were growing and with the next generation entering the business, the different family coalitions tried to secure their positions and their own goal systems. Flavio's leadership, however, consolidated even further, thanks to producing a different, and long-term oriented, narrative for the firm.

5.3. *The third generation and the creation of game-changing products and processes (2000-2018)*

When Greta, Flavio's daughter, entered the business, the 'who's family' question became more steering. After successfully completing her marketing degrees, Greta was put in charge of marketing in Alpha, and she was allowed to create her own team over time. It is under her direction that the materialisation of the history of Alpha started; the first external newsletters

were created in 2013 (appearing on Alpha's website), and the first YouTube videos in 2014, coinciding with the first years of Greta's work as marketer within the company. Despite her competencies and hard work, to her surprise, the start of her career in Alpha was met with scepticism by her uncle Riccardo. He understood the progressive diminishing of Aurora's involvement in the company and the entrance of Greta in the business as a threat to his position. This is illustrated in the following quote from Greta: *"I didn't' have a nice welcoming from him [Riccardo] when I started to be honest, because I was perceived as an ally of my father, a strengthening of his position in the company, an extra vote in the board. This was not well seen and slowly, with time and with reasoning [buonsenso] that marks our family, there has been a mental shift so now we have a good relationship and a reciprocal respect of each other's value."*

While the tensions became more obvious during this period, the family values and the presence of Aurora still acted as a glue to maintain some harmony within the family. However, this romanticized idea of family harmony contrasted with strategic decisions that were dominantly made by Flavio. In 2003, Alpha created Mondi*, expanded polyethylene sheets and coils, waved in a lamination process that Flavio patented with assistance from an expert engineer (also a distant relative). This created further tensions within the family resulting in a collision of interests, as Riccardo notes: *"It has been hard because there have been many moments of collision. We both were CEOs and we often collided until a few years ago."*

Despite efforts for a family internal resolution to align both, the economic goals of the firm and the family goals, the continuous and ongoing conflicts between Flavio and Riccardo were not solved. Here, the innovation-driven moves of Flavio can be seen as a cornerstone for escalating the tensions and finally the shift towards paroxysm and reconciliation of the apparent paradox. The following quote illustrates how Flavio alleviated these tensions:

"There have always been arguments for decades until the point that I managed to make my mother understand that she built a matriarchal company with a balance of power among brothers and this is fundamentally wrong. This was putting at stake the health of everyone and the future of the company. At last, my two other brothers moved the pendulum towards me also because I blackmailed the company. All patents were registered under my name so at one point the choice was forced. I'll tell you why my brothers decided to move the pendulum towards me [the researcher is asked to switch off the recorder. Flavio shares the story of why he believes the brothers decided to side

with him]. That put us in a situation of making a forced decision for Alpha and make a very important move. We decided to re-organise the family business [...] in that moment we went from a point of disequilibrium towards one of equilibrium."

Flavio put himself in the position of becoming the CEO and the dominant person within the firm. With Flavio pushing through his goal system or putting the economic goals of the firm at the forefront, he harmed the SEW goals of the family. Riccardo commented: *"[in 2016] the board which was composed by my brothers and myself wanted to give only to Flavio the role of CEO and this took us to two different levels and to the point where we are now. But it also led to the growth of the company [here Riccardo's voice lowers, holding tears and feeling overwhelmed in recalling this]. It has been hard...40 years in the company... I took that [company growth] more into consideration, to the respect of the company instead of self-love. And here we are. Difficult, very difficult".*

In the end, the matriarchal vision of a harmonic family that guided the behaviour of Alpha in the early phases of its existence dissipated, and Riccardo was forced to take a less prominent role in Alpha: *"So one takes a step back or leaves the company. I took a step on the side." (Riccardo)* Stepping down (or 'to the side', in Riccardo's words) was narrated as the necessary change for Alpha's innovative goals. Simply, the narrative around the founding family that benefits from the company changed towards a narrative around innovation. This becomes evident in multiple different sources. The shift towards the innovation narrative is illustrated in the sustainability report, which talks about "true innovation" (Sustainability report, 2020) and it is also reflected in the perceptions of the employees that told us, namely that *"the company has an innovation DNA"* and that *"Alpha is a trend-setter"*.

Interestingly, also internal communication made a shift towards **the narrative of innovation**, exemplified by highlighting innovative "success stories" in the newsletter, for example, *"innovation and packaging design: Alpha's solution for client X."* (Newsletter, 03.04.2018). In the same newsletter, they described a solution as *"a product derived from an innovative process"*. Further, in the 50th anniversary video message, innovation was labelled as essential for Alpha to survive in saturated markets. This narrative was also used by external stakeholders and the rhetorical history of the company was summarized by a journalist during an interview: *"From a box making company to an innovative company."* (Interview, April 2016) highlighting how the company has always tried to innovate.

Somehow, the change in the narrative also helped to heal the wounds caused by sibling rivalry and to realign the family goals with the business goals as highlighted by Riccardo: *"One thinks of the future of his children and not to waste 40 years of work in the company and all the staff members [who supported him]. That was the right decision certainly. The value of the company triplicated in the last four years",* which also benefits the family as a whole.

As such, rhetorical history here worked to dynamically produce an equilibrium among the tensions brought to light by the first apparent paradox, through Flavio's re-narration of the firm's purpose towards innovation. In other words, rhetorical history helped Alpha to overcome an essential apparent paradox and to find a new equilibrium for family and business goal systems. The following figure visualizes the apparent paradox and its reconciliation.

-----Insert Figure 2 about here---

5.4. *Rapid expansion, new shareholders, and acquisitive growth (2018-2022)*

The changes initiated in 2010 allowed Alpha to manage the entire value creation process: from the design phase to planning packaging solutions to producing them through the patented machines. This allowed Alpha to grow and detect new opportunities. However, to finance growth opportunities and the ambitious aims of Flavio, the company undertook an initial public offering (IPO) in 2018 and sold 18% of its shares to the Italian Stock Exchange. The narrative around innovation was also used during and after the IPO. For example, Flavio participated at a conference in November 2018 as chair of the theme "pathways to sustainability". In his speech, he presented a new innovative technology that enabled Alpha to produce Paperseat, a revolutionary waved-patterned cardboard able to replace plastic packaging. In this period of growth, and with the additional slack financial resources from the IPO, Alpha started to internationalize and opened a production site in Romania (Alpha Europe), purchased commercial land behind its headquarters in Italy to expand its production site, and created Alpha Group (comprising Alpha Europe, Cops and Trait).

The growth of Alpha and particularly the financing through the IPO triggered the increasing professionalization and resulted in the emergence of the **second apparent paradox – family management vs professionalizatio**n. This is evidenced in the sustainability report (2021): *"From a family business to an Ltd. The history of Alpha is entwined with the one of the Alpha family that founded it and still manages it. But it is more than the history of a family business. Throughout the years, Alpha has managed to transform itself, it has opened itself up to the outside world and has welcomed at its heart managers and directors who have*

contributed to its growth. Today, it is a company on the stock market, projected towards becoming a leader in its field and to drive the world of packaging towards a more sustainable future. After proving its innovative capacity in Italy, it is now ready to conquer the international markets". As a result, these rapid changes in the business puzzled the SEW of the family. Alpha had to take steps towards becoming, in the words of the interviewees, more 'managerial', to accelerate its growth in a way that is seen by Alpha's senior management as non-traditional for a family business. Interestingly, during this period, more and more external managers were hired to maintain the growth trajectory of Alpha. Two acquisitions in 2021 are further milestones in the growth path of Alpha.

This created a unique opportunity for us to observe the co-construction process of rhetorical history during this time, with extensive insights from multiple parties acting as co-authors of the narrative. Through rhetorical history (narrating the family history as a way to create a bigger Alpha family), Flavio attempted to create some paroxysm and reconciliate the tensions surfaced through this apparent paradox. Flavio gave key managerial roles to professional managers, who "are placed in positions and rewarded based on merit" (Stewart & Hit, 2012, p. 60). Flavio stressed the need for professionalization or the need: *"to re-organise the family business"* and to reverse the previous practices that *"favour [family members'] loyalty over [external managers'] competencies"*. The steps taken by Flavio from 2018 onwards resulted in the growing recognition of the need to professionalise, as mentioned by Pierfrancesco, an R&D director: *"I see the company has evolved considerably in the past 10 years, because it wanted to, aware that it was growing, and it wanted to bring in new people in the organisational structure with different experiences."* Similarly, Ferdinando, the accounting director, finds that decision-making processes changed: *"What has changed is the structure of decision making, giving more responsibilities to intermediate figures, the managers. The structure of the organisation has grown considerably, with delegated activities. A decision that before was passing through the family only, now needs to go through additional steps. They gave a clearer structure to the company, with more delegation."*

This loss of family control has been justified with an increased emphasis on family values from family members. The following narrative demonstrates the SEW preserving nature of Flavio's attempt to professionalise the company: *"I hope this will continue with my daughter and my son [...] I hope to bring him into the company, he is now 17 [...] what I am doing now and what I have done here it is for them. The holding company is the continuation of this thought" (Flavio).* In order to preserve SEW, the family, and particularly Flavio, remained at

the core of key decision-making processes, as highlighted by multiple employees who raise critical voices. Dario (a comptroller) sees: *"The family is involved directly in the company, with a predominant role, with Flavio as CEO. We are in the stock market, but decisions are those of Flavio. There is Greta but the essence of Alpha is Flavio, he decides on its development, where the company will go and where it wants to go [...]"*. Pierfrancesco, the R&D director, explained that: *"the difficulty has been the strong presence of the family that wanted to grow through the presence of new managers and it was difficult to make managers understand what the history of Alpha was, and to try to grow the company in agreement. The same goes for the entrance of the next family generation, this has created a more marked issue in these respects. The company has grown disproportionately, it entered the stock market, and is trying to find this equilibrium between a managerial asset and the family influence."*

However, the continuation of the family in the firm's management is also perceived positively by some employees that see the past and future of Alpha being a family-managed business. For example, Luana, a financial administrator commented: *"When I joined, they narrated to me the history of the company, how it was born, and where the holding company's name comes from. The idea of the four children and nine grandchildren is beautiful. You understand that there is a strong sense and presence of the family, and to them, it is an important value despite the size of the company."* In this sense, the family does not act as a cumbersome element of the company, but as the glue that keeps things together and gives a sense of continuity.

We identified a shift of narrative from Alpha´s family to include the non-family employees as 'a bigger family' to alleviate these contrasting perspectives. Alpha has a well-recognised reputation for supporting its employees, e.g., excellent maternity packages and gifts, and incentivising employees for good performances, summarised in the following organisational narrative: *"Caring for your collaborators is one of the key tools for increasing efficiency and empathy at work. The support scheme comprises activities targeted at caring for and improving the wellbeing of the workers in different dimensions of their life, both professional and personal." (Newsletter, April 2021, HR director).* As a result, Alpha as a business that is founded by a family and led by a family is valued as a vital character by most employees, who welcome Flavio's narration of a "bigger family". As such, the narrative of inclusiveness ('bigger family'), initiated by family members, was co-constructed by some non-family managers and employees.

Indeed, non-family employees at Alpha feel like being part of the bigger family. Raffaele, for example, commented that: *"The founding values of the family, the sense of family, are still very much valued as important in the company. [...] there is stability because the job allows you to get a mortgage, children...to offer indefinite contracts are some small examples of this. [...] I expected a small gift from my closest colleagues because I also participate in the collection when there had been births or weddings. But an institutional present, I did not expect that. I appreciated it a lot at the personal level because it was not compulsory."* This sense of being included into a bigger family was reiterated throughout the interviews with non-family employees, such as Luana and Serena: *"It is like entering a big family. It is wonderful and it makes a difference [...] I was positively surprised that they made me do lots of training for development in all sectors of the company. This makes me feel that they want to involve me, that it is like they are introducing to me all the family. Nobody [outside of Alpha] does it."* (Luana, financial administrator); *"This is a second home to me. If there is a problem, I think of it when I am outside of here. They made me grow"* (Serena, customer care manager)

This unique observation point allows us to link the past with the present, in the process of co-construction with multiple agencies, not only from the family but also non-family employees. When we left the field, a new general manager was about to join Alpha, with the aim of replacing Flavio as CEO in the long term: *"There will be a strong growth now especially with the new general manager coming in soon. We are going towards what is effectively industrialisation of a company that is artisanal in its roots and that has a 'family approach', and also towards internationalisation and realisation of new production sites abroad. We did one and now we will make more in partnership with foreign companies or also on our own."* (Greta)

In light of Greta's new and more visible position, her words can be interpreted as a further signal of the productive management of the second apparent paradox. Greta's position can be seen as a cornerstone for continuity of family involvement and the narrative of the bigger family by simultaneously shifting towards a new way of engaging with its decision-making processes and moving towards modernity: *"Flavio for example has introduced the family in the company with a position of big responsibility. He gave his daughter an institutional position of all respects, in the innovation park. This is a double-edged sword, on one side it is a cool office, on the other it is a big responsibility as it puts her under everyone's spotlight [..] at 35-40 years old to be given an entire marketing office is a bridge towards modernity."* (Raffaele, sales manager)

The prominence of Greta also recently manifested through several interviews with local and national magazines, as well as her new role at the local chamber of commerce as vice-president of the young entrepreneurs, all aiming to give her greater visibility. The increasing prominence of Greta and her more prominent outward recognition go hand in hand with Alpha's continuing growth and professionalisation activities but also the family's aim to preserve SEW. This indicates a productive management of the tensions associated with paradoxical goal systems, namely family control and involvement in management (family goal) and professionalization (business goal). Such equilibrium is facilitated by the co-constructed narrative of "Alpha as a bigger family", thus realigning family and business goals. This is illustrated in the next figure 4.

----Insert Figure 3 about here----

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our research takes a historical view of the development of a family business, Alpha, since its beginnings in 1969. Family businesses are paradoxical by nature which might put the business at stake when they come to surface. Our research aimed to better understand how the use of rhetorical history can help family businesses to productively manage paradoxical goal systems between the family and the firm. Throughout Alpha's history, two apparent paradoxes emerged, caused by conflicting family (family expansion, generational involvement, leadership and control) and business goals (business expansion, growth and professionalization). To alleviate these tensions, several actors within Alpha contributed to strategically re-narrating the history of the company. While the paradoxical nature of the goal systems remains due to the very nature of family businesses, it surfaced in two apparent paradoxes which were productively managed through rhetorical history. More specifically, the first apparent paradox, *happy family vs successful business*, saw a shift in the narrative of using the business to secure financial safety and welfare for the family towards an innovation narrative, dominantly pushed by one family member. While this tension was alleviated thanks to the narrative shift, a new tension emerged. The traditionally managed firm was soon confronted with the need to professionalise, which also included the hiring of external managers indicating a loss of family control over the business, thus, harming SEW (the second apparent paradox). In order to create a new equilibrium between family and firm goal systems, an extended narrative of what constitutes the family (beyond the nuclear one) to 'a bigger family' was co-constructed by multiple agencies aiming to establish a sense of continuity.

Our research complements rhetorical history research in family business in several ways. First, we show that rhetorical history is co-created and involves multiple authors. This adds to family business research, typically focussing on the key strategists or the top management and their rhetorical history-making (e.g., Suddaby et al., 2020). While it is well developed in the literature that next-generation family leaders can create strategic narrations to legitimise their leadership and mitigate any arising tensions (Dalpiaz et al., 2014; Ge et al., 2022), rhetorical history is typically treated as a potential source of competitive advantage "that can be shaped and manipulated to motivate, persuade, and frame action" (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 147). We show particularly with the second paradox, that rhetorical history is co-created. This is important as it moves history-making from the elites of an organisation towards a more democratic and emergent history-making process that involves multiple agencies. Especially family business research often treats the family as leaders of the firm (Chrisman et al., 2012). We complement this line of research by developing a better understanding of the involvement and contributions of non-family members (Pimentel et al., 2020) through their often-overlooked agencies in constructing rhetorical history. In our analysis we show that an interpretative view of history allows us to capture the highly agentic nature of the act of narration (Maclean et al., 2016). This implies that to fully unfold the power of rhetorical history - as a sense-giving device for the family and the firm to alleviate the tensions emergent from the paradoxical goal systems of family businesses - requires an involvement and alignment of multiple authors. While our research started to uncover a more democratic and emergent history-making process, we call for further research to explore this fruitful avenue and particularly when this use of rhetorical history has positive but also negative consequences. Such integrative view is more attentive of the plurality of agencies (and their narrations), thus moving away from the typical understanding of the family as the sole agent for change towards seeing the firm in its entirety taking a more active role.

Second, our analysis shows that rhetorical history can act as a glue between the family and the business in a malleable and relational way. Understanding the dynamics underpinning this glue allows us to better capture how surfaced conflicts between family and business goal systems can become an opportunity for strategic change in terms of the renewal of the family business (Suddaby et al., 2020). Despite the emergence of apparent paradoxes, our research shows that rhetorical history provides a powerful tool to give meaning to the company's developments and further provides a narrative to release the tensions between the family and the firm as well as tensions within the family. Simply, rhetorical history can be used to

productively manage apparent paradoxes and develop temporal equilibria among conflicting goal systems. This is important as rhetorical history affects two parallel goal systems that are closely interacting and dependent from each other (Williams et al., 2018). As such, understanding how rhetorical history acts as a sense-giving device for each system individually and their relationality adds to a more nuanced view on family firms. Particularly in periods when the paradoxical nature of family businesses comes to the surface, the malleable and relational nature of rhetorical history can contribute to adding new directions by shaping a diversity of goals (Kotlar & De Massis, 2013) made available, for example, to the next leaders to seize the opportunity to change the course of the family business by simultaneously preserving SEW. In our case, the next leader utilised rhetorical history to consolidate his positioning and to grow the business by preserving SEW.

Third, our research extends current debates on the need of family businesses to consider the inclusion of non-family talents in light of their business growth (e.g., Miller & LeBreton-Miller, 2005). Family goals are found to conflict with business growth goals particularly when non-family employees are involved in key decision-making roles (Vardaman et al., 2018). Family business owners' attempts to protect and preserve SEW during decision-making processes (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007) pose challenges for attracting and retaining external (non-family) talents (Verbeke & Kano, 2012). Differing from other research on professionalization and agencies of non-family employees (e.g., Barnett & Kellermanns, 2006), we reveal how non-family employees can shape the narratives of the family business. Whilst current research highlights the darker side of professionalization processes as harming SEW due to reduced family control over the business (Stewart & Hitt, 2012), we find that extending the definition of ´who is family´, and consequently co-constructing rhetorical history, helps to productively manage tensions between family and firm goal systems. Further, this opening up allows family businesses to fully exploit the non-family talent and make use of it for the sake of both, business and family goals. Allowing a sense of involvement deriving from the opportunity to express their agencies to shape the history of the family business could resolve the commitment issue reported in other research on non-family employees (Chrisman et al., 2012; McAdam et al., 2020).

When using rhetorical history, family business decision-makers have an opportunity to re-direct the vision of the business and through the co-creating history making process, give sense to the business, the family, and their interplay. This use of history highlights an interpretative perspective of history that links the past with the present and the future of the

family business. We hope our research stimulates future enquiries into the use of rhetorical history as a glue and sense-giving device for grasping the changing contexts affecting family business development.

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