Lubinski, Fear & Fernández Pérez wrote in 2013 that “The family’s role in internationalisation (…) is as yet little understood”. Familism’s influence encompasses many aspects. Previous assumptions about family capitalism, seeped in the Chandlerian tradition, have cast it in a rather negative light when it comes to internationalisation and the development of multinationals, the paragons of scale economies. The lack of human capital required to supervise, let alone run organisations whose increase in size paralleled a growth in complexity, the problem of financial capacity as family companies tend to plough back in order to keep control, excessive prudence as the ultimate risk is borne by those who run the company.

The reversal in appreciation of family capitalism during the last two decades has pointed to several advantages. There was a realisation that family firms’ statistical tendency of being SMEs provided the probable best reason of why internationalisation seemed negatively correlated with family shareholding. Family firms’ stability and longevity was shown to support the incremental and cumulative process of internationalisation in which networking, learning, knowledge transfers, personal relations, and long-term perspectives seem to be key components.

This paper intends to contribute to this tendency of “setting the record straight” by shedding some light on family business mechanisms influencing the process of internationalisation. Specifically, it focuses on the family members’ personal contribution. It is indeed the identifiable individual shareholder, member of a family group (sometimes without the actual blood ties), who forms the core difference with managerial companies. Impossible to fire from his family, subject to rational analysis and irrational impulses, selected by birth rather than by an HR department, holder of a usually sizeable amount of shares, member of a group of (relatively) similarly endowed members amongst whom he has a reputation and a certain amount of influence, the family member is the key variable bringing the salt in the corporate soup or the stone in its cogs. His contribution can be decisive in almost any sense, and thus deserves to be studied as such.

The contribution relies on the case study method. This approach’s issues are well-known: limited replicability and lack of quantitative data (a problem at least for the more positivist amongst us) being the main ones. It remains, however, highly relevant as the central question of this research topic, whether family capitalism is beneficial or detrimental to internationalisation, will only be possible to address once there is sufficient historical work done on concrete cases of family firm internationalisation, supplying the necessary quantity of knowledge to deliver statistically backed analyses, but also delivering the rich and contextualised analyses without which these tables and graphs remain meaningless.
This paper has its origins in a research project which produced a book, *Becoming the World’s Biggest Brewer: Artois, Piedboeuf and Interbrew (1880-2000)* on the history of AB-InBev’s predecessor companies, to be published at OUP in September. Despite serious progress on the understanding of the history of the beer industry in the last decade, the lack of knowledge on the present-day largest world actor was a significant gap in the historiography, which will thus soon be closed. The project has proceeded following the classical historical method, relying mainly on a vast collection of company and private archives, but also on more than fifty interviews of family members and former managers.

1. Internationalisation of the brewing industry

The brewing industry remained overwhelmingly local until the 1960s. Consolidation started in earnest at a national level from the 1880s onwards, when bottled lager swept over the Western world and its dominions, leaving small pockets of ale resistance, mainly in Britain and Belgium. The expensive investments required for refrigerated maturation cellars, bottles and bottling lines, as well as the rising sunk costs of advertisement structurally weakened small brewers. The two world wars in Europe – particularly in Belgium - and prohibition in the US abruptly thinned brewers’ ranks. These were never to recover again. In Belgium, where there were “more breweries than municipalities”, reaching a peak of 3387 units in 1907, only 755 were left in 1946.

The postwar years saw the trend continue due to the success of self-service retail shops and supermarkets, the European single market and the introduction of TV advertisement. All of these conditions created a situation where Europe’s small brewers choked on ever larger sunk marketing costs caused by limited shelf space and televised customer attention. Brewers, witnessing concentration at a national level, increasingly came to consider the dwindling of their numbers and the rise of continental behemoths as a future certainty. This feeling of inevitability was vindicated by the past experience of the USA, seen as at the vanguard of economic development only waiting to jump across the Atlantic. The same thinking was extended from industry to marketing and soon most brewers thought that the number of brands would follow the same path of concentration in favour of a limited number of survivors. This was despite the fact that American brand consolidation had been aided by factors not easily replicable in the old world. The US had a more unified mediatic landscape, a relatively homogeneous culture, few internal barriers to trade and post-prohibition legislation which, by artificially separating distribution from production, created a power struggle which pushed towards more consolidation still.

Nevertheless, concentration continued unabated, and in Belgium the number of breweries reached an all-time low of 112 breweries in 1997. This was still an impressive number relative to the country’s population of about ten million, but this apparent fragmentation hid a more concentrated reality. The Belgian top brewer officially captured 45% of its market in 1980, reaching 55% if we add the second largest actor, which was in the same hands as the leader. The rest of Europe oscillated between the extremely concentrated such as the Netherlands and Denmark, at respectively 61 and 75%, and the very dispersed such as West Germany or the UK, at 13 and 19%.

---

4 Hornsey (2003); Van der Hallen (2007); Poelmans & Swinnen (2011)
6 Schroter (2005)
7 Dighe (2016); Tremblay & Tremblay (2005)
8 Gourvish (1998)
As national concentration was gathering pace, leading firms started to aim abroad from the 1950s and especially the 1960s onwards, starved of expansionary perspectives at home and motivated by the perspective of becoming one of the expected few continental leaders. The progression more frequently than not proceeded in stages, roughly close to the Uppsala/Wilkins models, with exports leading the way, neighbouring countries (or colonies/former colonies) being preferred and licensing deals occasionally popping up. The great battle which would generate the current-day “elephants” had started…

2. Internationalisation of Artois-Piedboeuf

By 1970, the leading Belgian brewer was Artois, and by far. A contender for leadership since the late 19th century, the company had taken the right turns at the right time, to lager in the 1880s, advertisement and branding during the interwar (notably through the creation of the Stella brand in 1926) and the home consumption market in the 1960s. Its shareholder families sprang from the wedding, in the 1880s, of the owner’s two daughters with two scions of Belgium’s oldest aristocratic families, the de Spoelberchs and de Mevius.

Artois’ uninterrupted double-digit growth during the 1960s should not be understated. Belgium, despite its small size, was a relatively large beer market thanks to its enthusiastic consumption of the hoppy drink. At 132 litres per capita, it wasn’t as high as the 221 reached at the turn of the twentieth century but still put Belgians in the world’s top three customers of the hoppy beverage. There were other consolidators, notably, Piedboeuf, Maes, Alken and Haacht, all family-owned and led, but too busy trying to survive and grow on the Belgian market to focus much on the outside. Internationalisation was rather happening the other way around, as British brewers had been acquiring regional brewers and distributors during the 1950s and 1960s, though with limited success. By 1980, only Haacht, amongst Artois’ local competitors, was still independent.

Artois executives never wasted an occasion, during the late 1960s, to state that Stella was “Western Europe’s most-consumed beer brand”. Stella Artois, from a Belgian Success story, had the “vocation” to become a large European brand. Artois’ then president-directeur-général, Raymond Boon, seeing the constant reduction in the number of brands on the national and international markets, abided to the idea of a continental concentration of industrialists and brands. Specifically, he thought Europe would end up with roughly seven transnational brands, a bit more than the US because of the continent’ cultural diversity. Stella Artois had to become one of them.

Aside of a rather exotic African venture which will be described below, Artois can be considered a test-case for a sequential progression model. In the 1950s Artois invested in small distributors in Paris, Maastricht and Germany. These were modest exploratory ventures, reaching only 5000 hl, or 0.6% of Artois’ sales, in 1958. In the first half of the 1960s investments were ramped up to provide a decent network of tied houses. They were followed in the late 1960s by the acquisition of regional breweries in Northern France and the Southern Netherlands. Volumes grew fast, reaching 95.000 hl in 1963 or 7% of total production volume in 1963 and 10% six years later.

The location of the later acquisitions was by no means random or linked solely to the stronger beer culture these areas occupied in their respective countries. They were part of a strategy of international growth centred on the city of Leuven. Stella Artois’ prestige rested, according to Boon, on it being produced in Leuven, a historical brewing centre. It couldn’t be made elsewhere. She was “une, indivisible et Louvaniste” (one, indivisible and from Leuven). Consequently, Artois’ Leuven plant

---

10 Sluyterman & Bouwens (2014)
11 Belgian Brewers
became Western Europe’s largest until the construction of Zoeterwoude by Heineken in 1974.\(^{12}\) Beer transportation being a delicate task, Artois wanted international subsidiaries to be close enough to receive the liquid in tanks and bottle them for their respective markets.

Stella had to become the reference pilsner, replacing local brands. The entry mode was through the old-fashioned method of tied houses serving Stella from kegs, with the aim of using the on-trade selling points as advertisement for off-trade sales. A cumbersome and slow task, but less expensive and risky than investments in national advertisement and distribution. Hence, whereas Artois had massively benefited from being a country-wide player in Belgium with a well-known brand, it counted on small, traditional breweries abroad with reduced distribution and marketing capacities to do the trick. Artois wasn’t exceptional in this regard: Kronenbourg did the exact same error in Germany in the 1960s, just like Schlitz, Watney’s and Bass in Belgium. In essence, these companies negated their own experience of domestic success and counted on their brand appeal to allow small producers to go against the grain of scale-driven concentration. An impossible task, even with the help of the Stella brand, especially when it appeared not to be so popular after all. Its Belgian and Leuven origins left French and Dutch consumers quite indifferent (not to mention German imperviousness against beer not brewed along their national tradition) and its relatively cheap pricing strategy clashed with advertisement claims of premium quality. Italy was a modest success. Launched in 1970 from scratch, Artois reached 66.000 hl in 1981 and roughly 180.000 in 1984. However, energies were misplaced in the acquisition of a regional brewer in 1986 which failed to gain the necessary market share in what seemed like a repeat version of the French and Dutch experiences.

Around the same time as the early Dutch and French investments, in 1953, a deal was struck with Whitbread to export Stella Artois in Britain. A latecomer in the growing lager trade, the London-based company wanted a prestigious continental brand but with an alcohol content suiting the British public. Facing refusal from the stubborn Belgians to “put water in our Stella”, the deal was cancelled in favour of Heineken, then revived, though with Stella Artois sold as an imported exotic premium, at its usual strength. Though positioned in an as yet inexistent niche, the brand progressed at a double-digit rhythm for more than twenty years, morphing into a license agreement and becoming one of the UK’s most popular lagers.

A last, fundamental move of this first foreign expansion needs to be mentioned. Paradoxically, though motivated by the firms’ internationalisation drive, it was the acquisition of a local brewer: Piedboeuf. The Liège-based brewery, from a very limited base, grew fast before and after WWII and had become second. The company’s growth had been powered by a remarkable young man named Albert Van Damme, who had married into the company’s owner family in 1920 and started to develop it with breathtaking energy. When acquiring Piedboeuf through a share swap, enabling a new family to become shareholder of the ensemble, albeit at only 12.5%, Artois’ leadership justified the move by the necessity to secure its Belgian basis in order to have its hands free abroad. Remarkably, the alliance was kept secret from everyone, including the vast majority of personnel, for more than 16 years.

The 1970s and 1980s were spent unsuccessfully trying to beef up the position in France and the Netherlands, both markets dominated by a domestic hegemon. Export markets were also looked after in the USA, with little success. The company was forced to progressively focus again on its home market, where reputational issues battered Stella Artois’ market position, albeit in favour of Piedboeuf’s Jupiler. In the meanwhile, Artois subsidiary in Côte d’Ivoire, launched in 1959 in Abidjan, gained serious traction in the 1970s, reaching a market share of about 65%. Further positions were progressively added throughout Africa in Guinea, the Central African Republic, Senegal and finally Zaire, where the country’s third-largest brewery was acquired in 1979. An engineering division was also created, sending engineers to Burundi, Nigeria, Angola, Guadeloupe and China, amongst others, and serving as a gateway

---

12 Sluyterman & Bouwens (2014)
to take stakes in new companies or repatriate benefits from acquisitions through technical assistance contracts.

The Artois-Piedboeuf era ended in 1988 after a Zaïre-related enquiry into Artois’ accounts revealed the secret alliance and major fiscal issues. The two companies were forced to brutally merge in public and the new company took the name of Interbrew. The result of this first wave of internationalisation was slightly half-baked but not unimportant. A European position had been developed, with the UK shining as a successful outlier. A profitable African division had been built, though its personal supervision by a lone family member made it a very separate part of the company, barely linked with – let alone supervised by - Leuven. Crucially, experience had been acquired both at the operational and at the (family only) board level.

3. Internationalisation of Interbrew

The new company spent its first years digesting the merger before starting a second wave of international expansion by acquiring Hungary’s second-largest brewer, a move that was considered utterly minor and inconclusive at the time, and described by then CEO José Dedeurwaerder as “just a gas station in Europe” (the man had had most of his professional experience in the automobile industry). In contrast with the previous era, this period was marked by wild leaps and risky bets. The almost immediate profitability of the Hungarian investment pushed Interbrew to continue fishing in the troubled waters of post-communist central and eastern Europe, where 16 of the 1990s’ 28 acquisitions would take place. Artois and Piedboeuf had hoarded cash reserves during the past twenty years which were well spent in an environment in dire need of expertise and investment. This wealth, added to the brewing industry’s very stable cash flows, postponed the need for an IPO until 2000.

This opening to the east marked the beginning of a second wave of internationalisation. The first wave had been rather tentative for most industry actors, marked by half-successes, regardless of where the companies were coming from. Apart from Heineken and Carlsberg’s flood of exports, there had been little to cheer on. This time was different. Not only did Central and Eastern Europe provide excellent testing-grounds for acquisitive and integration strategies, but the sheer size that had been gained by brewers, usually on domestic markets, meant much larger deals were now possible. Brewers progressively shed the diversified assets they had acquired in previous decades, especially water and soft drink investments which had provided little synergies, freeing their means for brewery acquisitions. Finally, crucially, beer operators, and particularly Interbrew, progressively understood that no brand concentration would ever happen. Beer is a special product, where identity and locality play an important role for the customer’s choice. The nimble Belgians found themselves more often than not able to purchase a company and run it profitably without excessive investments because they kept local brands, local teams, local practices and pre-existing equipment. This gave them a serious advantage over competitors such as Heineken who had the reputation of being arrogant centralisers with scant respect for any brand other than theirs.

The company was growing neatly in the early 1990s but needed a large deal to jump from challenger to leader. This happened with the acquisitions of Labatt’s from Canada in 1995. Strategic plans then focused on eastwards expansion, first to Central and Eastern Europe, then to Asia. Canada wasn’t the obvious next step but, as former Bertelsmann CEO Ulrich Wechser once said, “Acquisitions can only

---

13 Flack (1997)
be planned to a limited degree (...) Luck and chance play an important part”.\footnote{Bertelsmann Report 101, cited in Berghoff (2013)} Interbrew had just missed an important opportunity in Poland when a proposal to break-up Labatt, a conglomerate with a central brewing pillar, suddenly ended on its CEO’s lap, who decided to present it despite being utterly out of strategic bounds. The Canadian company, freed from family ownership in 1967, had been investing in areas as diverse as flour mills, milk processing, sport teams, rock tours and TV networks. The loss of its reference shareholder in 1993 put the company in a situation of takeover vulnerability which soon enough materialised when a financial company aimed for its TV network, searching for a candidate for the other businesses. After meeting Labatt’s staff, a team of Interbrew shareholders and managers were able to successfully pull a friendly bid for the entire company.

The deal was noteworthy in many ways. First, the active participation of shareholders, who flew to Toronto with their executives and held daily phone meetings with Leuven during the whole acquisition process. Second, the size of the acquired party, which was slightly larger than Interbrew and thus represented a serious risk. Interbrew jumped from being the world’s 18th to 4th largest brewer in volume, from 17 to 29 million yearly hectolitre production, overnight. It was the biggest acquisition by any Belgian company before. Third, the financing of the operation, which was entirely backed by debt and with all the risk carried by the acquired Canadian company, thus necessitating no substantial capital increase. Fourth, a degree of luck, as the Canadian dollar rapidly appreciated after the deal, allowing non-brewing assets to be sold profitably. Finally, the structure which followed the acquisition, arranged with Labatt’s management, which created a bicephalic organisation with two COOs, separated by the Atlantic but headed by a beefed up “office of the chairman”.

In adopting such an unusual management setup, Interbrew not only demonstrated a large amount of adaptability, but also the particular weight of its board of directors. Interbrew’s CEO, who had brought the deal forward and made great plans for new headquarters from which he’d run his unified empire, was dismissed immediately after the acquisition spending only 3 years at the top, similarly to Interbrew’s first CEO. This reflected the hands-on approach taken by shareholders’ representatives, which followed a long tradition of active involvement. The board had been actively busy in daily management decisions, up from the most minor financial decisions, since forever. Progressive attempts to professionalise the board had led to even greater influence in the late 1970s-early 1980s. New rules enacted in the early 1990s created a clearer split of tasks between directors and management, but the former still took their supervision task further than most boards do for similar-sized companies. CEO’s were relatively powerless, and once the board considered their skills no longer matched the company, they were dismissed.

The following half of the decade was spent acquiring companies in Central and Eastern Europe and Asia, using the sudden notoriety burst gained through the Canadian acquisition. Suddenly, Interbrew was present at every deal, set against the usual suspects: Heineken, Carlsberg and Scottish & Newcastle. In 2000, after four decades busy at international growth, the company had become a world player.

4. Country and industry-specific drivers of internationalisation

Which factors contributed to this success? Da Silva Lopes, in her seminal book on multinationals in alcoholic beverages, used an OLI-inspired framework with country, industry and company-specific determinants for growth, which we will rely on.

In the broadest category, country-specific determinants, we find specific systems of corporate governance and the institutional environment. In terms of corporate governance, Belgium was, and
remains, a typical country of “insider” corporate governance, one where “reference shareholders”, be they families or relatively stable financial stakeholders linked to banks or wealthy families held a large stake in its economy. The way this national characteristic influenced internationalisation at the company level will be seen further in greater detail.

The role of institutions was dual. At the official level, the Belgian state acted in a schizophrenic way, officially promoting small brewers with a system of progressive excise taxes but turning a blind eye on flagrant fleeting of the rules by large brewers. The Minister of Economy Edmond Leburton even knowingly promoted the merger of the country’s two largest brewers in 1971, probably with the aim of creating a European powerhouse. The importance of belonging to the European project was an inestimable boost on internationalisation, not only by opening borders but also by pushing brewers who felt they couldn’t compete in the enlarged market to sell. When it comes to more “informal” institutions, as always, their influence was both probable and difficult to pinpoint, even less measure. Nevertheless, one key influential cultural institution was doubtless Belgium’s beer culture (recently elevated to UNESCO immaterial world heritage) not only through its influence on domestic consumption but also through Belgian beer’s international reputation (even though further research needs to be done on its history) and the variety of beer types which survived locally and proved excellent premium exports (think of white, abbey or cherry beer).

Finally, country size also probably played a role, as assumed by Schrötter in Aufstieg der Kleinen. The comparison with larger markets such as Germany or the USA points to a tendency of internationalisation in favour of smaller countries such as the Netherlands (Heineken), Denmark (Carlsberg) and Belgium (Artois). Larger countries seem to have been more inward-looking, with the notable exception of Britain (S&N, Bass, Carling), which had its own internationalisation wave earlier than the rest. Too early to succeed, actually.

Industry-specific determinants were largely linked to the pace of the aforementioned process of national and then international consolidation. The bulky nature of beer probably caused its relatively late internationalisation in comparison with other alcoholic beverages. The growing convergence in drinking patterns across the world created investment opportunities in countries previously dominated by wine or spirits, which were keenly seized by international brewers. The influence of Heineken and Carlsberg, the first movers, is undeniable and often cited by contemporaries. Finally, the homogeneous nature of its most popular variety since the interwar, lager, increased the necessity in expensive sunken marketing investments and product-specific marketing expertise which were not easily accessible to small brewers, thus favouring larger multinational players with the ability to spread marketing knowledge across their organisation and in turn spread these expenses over vast sales volumes.

5. Company-specific drivers of internationalisation

But what made Interbrew so good at internationalising? First, the timing was right. The company embarked on the process early enough to gain an experience advantage over several competitors, but not too late, when many of the best deals were already gone. The price differential between the early 1990s, when brewing companies were sold at sometimes as little as two times their EBIT, compared with 13 times for the latest acquisition of Bosteels in 2017, shows how inflation may have clipped the

---

15 Daems (1998)
16 Schrötter (1993)
17 da Silva Lopes (2007); Van der Hallen (2007); George (2011)
wings of latecomers.\textsuperscript{18} Decentralisation facilitated deal making and lowered costs. It also allowed for beer’s national specificity to be respected by keeping local brands, a major advantage over some more centralising competitors. Cost consciousness (why invest in a new brewery if all you need is some expertise and second-hand equipment?), high technical competence and aiming for leading or growing brands (strong or out) were good practices which were developed during the 1990s and which favoured the company all along.

What seems to have set the company apart becomes more visible if we change our lenses and adopt a resource-based view on the company’s growth. In this case, we’re talking about human resources, especially inside of the family. The key driver was a limited set of entrepreneurial people, who instilled an energy which never seems to have wavered. Considering how the company’s top was organised, with an overarching board of directors dominated by family members, understanding this spirit requires to delve deep into family matters. A telling tale is what was done at the board level with a Roland Berger report in 1990. The consultants’ key territorial strategy was to “fortify the citadel of historical Flanders”, aka Northern France and the Southern Netherlands, where the group led with a 34% market share. This meant the expansion strategies were supposed to buffer this zone by prudently creeping around that zone. It was as if the consultants had resuscitated a plan made by Raymond Boon thirty years earlier. The reaction of several board members with an international experience was utter bafflement. Strategy needed to be outward-looking. The world, not historical Flanders, was their oyster.

Their contribution would of course have been void without the input of the company’s structure. The 1988 merger generated a lot of frustration, and many former Artois and Piedboeuf employees were replaced by a new, international-minded generation of young executives, often with an American background. This probably had to do with the preferences of the new CEO, who harboured a slight obsession with the US, where he had run Renault’s operations. An important contributor was the strategic team, originally composed of a manager, an employee and Alexandre Van Damme, family shareholder coming from the Piedboeuf branch, which sent its people, assisted by financial and technical experts, all around the globe.

6. Familial internationalisers

Four key strategic actors can be identified in regard to internationalisation during the second half of the twentieth century. This of course doesn’t mean that others were inactive, but their influence was less decisive or primarily directed to other areas.

Chronologically, the first to mention is André de Spoelberch. A brewing engineer by training, he joined the family brewery in 1950 and was immediately sent in the United States to gain some international experience. His managerial ambitions were thwarted by his own lack of diplomacy and his successful rival, Raymond Boon. The unspoken rule always having been not to combine directorship with executive responsibilities (with the exception of Boon), he was forced to leave the company when becoming director. Now independent from any hierarchy, he invested his energy and some of his personal means

in developing Artois’ soft drinks division, Africartois and Artois Engineering, which he managed independently from any supervision from the company’s top. Dubious business practices in Zaïre will land him in prison for two months in 1987, though he will later be cleared of all charges. An international-minded person, he kept comparing Artois’ structure with its peers, Heineken being his favourite model. He shortly headed the company in 1988 before leaving it altogether.\textsuperscript{19}

Raymond Boon, a trained jurist in fiscal matters, entered Artois in 1940, became general manager in 1956, then PDG from 1964 to 1988, and is the second key actor of the first wave. The whole first project of European internationalisation can be attributed to him. Although not originally a family member, he became so closely associated that he became the only employee allowed to acquire shares before the IPO, testifying the ability of family-firms to develop family-like relationships outside of blood ties.\textsuperscript{20} He personally negotiated the takeovers in France and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{21} He acknowledged the importance of shops and advertisement as ways to grow in these markets, but still, cautiousness pushed him to do the error of investing in regional brewers instead of aiming for large established brands. His financial conservatism was at the origin of the “treasure trove” which allowed Interbrew to expand rapidly in the 1990s. His policy of exiling troublesome family members allowed André and Philippe de Spoelberch’s to actively contribute to Artois’ foreign expansion.

Philippe de Spoelberch’s career spans the two periods, as he started working in the company in 1969 and left the board only in 2007. A trained brewing engineer, he acquired an MBA in marketing from Columbia university. Not unlike his cousin André he managed to keep peripheral responsibilities in the company while being on the Board, managing the British licence during its successful years, launching exports in Italy, renewing Artois’ marketing department, following the French and Italian ventures and unsuccessfully prospecting the American market until being relieved of his executive responsibilities in 1984 in the middle of an intra-family diplomatic storm. A member of the board’s strategic committee set up in 1991, he was behind the marketing research techniques which determined Interbrew’s acquisition strategy in the 1990s and was present in Toronto with Alexandre Van Damme during the Labatt takeover.

Finally, Alexandre Van Dame, born in 1962 is a key strategist of the board since 1992. Sole representative of Piedboeuf’s Van Damme family, he studied in Brussels at the elite Solvay Business School and entered the company in 1986. After a brief spell in sales he co-founded the company’s strategic team, in which he worked until leaving the operational side in 1992. He then became member of the board’s strategic committee, was present in Toronto and engineered the contacts which led to the 2004 merger with AmBev of Brazil.

Several aspects of these four experiences are revealing. They confirm Graves & Thomas’ conclusions that the vision and managerial styles of successors, expertise of family members, degree of family harmony and family equity-related issues all influence the company’s internationalisation process.\textsuperscript{22} The same goes for Gupta’s conclusions on the positive influence of peers’ successes from the same industry or country, which can boost fast-follower strategies and the influence of family wealth as a reassuring

\textsuperscript{19} del Marmol (2019)  
\textsuperscript{20} Popp (2013)  
\textsuperscript{21} Godaert (1993)  
\textsuperscript{22} Graves & Thomas (2008)
protection the case of risky enterprises.\textsuperscript{23} They also point to the importance of longevity, the unfolding of family politics (whether or not there is any harmony), corporate governance, family networks and wealth. The first observable element is the positive influence of international training and experience, which regards three out of our four members. Expertise, in general played a huge role as brewing engineers and trained and experienced business people left a much stronger imprint on the company. In 1975 the board created a standing management committee with board members and executives. It created a wedge between directors appointed for their skills and those nominated as “simple” branch representatives. This also points to the influence of corporate governance, which orients family members’ energies. The standing committee was one element. Even more important was the creation of a strategic committee in 1992, whose main task was to screen acquisition opportunities and create foreign networks. It allowed international-minded family members to act as ambition-boosting stewards. The families’ outside fortune is another positive element, as risk-taking only impacted a limited (if substantial) part of shareholders’ assets (at least until 1995, when it became more central to their material well-being). It also limited the need for generous dividend distribution (aiming at 30\% of net profits during the 1990s, but often remaining below that bar), thus facilitating the company’s growth.

Two characteristics also show how familiness can act in both ways. First, longevity. The related experiences range from 32 to 48 years in the company in one way or another, and the lowest number regards a presently still running experience. This allowed every member to build knowledge, expertise, influence in the company and the family and contribute to put his imprint on the company. André de Spoelberch single-handedly created entire divisions across continental borders. Philippe de Spoelberch put marketing and brands at the core of the company’s expansion. Alexandre Van Damme is credited with orienting the company to a merger with the Brazilian Ambev group in 2004. Raymond Boon’s ambiguous role shows also how longevity can become perilous. Though he can be credited with running the company during some of its fastest-growing years, he can also partly be blamed for the excessively cautious path taken when internationalising in Europe, where a lot of energy was consistently wasted in trying to build an empire of struggling mid-sized companies.

Second, family politics. Artois’ success stories stem from “network extensions” which were almost involuntary.\textsuperscript{24} Raymond Boon used the foreign world as a sort of gilded prison where he could exile troublesome family members. As they were important shareholders, he had to give them a role and some leeway, but sometimes seemed almost annoyed by their success. In an interesting counterexample, Philippe de Spoelberch was sent in vain to travel across the USA for years, despite the obvious lack of means for Artois to invest there. It very much looked like punishment for succeeding in Britain, even though it was never expressed this way. Another aspect of family politics was the way internal divisions were surpassed. Of course, not everyone was looking in the same direction or giving the enthusiastic growers a loose leach. Important decisions such as the Artois-Piedboeuf share swap and later merger, the Labatt acquisition or the Ambev merger were fought by family members who contested the opening of capital or the risk taken. But the leadership always had the upper hand. Growing confidence in decision-makers, especially once an internal crisis in 1992 was solved, was another. To take John Ward’s taxonomy, Interbrew developed a “business first”, growth-oriented shareholder family which limited agency issues by staying closely involved to the business.\textsuperscript{25}

7. Conclusions

\textsuperscript{23} Gupta (2013)
\textsuperscript{24} Johanson & Mattsson (1988)
\textsuperscript{25} Ward (2004)
The case clearly suggests familiness doesn’t constitute a drag on internationalisation as such. The fact that this used to be considered the case probably had more to do with the prevalence of SMEs, which are less prone to internationalisation due to a lack of means, in amongst family firms than with a thorough analysis of family business dynamics. Other critics of family capitalism don’t seem to bite either. Human capital, both from inside as from outside the family was a constant concern, but no less than if the company had been public. Financial capacity doesn’t seem to have lacked, as testified by the modest dividend distributed throughout the 20th century, and when required, the family didn’t find objections in going public in 2000. Prudence was the hallmark of some men, but definitely not of the organisation or the family in their entirety.

This story also validates the idea of taking a knowledge-based view of the firm associated with the learning process of key family members. The longevity of Artois’ and Interbrew’s active family members generated an incremental and cumulative learning process where family provided networks, a long-term perspective, knowledge transfers and commitment to the strategic decision of internationalisation.26 The sustained effort and learning process of both family and company in interaction with each other produced a dynamic mix which partly explains their trajectory. “Familiness” thus proved to be favourable to internationalisation: the company’s learning process on foreign investments ran parallel to the experiences of its board, and the latter was infused with family talent which took on the mission of global growth as their personal one. Conservative voices opposing risk-taking such as the Labatt and Anheuser-Busch takeovers were put in minority by family representatives through lengthy pow-wows which allowed all family members to endorse or at least accept the most difficult decisions. The heavy influence of individual family members leads to the inevitable validation of Zachary’s and Gupta’s statement that the family deserves a stronger focus in itself as a unit of analysis.27 Business and family dynamics need to be studied together to understand their mutual importance.

---

26 Cabrera-Suraz, Saá-Pérez and García-Almeida 2001; Graves and Thomas 2008
27 Gupta (2013); Zachary (2011)