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Drivers and nuances of sustainable development goals: Transcending corporate social responsibility in family firms

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, the United Nations established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be reached by 2030. They are aimed at all members of society, including businesses, which could integrate SDGs within their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies. As family firms constitute the most widespread form of business, understanding the factors that drive the decisions to pursue SDGs is essential. Thus, this research aims to understand why a family firm complies with SDGs. Additionally, it examines how SDGs enter, at the strategic level, activities and management practices. Following the case study method, the paper focuses on a family firm based in Italy, by means of documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and online data. In line with the Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) theory, family and personal values are crucial. While SDGs are only now entering the strategic level, their rationale has always been part of the family values, and the firm's culture. The selected firm is pursuing ten Goals. SDGs serve as a further motivator for family firms to behave more responsibly, meaning that they help to align the firm's strategy with the global challenges, building on existing family and firm's values. Our paper brings several contributions to the family business, CSR and SDGs literature, providing a representation of the reasons why a family firm pursues SDGs and the first reaction phases to SDGs. It brings practical implications for policymakers, highlighting the role of family values as the main drivers of the choice to invest in SDGs. By providing unique evidence, it is the first to connect the family business literature, CSR and SDGs.

1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 objectives composed of 169 targets to be reached by 2030 (see Fig. 1). The goals balance three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental, consistently with the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework (Elkington, 1997). SDGs require cooperation from all the members of society, not just from key stakeholders, such as regulators, standard-setters, investors, policy-makers, academics, practitioners and professionals (United Nations, 2015, 2017). Among them, firms can be key players in achieving the SDGs (Redman, 2018; Scheyvens et al., 2016), and benefiting stakeholder engagement and reputation (Molinari and Carungu, 2019). In particular, family firms are the most widespread type of business in Europe, where they make up more than 60% of all firms[1]. In Italy, family firms represent more than 85% of all firms (Corbetta et al., 2018). Traditional views of family enterprises include three overlapping systems: family, business, and ownership (Tagiuri and Davis, 1996). Because of the interaction between these systems, family firms can produce peculiar synergies, which are manifested as additional capabilities and resources, known as "familiness" (Habbershon and Williams, 1999). For the purpose of the paper, we define a family business as "a business governed and/or managed with the intention to shape and/or pursue the vision of the business held by a dominant coalition controlled by members of the same family or a small number of families in a manner that is potentially sustainable across generations of the family or families." (Chua, Chrisman and Sharma, 1999, p. 25).

Drawing upon Socioemotional Wealth (SEW) theory (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Swab et al., 2020), we believe that non-financial drivers have some impact in family firms' decisions to pursue SDGs, which are part of firms' CSR activities (Elalfy et al., 2020). However, there are gaps in our understanding of why and how family firms undertake socially responsible actions (Bergamaschi & Randerson, 2016; Izzo & Ciaburri, 2018). This is particularly true in the case of SDGs, as they were

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[1] European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/supporting-entrepreneurship/family-business_en, consulted on 16th November 2021.

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introduced just a few years ago (Tabares, 2021). Indeed, as it is a recent phenomenon, the literature considering firms and SDGs is sparse, with several calls for more research exploring businesses' role in achieving SDGs (Mio et al., 2020).

Since, to the best of our knowledge, no academic research has investigated this phenomenon, our intention is to bridge this gap in the academic literature. We do so by focusing on how enterprises become responsible, rather than comparing family businesses to other organisational forms (Randerson, 2022). Thus, this paper aims to understand 'why' and 'how' a family firm decided to contribute to SDGs, by carrying out a case study based in Italy, with documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. Our case study shows that the decision to pursue the SDGs is primarily driven by the founding family and the current generation.

The paper develops as follows. First, we outline the theoretical framework, discussing the relationships between family firms and CSR, and previous findings on SDGs among firms. Then, we outline our methodology-the data collection strategy and the data analysis phase. Results are presented and discussed in Sections 4 and 5. Lastly, we conclude with some remarks and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. CSR and family firms

Over time the academic literature has produced a variety of definitions on CSR. Within the management literature, the concept of CSR originates in the 1950s (Mariani et al., 2021), with the first reference made by Bowen (1953), who questioned the responsibilities business people should assume towards society. Carroll (1979) expanded the notion of CSR to the whole range of obligations a business owes towards society, including the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary dimensions. In his study published in Freeman (1984), redefined CSR by introducing the stakeholder theory: firms not only have a duty to their shareholders, but also towards their stakeholders, which explains their engagement in CSR. A recent generally accepted definition views CSR "as actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law. This definition underscores that, to us, CSR means going beyond obeying the law" (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001, p. 117). According to the European Commission (2020) CSR can be viewed as the "responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society".

In the last two decades, the academic debate focused on the determinants and strategies that enhance CSR, and how CSR differs within different organisational settings (Mariani et al., 2021).

Connecting to the application of CSR on family firms, one explanation of the more significant concern in CSR is found in SEW theory. In short, SEW theory implies that family businesses are often driven by and devoted to the maintenance of their SEW, which refers to non-financial parts of family owners' "affective endowments." Gains or losses in SEW are the primary point of reference that family businesses utilise to make decisions (Berrone et al., 2012). Following this reasoning, a family firm is more willing to accept economic losses than non-family firms, as well as favouring other non-economic goals (Breton-Miller & Miller, 2016; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). These goals are related to the family dimension, such as family control and influence, dynastic succession, the preservation of family values, emotional connections and reputation (Swab et al., 2020).

Indeed, family firms decide to invest in CSR for multiple reasons. In their conceptual paper, Breton-Miller and Miller (2016) distinguish the reasons why family firms behave in economically, socially, and environmentally responsible ways in four areas: (i) family values, beliefs, parenting styles and education (i.e., being raised in harsh times favours more substantial concern towards social aspects); (ii) governance aspects (i.e., ownership and board composition, and to what extent family members are involved in the board, can influence the firms' responsible behaviors); (iii) the nature of the organisation (i.e., some factors at the firm's level, which include the firm's size and strategy, could ease sustainable behaviors); (iv) and the environment the firm is located in (i.e., some contexts tend to favor sustainable behaviors, due to the institutional background, the values, the closeness of the local community or other factors), including the institutional background. Following this view, studies showed that family firms are more likely to show stronger concern for their home territory than non-family firms (Amato et al., 2021; Basco, 2015; Mariani et al., 2021). However, an alternative view of SEW and CSR commitment maintains that family firms might instrumentally invest in CSR to obtain self-oriented gains, rather than to contribute to the "greater good" (Zientara, 2017), in other words. A CSR framework is not the primary driver of family firms' decision to invest in CSR activities. However, the advent of CSR frameworks allows family firms to "repack" their existing activities in line with CSR (Kuttner et al., 2020).

Although they are primarily a society-level phenomenon, SDGs can play a vital role in the growth of CSR research (Bebbington and Unerman, 2018), with CSR as a theoretical home to explore to what extent and how firms contribute to the SDGs (Vildåsen, 2018). In fact,

Fig. 1. United nations' SDGs.

consistently with the well-known CSR categorization (Elkington, 1997), the 17 SDGs may be divided into three dimensions: social (1–5, 10, 16, and 17), economic (7–9, 11, and 12), and environmental (6, 13–15) (D'Adamo et al., 2021).

2.2. Firms and SDGs

As the SDGs have only been recently launched, research is still at an embryonic stage (Tabares, 2021). Literature is investigating the reasons why and factors that drive the adoption of SDGs (Khaled et al., 2021), their challenges (Dalton, 2020), how firms integrate SDGs into their strategies and activities (Ike et al., 2019; Tabares, 2021), and to what extent they report (Dalton, 2020; Khaled et al., 2021; Silva, 2021) and communicate (García-Sánchez et al., 2020) SDG goals and achievements.

Some reasons why companies comply with SDGs include achieving sustainability, understanding and managing risks, and aligning strategy with global challenges. Also, SDGs are considered as business opportunities (Van der Waal and Thijssens, 2020). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the adoption of SDGs is due to the legislative pressure from the European Union, for example the introduction of non-financial reporting with the publication of the Directive 2014/95/EU[2] on the "disclosure of non-financial and diversity information"(Carungu et al., 2021; Manes-Rossi et al., 2020; Nicolo et al., 2021). Arguably, the EU Directive identifies the disclosure of non-financial information as crucial for progress towards a sustainable global economy, encouraging companies to contribute towards achieving the 17 SDGs (Carungu et al., 2022; Manes-Rossi et al., 2020; Nicolo et al., 2021). Up to now, it has seemed that only a minority of businesses are pursuing SDGs. However, from the analysis of company reports from 30 countries, Bose and Khan (2022) find a generally increasing trend towards the adoption of SDGs. Despite a quantitative increase, only a limited number of companies mention SDGs in their non-financial information (Pizzi et al., 2022). Focusing on Italy, Pizzi et al. (2020) extend the current debate on the effective achievement of SDGs by the private sector, finding an explicit involvement of firms in all the SDGs. Among the diverse findings, these studies highlight some country-level factors that are connected to progress on SDGs. However, little is known about the reasons why firms decide to pursue SDGs, as their adoption is also "driven by factors related to institutional and organizational dynamics" (Pizzi et al., 2022, p. 83). Moreover, there are no studies about how SDGs enter a family firm's strategy and activities. Preliminary results show that most businesses only pursue one SDG, while one out of three pursues two, and a minority of businesses pursue three or more at the same time. Generally, businesses tend to focus on SDG 3 (good health and well-being), 4 (quality education), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure) and 12 (responsible consumption and production), while some pursue several SDGs together (Horne et al., 2020).

CSR represents a promising research stream in family businesses, with the reasons why family firms act responsibly towards society requiring further attention (Bergamaschi and Randerson, 2016). Though scholars agree on the urgent need for further understanding the interrelations between CSR and family business (; Randerson, 2022), tFehre and Weber, 2019he field has not yet come of age and the findings so far are mixed (Mariani et al., 2021). Considering SDGs worldwide relevance and their role within CSR research (Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; Elalfy et al., 2020), this paper aims to understand why and how family firms pursue SDGs. Specifically, we overcome the traditional approach comparing family versus non-family firms, and adopt a more granular approach (Bergamaschi and Randerson, 2016), focusing on a single case study. To the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of academic debate on family firms and SDGs, apart from some practical contributions that started to arise (i.e., IFB, 2019).

Therefore, our research questions are *i) Why do family firms pursue SDGs? What factors drive the choice to pursue the SDGs?*; *ii) How do family firms pursue SDGs? How do SDGs enter the firm's strategy, management and activities?*

3. Methodology

Our research stands on interpretivism (Bluhm et al., 2011; Langley and Abdallah, 2011), to capture insights from organisational phenomena. We also expect that the people who build organisational realities are "knowledgeable agents", or people who know what they are trying to do and can articulate their ideas, intentions, and actions. A qualitative method based on a case study is suitable for three reasons. First, it enables us to investigate an ongoing phenomenon in its natural environment (Yin, 2011). Second, through the recording of their ideas and experiences, the interviewees are given a "voice" (Bluhm et al., 2011). Third, as SDGs are a recent phenomenon, a qualitative methodology is required to understand it (Bluhm et al., 2011; Graebner et al., 2012). The advantage of a single case study is the ability to obtain greater understanding of the broad spectrum of corporate, family, and personal components. However, while the findings of this study reflect the firm's experiences, they are not generalisable to the wider family business community, which is consistent with the methodology used. As a result, our study strives to share the lessons learned rather than make generalisations.

The selected case represents a good example of a family firm adopting SDGs. It had to comply with the three criteria below. First, the firm had to be a family firm. Following Campopiano and De Massis (2015), we adopted two criteria to identify family firms: self-identification as a family firm and family involvement in ownership, governance or management. Second, the firm should be formally and actively pursuing SDGs. The third criterion is the willingness to participate in the study. Based on the above criteria, our research strategy proceeded in steps.

Our study is set in Europe, for two reasons. First, it is one of the areas, together with South America, where firms show the highest levels of SDG adoption (Elalfy et al., 2020). Second, about 70%–80% of firms in Europe are family businesses, which account for about 40%–50% of employment, even though the number and role of family businesses vary depending on the definition used (Mandl, 2008). For our study we chose Italy, where family firms account for 85% of the total businesses (AIDAF, Italian Family Business, 2021). In order to identify family businesses that are pursuing SDGs, the analytical starting point for the research was the Family Business Sustainability Pledge.[3] We contacted the Italian family businesses that signed it.[4] At the time of the study, there were 335 firms adhering to the Family Business Sustainability Pledge worldwide, four of these were based in Italy. We contacted all the 4 Italian firms, and one answered.

Subsequently, we had an introductory meeting with the firm, where we explained our rationale and research methods and double-checked that our requirements were met. The introductory meeting with the Sustainability manager confirmed the family essence of the firm, as well as its strong desire to pursue SDGs. As previous research has found that large-scale family firms under tight family control tend to invest more in CSR (Venturelli et al., 2021), our case represents a suitable context to explore the phenomenon under investigation. As such, we concluded

[2] Directive 2014/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 amending Directive 2013/34/EU as regards disclosure of non-financial and diversity information by certain large undertakings and groups Text with EEA relevance.

[3] The Family Business Sustainability Pledge is available at: https://fbsd.unctad.org.

[4] As the page was consulted on October 16th, 2021. Hence, we collected the names and contacts of the family businesses that had signed the Pledge by that date.

Table 1
Interviews topic guide.

I. Introduction
1. Please describe the firm, your role within it and your background.
2. What is the broader corporate vision, mission and strategy?
3. What are the general values that you perceive as the most dominant in the firm? Where do you think these values originate from? Can you provide a specific example?
4. From your point of view, what is so special about working in a family firm? How is that perceptible in day-to-day operations? Can you provide a specific example?
5. How strongly are family and business connected?
II. SDGs
1. What are the SDGs the firm is contributing to?
2. Where and how did the idea of pursuing them arise? Which role does the family play when it comes to deciding about SDGs?
3. How important are SDGs in the overall firm strategy?
4. How can one image the entire process from the decision to pursue SDGs to implementation?
5. How exactly does continuous work on SDGs look like in the firm?
6. How has the firm changed through and since the introduction of SDGs?
7. How embedded have SDGs become within the culture and practices of the firm?

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

that the chosen case is illustrative of the phenomenon being studied, viz family firms adopting SDGs. Given the scarcity of research on the topic, an exploratory method was considered the best way to gain an in-depth understanding of a new phenomenon in the family businesses field (Leppäaho et al., 2016). After selecting the firm, we employed a purposive sampling technique (Guest et al., 2006; Morse et al., 2002), interviewing key informants. The semi-structured interviews were based on the same topic guide (find the topic guide in Table 1).

Interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 h, with an average length of 45 min. We interviewed three members of the firm: the Sustainability manager (non-family member), an owner and member of the board (family member), and a member of the board (non-family member). All interviews were conducted with Google Meet and recorded with the interviewees' written consent. Interviews were held in the interviewee's native language (Italian). Some were followed up with subsequent contacts to integrate the missing information.

All the interviews were transcribed word by word and coded in an open manner (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Relevant sections were translated accurately from Italian to English. We used various secondary data to complement the primary data and triangulate different data sources (Denzin, 1989). First, we explored the firm's website. Second, we downloaded and analyzed one document contained in the website, namely the CSR report for 2021. We further contacted the company for the past CSR reports, not available on the website. Our secondary data also include the firm's CSR reports published from 2012 to 2020.

Third, using the firm's name and specific keywords ("SDG" and the Italian translation for "social responsibility" and "sustainable development") we looked for other available materials on the Internet. Last, we complemented this with the analysis of one of the firm's online social network accounts. We chose Twitter, commonly used for business communications (Gómez-Carrasco et al., 2020), to complement the understanding of firms' challenges, issues and CSR interests (Patuelli et al., 2021). Using the free online software Vicinitas[5], we downloaded the firm's latest tweets. Overall, the case study database was composed of documents, website, Twitter posts, results from Google searches, and the interview transcriptions. We used an inductive approach to analyse the data (Thomas, 2006) and open coding to select the relevant information; we then analyzed data iteratively to uncover common themes and compare these with earlier literature (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994). The methodological design used in our research is shown in Table 2.

[5] Please visit: https://www.vicinitas.io/free-tools/download-user-tweets to learn more. Tweets were downloaded on January 12th, 2022.

Table 2
Methodological design.

Phase	Approach
Selection criteria	Selection criteria: Single case as representative of a family firm adopting SDGs
Method of research	Case study
Data gathering (multiple sources to allow for triangulation)	Documentary evidence: ● CSR reports (2012–2021) Online data: ● Website ● Google searches using the firm's name and keywords ("SDG" and the Italian translation for "social responsibility" and "sustainable development") ● Tweets posted in 2021 Three online semi-structured interviews. Average length: 45 min. ● Sustainability manager (non-family member) ● Owner and member of the board (family member) ● Member of the board (non-family member).
Data collection	Transcription of interviews, and collection of documentary extracts. Inductive and open coding approach.
Data analysis	Comparison and connection of the emerging themes with the family business literature.

Source: Own elaboration, framework adapted from Calvo and Villarreal (2018).

4. Results

4.1. *The family firm: a description*

Alpha (fictional name, to preserve the anonymity of the firm) is a multinational family firm specialising in producing and selling complete systems for commercial refrigeration. The group has about 6000 employees, and its revenues amounted to 928 million euros in 2020. It has headquarters in Milan and operates in Retail, Food & Beverage and Ho. Re.Ca. (Hotel, Restaurant and Catering) sectors, with production sites in Italy and abroad. The group operates in four geographical areas: Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East and Africa, totalling 60 nations. Today, the group is composed of 11 manufacturing facilities based in Italy. The board has nine members, four of whom are family members with the majority of shares (including the CEO), two are members of the second family, and three unconnected to the families. After the Second World War, the founder initiated his career, working in his father's workshop, which then became an electrical appliance company. He founded Alpha in 2003 and became the first chairman. Even if the founder is no longer alive today, several of his children, as well as some of the third generation are involved in the company. The ownership is now composed of the founder's family (80%) and another family (20%), whose members are also represented on the board. The second family joined the board after their company was taken over by Alfa, which was pursuing a strategy of growth through the acquisition of Italian and foreign firms.

All interviewees confirmed that the family and business are closely related, with the family having a significant influence on the business, indicating that family values translate into business values.

"Family values are very … very strong, very strong." (Board non-family member)

4.2. *From CSR to SDGs*

The firm aims at making a solid contribution, both globally and locally, towards sustainable innovation, continuous improvement, teamwork, trust in young generations, a long period orientation, partnership with external institutions, a client-oriented approach, staff well-being and commitment to the territory.

All the data sources highlight the firm's interests in environmental and social themes. The interviews reveal a special interest in the education and well-being of people in general and employees in particular. This involves not only collaborating with schools to provide the young with specific skills that will be useful in the job market, but also improving employees well-being, for example, by introducing technologies that make their work lighter and more rewarding. Another critical area is the firm's concern for the local territory.

All interviewees agree that the firm has long pursued these avenues; in other words CSR values were part of the family firm's culture long before SDGs were established and became well-known.

"Attention to the environment, to the well-being of people, the territory … all things do not arise from a decision: they are inside us." (Board family member)

These values have always permeated the management and culture at all levels: in the governance, management approaches, and relations with employees.

"I recently happened to go to our plant in [name of the town], which is near [name of the city], and I was very impressed. In some ways, these principles, this respect goes down to the factory, without realising it." (Board family member)

The interests and activities towards CSR and sustainability materialized in a series of activities, news items, documents, reports and awards, which include CSR reporting (which started in 2012), the title of "Best Managed Company" from Deloitte for three years in a row, a concrete investment in the local environment and cultural heritage (the firm is a Corporate Golden Donor of the Fondo Ambiente Italiano - the National Trust of Italy - from 2015), and corporate communications which from 2011 have promoted sustainable growth and development. CSR and sustainability also appear central in the firm's communications on online social networks, as witnessed by the firm's tweets.

For us, # sustainability is a #value that must be cultivated and shared together with financial performances: for this reason we have been publishing the #CSR Report since 2012 and we are working on the integrated report. (Tweeted on October 10, 2021, authors' translation)

Currently, the family firm is pursuing ten SDGs (CSR Report, 2021), namely:

- # 3: Good health and well-being;
- # 4: Quality education;
- # 6: Clean water and sanitation;
- # 7: Affordable and clean energy;
- # 8: Decent work and economic growth;
- # 11: Sustainable cities and communities;
- # 12: Responsible consumption and production;
- # 13: Climate action;
- # 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions;
- # 17: Partnership for the goals.

4.3. Motives for the SDGs

The factors that drive the decision to pursue SDGs bridge the founding family, the current generation, and the firm itself. The founding family had strong values based on recycling and a feeling of responsibility towards the environment, people and territories. These values were transmitted to the firm and the second generation.

"So, both of our parents … Dad has now passed away, but he lived in the war. He was born in 1930, my mother was born in 1928, and she is still alive. I believe that having lived through an extremely difficult period led them to teach us the value of things. Not taking things for granted. They didn't raise us with a consumerist mentality, but truly in one in which everything has its value. And the value of things also means the value of your surroundings." (Board family member)

The second generation grew up with solid values, for example, among the values of the family are respect for the environment and the local territory, the well-being of people, the sense of belonging, a long-term orientation, an attitude towards continuous improvement and sustainable innovation. These family values are also reinforced by the interests and personalities of family members currently involved in the firm's governance. For example, the family member interviewed has a strong interest in sustainability. She was inspired in her youth by an influential entrepreneur, Adriano Olivetti, who pursued social values while developing one of the Italian's major firms after the Second World War.

The interviewees agree that a significant driver of the company's success is the CEO, a family member, whose ambition to be always ready helped the company to stay ahead of the game.

"As I mentioned earlier, [it comes from] the forge which is the CEO. The CEO is always ahead." (Sustainability Manager)

In sum, at the heart of the business there is the belief that growth and innovation are closely related, in a virtuous circle based on sustainability and CSR.

4.4. SDGs in the family firm's governance, strategy, and planning

Although the firm has always considered SDGs among its values, they never reached a strategic level. In 2021, the CEO clearly stated that, in the future, the firm would consider SDGs and business objectives in its strategy. Thus, while there was always an awareness of SDGs, they are now being incorporated into the firm's strategy.

"[The CEO] spoke about SDGs. He clearly said they are a goal: in our future business goals, we must also consider them. […]. In the objectives we have to consider the SDGs." (Sustainability Manager)

As of now, the decision to pursue SDGs comes in a non-hierarchical and open manner. Sometimes it rises spontaneously from board and family meetings. Other times, it comes from proposals, formalized by the management interacting with the board and the CEO.

"There is no structured process: because everyone has this common, cultural basis, within stakeholders, I mean, the family; it happens that we find ourselves talking, we meet for various reasons, family reasons, at lunch or whatever. When you meet, someone has read a news item, if you read the case of Vaia, simply from reading the newspapers, we said: "What a disaster, what a terrible thing". We were very upset. The idea was: "We have to do something, we have to do something". (Family board member)

Although the family firm already perceived SDG values, their advent had an impact. SDGs further increased their awareness of the importance of environmental and social themes. While the board was already aware, this increased at the management and employee level. Moreover, at the level of governance, there is a new awareness that SDG values must permeate all levels explicitly: the firm's SDGs should be communicated internally and externally. Having clear objectives strengthens efforts and improves effectiveness, leading to further progress on SDGs. When SDGs were introduced, the first step was to map the existing activities and align them with the framework. Later on, the CEO gave formal responsibility for sustainability to a family member on the board (our second interviewee).

To sum up, Alpha shows a strong commitment towards sustainability, which is acknowledged by the interviewees, and witnessed by the firm's activities, publications and awards. The decision to pursue the SDGs is driven by the founding family, the current generation, and the firm. All the participants highlight that the family has strong values, rooted in their upbringing on recycling and responsibility towards the environment and the local community. While the firm has always been committed to social and environmental themes, this commitment was strengthened in the 2010s (with the CSR reports), and then transformed and reinforced through SDGs.

5. Discussion

Our findings confirm that the personal and family values, instilled by the founding generation, are at the core of the family firm's decision to pursue SDGs (Breton-Miller and Miller, 2016). Living through the Second World War taught the first generation the values of saving, making

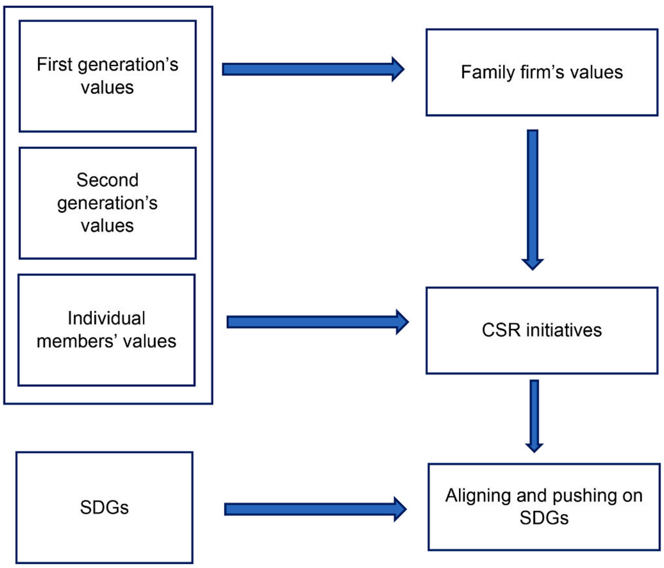

Fig. 2. The family firm's drivers for SDGs.
Source: authors' elaboration.

the most of what one has and respecting the environment. The second generation and the business itself absorbed these values, which are also reflected in the individual beliefs of family members, who bring them to the governance level. These ideas are highlighted in Fig. 2.

Thus, we confirm that family values, beliefs, education, and the involvement of family members on the board influence the firm's decisions in favor of SDGs, thereby extending the previous literature on CSR (Breton-Miller and Miller, 2016). As such, our research confirms SEW theory, with family firms also favouring non-economic goals (Berrone et al., 2012; Breton-Miller & Miller, 2016; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007), which are related to the family dimension (Swab et al., 2020). Unlike previous findings in the literature, the SDGs in our case study are not primarily seen as business opportunities (Van der Waal and Thijssens, 2020); they mostly come out of existing values concerning the family and business. Our findings are also in contrast with the previous academic debate which links the adoption of SDGs to legislative pressure from the European Union (Carungu et al., 2021; Manes-Rossi et al., 2020; Nicolo et al., 2021).

Our case study shows that, when SDGs were announced, the first step was understanding what aspects were already ongoing. SDGs became a chance to categorize and align the existing activities within this new framework. This is consistent with previous research on family businesses, arguing that family firms "repacked" their activities under the CSR framework (Kuttner et al., 2020). Our research expands these previous findings, by showing that in our case the company repacked their existing CSR activities under the new SDGs framework. However, repacking was not the only consequence of the introduction of SDGs. In fact, SDGs acted as a catalyst for further investment in CSR. Mapping and aligning the existing activities reinforced the awareness of SDGs at all levels, with new initiatives arising spontaneously at governance, management and employee levels. It also became an opportunity to enhance communication on SDGs, both internally and externally, and to reinforce the will to contribute to the global challenges. In a nutshell, the SDG framework acted as a motivation to do more, complementing the firm and the family members' values.

Six years after the setting up of the SDGs, our case bears witness to their arrival at strategic level. SDGs are now disseminated at all levels of the firm. This highlights that it can take a considerable amount of time for SDGs to enter a firm's strategic and organisational culture, even where CSR activities were already at the core of the firm's values. Fig. 3 shows four phases of the process of SDG absorption.

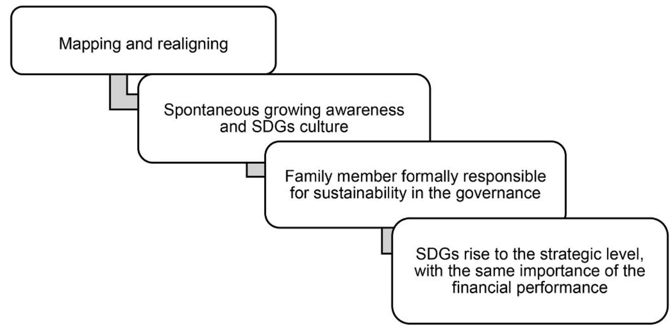

Fig. 3. Reaction phases within the family firm to the growing process of SDGs.
Source: authors' elaboration.

Our findings differ from the previous literature, which maintained that most businesses pursue fewer SDGs (Horne et al., 2020). We argue that, in line with previous literature on CSR (Venturelli et al., 2021), a large family firm has a strong commitment to SDGs, pursuing many goals at the same time. The concern for the territories is partially in line with previous studies, as our case study is concerned for the welfare of their local region (Amato et al., 2021; Basco, 2015; Mariani et al., 2021). Additionally, our study shows that the family firm is also concerned with territories different from their own.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to understand the reasons and ways a family firm pursues SDGs. Our single case study of an Italian family firm shows that the primary drivers are the founding and present family values, personal beliefs and governance aspects. Our interviewees and document analysis highlight that the firm is pursuing ten SDGs, emphasizing dominant values of the founding family, based on a feeling of responsibility towards the environment and the local community. Such values first enter the firm as a strong CSR orientation, and they are strengthened and developed with the advent of the SDGs.

These findings are consistent with previous literature on CSR in family firms (Breton-Miller and Miller, 2016). Concern for environmental and societal issues, which preceded the setting up of SDGs, is mainly explained by the nature of family businesses, where non-financial components and a long-term orientation have always been important, consistently with SEW theory (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Swab et al., 2020). The advent of SDGs presented firms with the opportunity to align their existing activities with the new framework and also served as a motivator for the firm to increase its responsible activities and to bring SDGs to the strategic level, together with business objectives. In this regard, our study contributes to the literature on family businesses in the following ways. First and foremost, it sheds light on the controversial issue of CSR in family firms, with a specific lens into the SDGs framework. Instead of adopting the traditional approach that compares family versus non-family firms (Randerson, 2022), our study focuses on a single case study, exploring why and how a family business pursues SDGs. Similarly to previous findings on CSR, we highlight that family values, beliefs, and education, as well as governance factors (Breton-Miller and Miller, 2016) are the main drivers of the family firm's decision to pursue SDGs. Our results are consistent with SEW theory (Berrone et al., 2012; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Swab et al., 2020), as non-financial drivers (namely, family values) are at the basis of the firm's decision to pursue SDGs. In doing so, our paper contributes to the field investigating family firms' socially responsible initiatives (Izzo and Ciaburri, 2018).

We contribute to the CSR literature with the case of a specific organisational setting (i.e. a family firm) deciding to pursue SDGs (Mariani et al., 2021). Our research shows that the drivers of the family firm regarding SDGs do not substantially differ from those highlighted by the literature on CSR in family businesses (Breton-Miller and Miller, 2016). Building on previous insights on family firms aligning their existing activities with the CSR framework (Kuttner et al., 2020), we add that a similar phenomenon is also observed with the SDGs. However, our case shows that, after the first alignment, SDGs stimulate the family firm's CSR motivation, and increase its commitment to environmentally and socially responsible actions, while SDGs are incorporated into the firm's strategic objectives.

Third, this research is the first one bridging the gap between family firms, CSR and SDGs, bringing new data and insights on a globally important, albeit under-investigated phenomenon. Last, from a methodological perspective, one of the novelties of our research is complementing the traditional secondary data sources with data from online social networks (namely, Twitter posts). To the best of our knowledge, case studies do not usually include secondary data from online social networks, though some papers have argued that online social networks could support research into firms' CSR engagement (Patuelli et al., 2021).

Our results bring practical insights. Given the high number of family firms and their increasing tendency to invest in CSR (Mariani et al., 2021), policymakers should be aware of what drives their investments in environmental and societal issues. As SDGs are becoming a trending topic worldwide, policymakers should know that firms' commitment to SDGs also depends on various factors beyond the business dimension. Additionally, as family firms have a strong commitment to environmental and social issues, they need guidance to direct their activities. In this sense, SDGs serve as a guideline orienting the family firm's decision-making.

That said, this research has certain limitations. To begin with, we are not able to generalise the findings owing to the nature of qualitative research and the emphasis on a single case study of a large family firm, although many of the conclusions have been validated by earlier studies. These limitations pave the way for further research. First and foremost, further studies on implementing SDGs in family businesses is essential. Consideration of various contingency factors (e.g., size, nation) and the heterogeneity of family firms might also yield fresh insights. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the values and ideas that underpin the behaviour of the owning family and define family influence is necessary. Finally, our analysis focuses on a family business, but comparisons with other business types (such as non-family businesses or government agencies) might provide additional insights.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alessia Patuelli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision. **Jonida Carungu:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Nicola Lattanzi:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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