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## **International opportunity perspective on internationalisation of family firms in developing countries**

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**Abstract:** This exploratory study employed multiple case-based approaches to explore and advance our understanding of how family firms recognise international opportunities in developing countries. As such, we adopted eight Palestinian family firms from different manufacturing sectors, choosing family entrepreneurs as a unit of analysis. The current study aims to improve our understanding of how network ties as a source of information influence family firms' international opportunity recognition in developing countries. Furthermore, the study seeks to understand how family firms' internationalisation in developing countries differs from those in developed countries. The results imply that family entrepreneurs recognise international opportunities relying on both social and business ties, but business ties seem more significant and influential. The findings also indicated that the family entrepreneurs have been proactive in their attempts to enter international markets. Moreover, family entrepreneurs in developing countries are more proactive than those in developed countries.

**Keywords:** international opportunity recognition; networks ties; internationalisation of family firms; developing countries.

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## 1 Introduction

Family firms dominated the business landscape, with a growing presence in foreign markets (Arregle et al., 2021; Cirillo et al., 2021). Many academics and scholars have investigated the consequences of family involvement in foreign expansion (e.g., Metsola et al., 2020; Arregle et al., 2021). Because of the uniqueness of family firms' internationalisation, scholarly activity in this area has increased (Alayo et al., 2020; Debellis et al., 2021). The internationalisation of family firms is developing into a significant research area (e.g., Sciascia et al., 2010). However, there is little research on family firm internationalisation, and the theory offers mixed predictions (Fernández and Nieto, 2014; Sluhan, 2017). Many scholars suggest that research findings are inconsistent, incomplete, and insufficiently grounded in the international business literature. And therefore, they conclude that our knowledge in this area is unsatisfactory (Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Fernández and Nieto, 2014; Pukall and Calabro, 2013). However, family firms have traditionally focused on domestic markets; they increasingly find themselves obliged to get internationalised to survive and grow in a market that is becoming more globally competitive (Fernández and Nieto, 2005; Graves and Thomas, 2006, 2008; Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Kryeziu et al., 2022). Yet, in order to internationalise, family firms must first recognise opportunities in the international markets. Although opportunities may exist, they cannot be exploited until the family entrepreneur recognises them and realises their value for the business (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). A number of researchers (e.g., Crick and Spence, 2005; Ellis, 2011; Ozgen and Baron, 2007; Singh, 2000) have suggested that an entrepreneur's contacts and network ties with others are important in the opportunity recognition process. Through networks, the firm develops relationships that allow them to access resources (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988; Purkayastha et al., 2018). The network model of internationalisation indicates that the firms' networks act as bridges to foreign markets (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988). Moreover, the recently revised Uppsala model of internationalisation gives recognition to the importance of networks (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). However, very little is known about the role of networks in the case of the internationalisation of family firms (Kontinen and Ojala, 2010; Pukall and Calabrò, 2013; Kampouri et al., 2017).

Family firms in the Middle East face internationalisation challenges due to a lack of understanding of foreign markets and outdated management systems, which limit their entry into international markets to acquisitions of foreign enterprises (Davis et al., 2000; Samara, 2020). In this context, the family firm network, particularly the personal relationships that the family has with individuals and entities in the host country (Gupta et al., 2010), has a positive impact on their willingness to expand their operations into foreign markets (Zain and Kassim, 2012).

The current study focuses on developing countries, particularly Palestine, as a unique context to investigate the internationalisation of family firms. Undoubtedly, developing countries have received very little attention from academic inquiry. To date, only limited research is directed in this context (Kiss et al., 2012). Hence, we chose Palestine as a location for our study because Palestine is different from other country's context. For instance, the economic and political environment in Palestine is not stable, and the uncertainty is very high due to the conflict in the region, which makes the context unique. Perhaps family firms in such a context are forced to internationalise and do business abroad because opportunities are limited at home because of the conflict.

The current study attempts to understand how the network ties of family firms perform in recognising international opportunities for the internationalisation of family firms in developing countries. Moreover, the study attempts to understand how family firms' internationalisation in developing countries differs from the findings of the prior literature on the internationalisation of family firms in developed countries.

Accordingly, the present study answers the following questions:

- 1 How do family firms in developing countries exploit network ties in recognising international opportunities?
- 2 How does the emerging empirical evidence differ from the findings of the prior literature on the internationalisation of family firms in developed countries?

The current study makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the network model of internationalisation (Johanson and Mattsson, 1998) by investigating how network ties function in family firms' international opportunity recognition. The interest in understanding the methods used by family entrepreneurs for identifying and exploiting international opportunities are under-researched (Chandra et al., 2009; Dimitratos and Jones, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). Moreover, there is a lack of networking knowledge in family firms' internationalisation because relatively few articles adopting a network perspective have been included in previous reviews (Arregle et al., 2021). Second, the study contributes to the literature on family business internationalisation by investigating the poorly researched role of networks in family firm internationalisation. Moreover, the study focuses on developing countries, particularly Palestine, as a unique context.

Our study structure is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on international opportunity recognition, internationalisation of family firms, network ties, activeness of network ties, and why we chose developing countries as the context for the research. Section 3, the research methods and data collection are provided. In Section 4, the findings are presented. Finally in Sections 5, 6 and 7, the conclusions, recommendations, and future research directions are provided as well.

## **2 The literature review**

### *2.1 International opportunity recognition*

According to researchers, the most essential and necessary activity for firms' internationalisation is opportunity recognition (Chandra et al., 2012). Exploration and exploitation of opportunities are part of the international opportunity recognition process, which assists a firm in mobilising relevant resources (Cao et al., 2014). Although opportunities may exist, they cannot be exploited until a firm or an entrepreneur recognises them and realises their value for the business (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Here, the main point of interest is how a family business discovers opportunities that others do not (Kirzner, 1997; Shane, 2000; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). According to the research on opportunity recognition, information plays a critical role in this process through accessing, retention, retrieving, and integrating such information into meaningful patterns (e.g., Ozgen and Baron, 2007; Shane, 2003; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Ozgen and Baron (2007) classify the information on opportunity

recognition into three social categories: mentors, informal networks (e.g., current or past customers, current or past suppliers, acquaintances, family members, and close friends), and participating in professional forums (e.g., conventions, conferences, seminar, and workshops). Several researchers (e.g., Crick and Spence, 2005; Ellis, 2011; Ozgen and Baron, 2007; Singh, 2000) have proposed that an entrepreneur's contacts and network ties with others are critical for getting information about new opportunities. Family firms often build new networks to facilitate their international activities in foreign markets (Kontinen and Ojala, 2011b; Leppäaho et al., 2021; Kryeziu et al., 2022). Furthermore, the participation of the family entrepreneur in his social and business networks influences opportunity recognition (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Coviello and Munro, 1997; Johanson and Mattsson, 1988; Loane and Bell, 2006; Sharma and Blomstermo, 2003; Singh, 2000). Indeed, the size of a family entrepreneur's network is related to opportunity recognition (Ozgen and Baron, 2007; Singh, 2000). Opportunity recognition is defined by Baron (2006, p.107) as "a cognitive process (or processes) through which individuals conclude that they have identified an opportunity." However, little is known about the methods used by entrepreneurs for recognising international opportunities. International opportunity recognition is the first step in the internationalisation process and requires more systematic research attention than it has received because it is the trigger that starts everything off. As a result, the critical question here is how family firms identify and exploit opportunities in foreign markets.

## *2.2 Internationalisation of family firms*

Internationalisation has been defined as a strategic process of firms increasing involvement in international operations across borders (Caputo et al., 2016). It has been argued that the internationalisation of family firms differs from the internationalisation of non-family firms (Fernández and Nieto, 2005; Graves and Thomas, 2006; Kontinen and Ojala, 2010). Sciascia et al. (2010) found that different levels of family ownership impact the internationalisation of these firms. This may be due to the fact that family firms are less likely than non-family firms to internationalise (Fernández and Nieto, 2005; Graves and Thomas, 2006). Moreover, family firms are less prone and slower to internationalise than non-family firms (Gallo and Estape, 1992; Calabrò et al., 2013; Ray et al., 2018). When compared to non-family firms, family firms have different entry modes, paces, and levels of permanence in international markets (Avruchir et al., 2016; Boers, 2016). From the vantage point of networking, family firms do not form networks as easily as non-family firms (Graves and Thomas, 2004; Roessl, 2005). Family firms are usually at a disadvantage compared to non-family firms when accessing resources and capabilities required for managing a high-growth process like internationalisation. For example, they have financial difficulties (Chittenden et al., 1996; Friedman and Friedman, 1994); they tend to have a conservative attitude toward risk (Ward, 1998); they lack managerial capabilities (Graves and Thomas, 2006, 2008), and finally, they lack in bridging network ties (Graves and Thomas, 2004). According to researchers, family firms can overcome their lack of critical resources for internationalisation, such as financial, human, and marketing, by focusing on family-specific assets like trust, altruism, social capital, and network ties (Casillas and Acedo, 2005; Casillas et al., 2010; Segaro, 2010) and incorporating values that may promote internationalisation, such as knowledge, experience, and proactivity (Felicio et al., 2012).

Many scholars (e.g., Alessandri et al., 2018; Arregle et al., 2017; Bannò and Trento, 2016; Graves and Thomas, 2008; Merino et al., 2015; Tsao et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020) found a negative relationship between family ownership and level of internationalisation of the business. Researchers agree that family firms are significantly different from non-family firms in pursuing non-economic goals (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2018). Xu et al. (2020) argue that increasing international scope creates higher resource demands, increasing the risk of socio-emotional wealth (SEW) losses. One possible reason that SEW preservation may be a significant restriction to the internationalisation of family firms is the required creation of external business relationships (Metsola et al., 2021). In comparison with non-family businesses, family firms are often limited in their decision-making by their non-economic strategies and wealth generation that have their origin in the ‘familiness’ of the company, e.g., in ownership, management, and involvement (Metsola et al., 2020). However, SEW has yielded evidence that family firms are more inclined to internationalise (Carr and Bateman, 2009; Zahra, 2003), challenging the widely held belief that family firms avoid international investing due to an emphasis on preserving SEW.

The current study is developed in developing countries to explore and investigate the internationalisation of family firms in unique contexts where the firms often lack sufficient resources, including financial, managerial, and technological ones (Zhu et al., 2007). According to Xu and Meyer (2012), developing countries are different from developed countries in several aspects, including what follows: less stability and efficiency of markets due to less transparency; more extensive information asymmetries; and high risk and uncertainty. Such distinct features imply that some of the assumptions of existing theories may be less appropriate for developing economies. The internationalisation of developing-country firms is significant because they face additional liabilities and challenges in the early stages of their international expansion, particularly negative ‘country of origin’ effects (Ramachandran and Pant, 2010). Also, a lack of experience in exporting to and operating in foreign countries, exacerbates the challenges and risks of international expansion (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Sapienza et al., 2006). Some research from developed countries (Arregle et al., 2012; Calabrò et al., 2013; Zahra, 2003) and China (Liang et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2020) have found both a direct and a moderating influence on family engagement on the internationalisation of family firms. Studies on the internationalisation of family firms anchored in understudied yet distinct institutional contexts such as Asia (Sharma and Chua, 2013; Wright et al., 2014) will contribute to the theory of family business internationalisation. However, research on developing economies has emphasised the importance of networks and connections (Peng, 2003; Zhu et al., 2007). According to Shirokova and McDougall-Covin (2012), since entrepreneurs in developing countries lack adequate legal regulation and stable political environments, they may turn to their networks as they seek international opportunities. The fact of the matter is that many recent studies have extended the domains of the existing theories. However, most of them are still based on current theories from mature and developed economies (Kiss et al., 2012). The majority of existing research on family firms’ internationalisation and the role of networks in international opportunity recognition has been conducted in developed countries (Tasavori et al., 2018). Yet, empirical research on the internationalisation of family businesses from developing economies is lacking (Carney et al., 2015; Sabah et al., 2014). Given the significant differences in the political, economic, and cultural

environments of developing economies, there is a need for family business scholars to investigate the international opportunity recognition and internationalisation of family firms in developing countries as the results of studies done in developed economies may not be generalisable to developing countries' firms. However, there is a need to focus more on the context of developing economies to enable the researchers to develop new theories as well as to expand, modify and reassess the existing theories in the fields of the family business (Bruton et al., 2008). Finally, the overwhelming majority of the research in developing economies has focused mainly on China, states in the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, there is almost an absence of research focused on Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (Bruton et al., 2008). Hence, focusing on Palestine as a Middle Eastern country, the current study will provide new insights into the family business literature, which has not been investigated so far within this context.

## *2.3 Network ties*

### *2.3.1 Types of networks*

Networking relationships allow the family firms to connect to various networks outside the company (Kontinen and Ojala, 2011b). Most family firms rely heavily on networks to expand into foreign markets, network ties have been recognised as a critical aspect of family firm internationalisation (Ciravegna et al., 2014; Leppäaho et al., 2021). Furthermore, Kotorri and Krasniqi (2018) argue that managers can improve their ability to adapt their firms' strategies to the demands of international markets by developing social and professional networks and learning foreign business ethics and practices. The internationalisation of family businesses is a gradual process characterised by incremental learning (Kryeziu et al., 2022). According to the network model of internationalisation (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988), internationalisation is related to developing network ties with other firms belonging to a network in foreign markets. Firms could have ties with different actors in foreign markets, for example, with customers, distributors, suppliers, competitors, and non-profit organisations. The majority of firms used various network ties to facilitate their internationalisation efforts (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988). Consistent with Kontinen and Ojala (2011b), the present study considers three categories of network ties: business ties (formal ties e.g., suppliers, customers, local and foreign strategic partners, distributors, and competitors), social ties (informal ties, e.g., acquaintances, family members, and close friends), and intermediary ties (e.g., international exhibitions). A business tie refers to an existing tie between individual business partners (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Coviello and Munro, 1997; Ojala, 2009). Through business ties, family firms share and exchange various resources and knowledge, which enable firms to overcome problems and assist the international operation in foreign markets (Kryeziu et al., 2022). Informal ties refer to social relationships, for instance, with friends and family members (Coviello, 2006; Zhang et al., 2016). Social ties assist family businesses in recognising international opportunities (Kontinen and Ojala, 2011a, 2011b; Zaefarian et al., 2016) and are a source of knowledge that leads to a competitive advantage (Basly, 2007). Gibbs et al. (2007) suggest that small family business owners rely heavily on social ties to gather information on their customers, competitors, and suppliers. In the intermediary tie, there exist no business transactions between the seller and the buyer (Ojala, 2009). Intermediary ties can link actors in different markets and, as a result, initiate international business activities

between the seller and the buyer (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005). However, there is a third party, such as an export promotion organisation or an organiser of the exhibition, and that party contributes to facilitating the establishment of the network ties between the buyer and the seller (Ojala, 2009).

### *2.3.2 Activeness (proactive versus reactive)*

The active role of family firms' entrepreneurs in searching for new information is essential in opportunity recognition (Baron, 2006; Hills and Schrader, 1998). Hills and Schrader (1998) found that an active search for opportunities through personal contacts was regarded as more beneficial than the identification of opportunities from public information sources such as magazines and newspapers for entrepreneurs. However, the formation of network ties with other actors can be either active or reactive. According to Johanson and Mattsson (1988), active networking means that the entrepreneur takes the initiative. Thus, an entrepreneur will proactively search for new network ties or actively utilise existing networks. In reactive networking, the initiation comes from the buyer (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988). It means that an entrepreneur will reactively respond to initiations from his/her existing network, or even that the initiative comes from outside the existing network/s. Several studies concentrate on specific aspects of the internationalisation process, such as identifying international opportunities. The findings diverged once more here. According to Zaefarian et al. (2016), family firms do not proactively seek out international opportunities but rather learn about them through accidental discovery, such as information gained through acquaintances and social networks. Koller (1988) found that most entrepreneurs recognised opportunities rather than seeking them for their firms. Other studies in the past years have shown that recognising valuable information about opportunities happens coincidentally without actively searching for them (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Kirzner, 1979). Also, Shane (2000) reports through in-depth case studies of eight sets of Austrian entrepreneurs who exploit a single MIT invention that none of the case firms in his study actively sought out opportunities before their discovery, but the opportunity was recognised haphazardly. Kontinen and Ojala (2011b), in their study, reported that the ties involved in international opportunity recognition were found to be weak, having been formed in international exhibitions or derived from an unsolicited order. In another study by Kontinen and Ojala (2011a), it has been found that international opportunity recognition of family SMEs is more related to alertness to new international opportunities than to an active search for opportunities. Finally, Ellis (2011) reported that most opportunities recorded in his study (87%) were discovered rather than sought for. Marinova and Marinov (2017) reach the opposite conclusion, concluding that most family firms studied actively sought international clients. We conclude that family firms' international expansion does not follow a consistent pattern (Arregle et al., 2021).

## **3 Methods**

Since the present research follows the objectives related to an understanding of how family firms in developing countries recognise international opportunity through network ties, a qualitative research approach would be the most proper for the study at hand. A quantitative strategy often limits the researcher's ability to study context and

environment. Adopting an ethnographic approach in non-quantitative research would enhance our knowledge and understanding of such pertinent and critical factors [Dana and Dana, (2005), p.83]. Moreover, it is appropriate for achieving a new understanding of the intricate details of a particular phenomenon under investigation [Strauss and Corbin, (1998), p.19]. More specifically, the main aim is to build theory in the area of the network model of internationalisation and family business internationalisation, to broaden existing theory by extending and refining the categories and relationships that have been left out of the literature (Locke, 2001). For this purpose, we conducted a theory-building qualitative study to understand the unexplored role of network ties for international opportunity recognition in the context of family firms in developing countries. However, as noted by Hall (2005) and De Massis and Kotlar (2014), there is a need in the field of family firms for qualitative research that both draws on and generates theory because family businesses are characterised by complex relationships and interactions (De Massis et al., 2012). Furthermore, this is consistent with recent family-written studies based on qualitative methods (De Massis et al., 2014; De Massis and Kotler, 2014; De Massis et al., 2013). Moreover, recent research has emphasised the potential of qualitative methods in addressing issues of contradiction and paradox in family firms (Fletcher et al., 2016). Hence, we applied a multiple case study method, similar to approaches introduced by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003). We considered a multiple-case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003) as the adequate research strategy for the current research for several reasons: first, case studies are best positioned to answer ‘how’ questions regarding a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has no control. Second, we wished to acquire rich, in-depth data (Wright et al., 1988) to gain a deep understanding of a complex issue within its real-life environment in which a particular action (such as opportunity recognition) takes place (Yin, 2003). Third, case studies facilitate the inductive gathering of new insights (Sutton, 1997), which may have been originally unknown to the researchers. Shane (2000, p.453) argues that the case study method allows the investigation of how opportunity recognition operates in a situation where “all of the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated through experimental design.”

The case firms were selected for theoretical reasons rather than random sampling. Further, the selection of the firms for investigation was based on an overall theoretical perspective as recommended in Eisenhardt’s (1989) study. Hence, we followed Yin (1994) in selecting cases where the phenomenon under study is transparently observable. Eisenhardt (1989) recommends that researchers choose between four and ten cases, as it may be difficult to generate a complex theory with less than four, while greater than ten can result in ‘death by data asphyxiation’ [Pettigrew, (1990), p.281]. For this study, eight internationally active Palestinian firms from manufacturing industries were selected. To be eligible as a case firm, the firm should be Palestinian and should be family-owned.

Defining a family firm is still challenging because multiple approaches and dimensions could be applied (Ejupi-Ibrahimi et al., 2020). However, consistent with the earlier literature, for instance, Graves and Thomas (2008) and De Massis et al. (2014) in this study, we adopted the following three criteria to distinguish family firms from in which the family

- 1 controls the largest block of shares or votes
- 2 has one or more of its members in key management positions (Zahra, 2003)
- 3 the entrepreneur perceives the firm to be a family firm (Westhead et al., 2001).

This definition is based on two criteria of ownership and management presented, for instance, by Graves and Thomas (2008), and on the notion of continuity presented, e.g., by Zahra (2003). However, we considered family entrepreneurs as the unit of analysis in this study. In fact, it is accepted by entrepreneurship theories that individuals recognise opportunities, not firms (Mort and Weerawardena, 2006; Ozgen and Baron, 2007; Singh, 2000; Venkataraman, 1997). Several sampling strategies were used to select the eight case firms that met the criteria outlined above. These included opportunistic, convenience, snowballing, and theoretical selection methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### *3.1 Sample and data collection*

This research relies on qualitative analysis of interview data. The methodology responds to Dana and Dumez (2015, p.155), who argue that "... deductive qualitative research is theory-driven and makes use of a conceptual model ..." providing researchers with focus and orientation. The main form of data collection was a semi-structured interview guided by a list of topics. In the interview process, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. However, the study used interviews as a primary source of data, though the utility and reliability of interviews as a form of data collection. The interviews are subject to scholarly debate; some emphasise the fruitfulness and underutilisation of self-reports and firsthand narratives to understand subjective work experiences (e.g., Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). In contrast, others stress the weaknesses of such approaches for the reason of the tendency of informants to adjust their responses to maintain a positive self-image and create favourable impressions (e.g., Paulhus, 1984).

Palestine was chosen as the location of study cases because the business environment in Palestine differs significantly from that of developed economies. In countries where the domestic market size is small, internationalisation is an important growth strategy, forming part of efforts to guarantee long-term survival (Autio et al., 2000).

We identified a set of entrepreneurs who could potentially have been included in the study through preliminary interviews with professionals working with the Federation of Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture, as well as the Palestinian Trade Center (PALTRADE). They provided a preliminary list and references of family entrepreneurs with export activities from their businesses. We sought a representative sample of family businesses to build and expand on the theory.

We selected a subsample of firms that met the above conditions. Eight family entrepreneurs were chosen to participate in the interviews, as shown in Table 1. The final sample included different family firms, with the firm size ranging between 10 and 600 employees with an average of 118 and the firm age ranging between 7 to 60 years since its foundation. The fieldwork was carried out in July and August of 2013 in Palestine in the West Bank. It was impossible to include Gaza Strip due to its complex political situation.

**Table 1** Information on the case firms

<i>The firm</i>	<i>Establishing year</i>	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Title of the interviewee</i>	<i>Family ownership</i>	<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Industry segment</i>	<i>The start of internationalisation</i>	<i>Duration of the interview</i>	<i>Mode of internationalisation</i>
A	1994	Second	CEO (one of the owners)	100%	20	Aluminium industry	2000	75 min	Direct exporting and via subsidiary
B	1994	First	CEO and co-founder	70%	50	Coated abrasive product	1995	65 min	Direct exporting
C	1997	Second	CFO (one of the owners)	57%	70	Stone and marble	2003	60 min	Direct exporting via agents
D	1993	First	CEO and co-founder	100%	600	Sanitary and plastic products	2008	80 min	Direct exporting and via subsidiary
E	2006	First	CEO (the owner)	100%	10	Olive wood handicrafts	2007	70 min	Direct exporting
F	2001	First	CEO	100%	27	Footwear industry	2001	65 min	Direct exporting via agents
G	1952	Third	CEO (the owner)	100%	15	Olive wood handicrafts	1978	60 min	Direct exporting via dealers
H	1953	Second	R&D, and quality manager	100%	150	Scales and metallic furniture	1975	60 min	Direct exporting via distributors

The steps to be taken:

- At the outset of each case, rapport and mutual trust were established with the selected interviewee, who is mainly in charge of international affairs. This interviewee was briefed about the research project through a written project summary and a telephone call.
- We undertook a semi-structured interview with each respondent (lasting on average between 60–90 minutes).
- Secondary information regarding internationalisation activities (such as websites, annual reports, and project documentation) was collected from each firm.
- All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A second listen was conducted to ensure correspondence between the recorded and transcribed data. In addition, at this stage, a telephone follow-up and e-mail communication were carried out with the respondents to collect further information and clarify any ambiguous issues.
- The interviews at each firm followed a similar procedure. The interviewees were first asked to describe and present some information about their businesses, including demographic (e.g., age and size) and historical information, and then explain their firm's internationalisation history.
- When the main issues of the interview were touched on, short questions such as 'could you describe this? How? Why?' were posed to go deeper into the issue.
- To address and specify the objectives of our analysis and systematically develop the interview questions, we followed a pyramidal algorithm for interview question development (Wengraf, 2001). Therefore, the central research question was articulated into the following theory questions: how do family firms exploit network ties in recognising international opportunities? What are the most network ties used in family firms for international opportunity recognition? How do family firms proactively or reactively look for export opportunities? We developed those to be included in the interview protocol.
- Before analysis, information gathered through case studies was manipulated using data categorisation and contextualisation techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data was then analysed using a structured process that included a preliminary within-case study, an explanation-building investigation, and a cross-case comparison.
- In the data ordering phase, a detailed history of each firm was drawn up, based on interviews and written documents, because, as Pettigrew (1990) has noted, chronologically organising incoherent aspects is an essential step in understanding the causal links between events.

#### **4 Findings**

This section presents the network ties through which the opportunity to international markets was recognised by the entrepreneurs belonging to the case firms. In so doing,

first of all, international opportunity recognition will be delved into the perspective of network ties as business ties/formal ties (with other firms), social ties/informal ties (with family, relatives, and friends), and intermediary ties (trade exhibitions). Then, based on the previous literature on the topic, it will be discussed whether the networking activity of the present cases can be seen as either proactive or reactive with respect to their attempts to search for international opportunities. Finally, a comparison will be made between our emerging empirical evidence in the current study and the prior literature in the context of developed countries.

#### 4.1 *Types of networks*

As shown in Table 2, network ties in the form of business, intermediary, and social ties were involved in the international opportunity recognition of family firms. To begin with, it is worth noting that business ties were the most commonly used ties by family entrepreneurs for identifying international opportunities in case firms. Firms B, D, F, and H recognised international opportunities primarily through business ties. For example, firm D took advantage of the opportunity to enter international markets by establishing a subsidiary in Jordan as the first step in its internationalisation process after conducting extensive market research.

**Table 2** Types of network ties involved in the recognition of opportunities in the international market

	<i>Business ties</i>	<i>Intermediary ties</i>	<i>Social ties</i>
The family firm	D, F, H and B	C and G	A and E

As a result, they began to distribute their products in the market via this subsidiary. Similarly, one of the family members in Jordan had chosen to run a company there. They used the subsidiary as the leading centre to export to several countries worldwide in the second step of their internationalisation process. As a result, we consider the ties used by firm D to be business ties. The following is a summary of the entrepreneur's experience from firm D:

“We had always planned to export our products, so we decided to target the Jordan market by establishing a new subsidiary because we were already familiar with it. We hoped to expand our operations into new markets, which we were able to do. Our targeting strategy was founded on a direct search for the targeted markets and participation in international trade shows.”

In the case of firm B, the essential network tie for recognising international opportunities was a business tie. The story began with firm B, when the entrepreneur travelled to Jordan in search of potential business partners interested in their products. He began exporting to Jordan after meeting some agents there. Following that successful experience, they expanded their exporting activities to several regional markets. Firm B's exporting manager described his experience as follows:

“We chose the Arab countries as our target markets after developing our products to meet international specifications. We began specifically with Jordan as the first step in our internationalization journey. Because of its similarity to our market, starting with Jordan proved to be the right decision. As a result, our successful experience began in international markets.”

In the case of firm F, the family entrepreneur recognised that domestic markets were being overburdened by domestic and imported products, primarily from China, resulting in domestic market dumping. As a result, he decided to expand sales into new markets, particularly neighbouring markets such as Jordan and Egypt. Following that, he travelled to these markets with samples in search of new opportunities. As stated by the general manager of firm F:

“As we were about to close because Chinese products had dumped domestic markets and competition had become so stiff, family members made the decision to target neighboring markets, specifically those similar to our market. Following that, I traveled to Jordan and Egypt in search of exporting opportunities until I found some wholesalers willing to buy our products.”

The previous generation influenced firm H’s experience in exporting. After the company’s success in domestic markets, the founder decided to expand into international markets. As a result, the founder entrepreneur began his internationalisation journey in Jordan by establishing a new subsidiary there; later, he expanded the firm’s activities by exporting to other Arab countries.

Social ties were the most crucial network ties in the international opportunity recognition in firms A and E. In the case of firm A, the social network tie was critical in international opportunity recognition because the firm established a new distribution centre in the Jordan market with the assistance of family members who lived in Jordan. For example, those family members assisted in providing information, renting facilities, and connecting with business partners, among other things. The Jordanian market was deemed the most desirable for family businesses because it is the closest and most similar to the Palestinian market. It is worth noting that due to historical and political circumstances, many Palestinian families have been dispersed between Palestine and Jordan. Finally, one of the Jordanian family members was chosen to run the distribution centre. The following is how the entrepreneur in firm A described his decision to enter the Jordanian market:

“First and foremost, we began to consider exportation to Jordan because we had many relatives there and frequently traveled there for social reasons. In fact, we received critical assistance from family members there before establishing our first distribution center. Finally, we hired one of those family members to run our business in Jordan because we trusted them.”

In the case of firm E, the exportation experience began when the entrepreneur called one of his friends who worked and lived in Germany and asked for assistance in gathering information and identifying potential exporting opportunities. His friend was familiar with the olive handcrafts industry so he could find good exporting opportunities and business partners. The owner-manager made the following remarks about firm E:

“At the time, I recall that many factories in the same field had begun to export to Europe and the United States with the assistance of friends and relatives who lived there. Furthermore, due to the volatile political situation, there were few opportunities in domestic markets. As a result, I called one of my friends who lived in Germany and asked him for assistance in finding an export opportunity there, and that is what happened.”

In the last two cases (firms C and G), the opportunities were critical at international trade shows. Both firms used trade exhibitions to find suitable business partners in international markets, but neither focused solely on a specific target market; instead, they

wanted to meet business partners from other countries. Participation in international exhibitions generates more information about international opportunities than any other source. People have common interests, and they are highly motivated to meet and form network ties. Firm C's general manager described the importance of trade shows for his company as follows:

“Participation in trade exhibitions is significant because it is where all of our contacts are made, and it is also where our exporting experience began. I want to emphasize that what happens after attending trade exhibitions is more important than what happens during them; follow-up communication with potential partners is critical. I'd also like to emphasize that the most valuable participation is simply in specialized trade shows where we can find the right partners.”

Firm G's German market awareness began after the entrepreneur visited the country several times for social purposes. As a result, he cherished the idea of starting his exporting experience from Germany. The decision was then made to attend a trade exhibition that was taking place at the time. The following is how the entrepreneur from firm G described his experience:

“We chose one of the trade shows to attend after deciding to target the German market. We were able to connect with some business people who later became our business partners due to our participation, which proved to be very beneficial to us.”

#### *4.2 Networking activeness of the firms*

The case firms' networking activeness was measured along a continuum (see Figure 2). Based on the interview data, the firms' level of proactiveness in recognising international opportunities will be classified as highly proactive, fairly proactive, or reactive. First, a firm's level of proactiveness will be considered high if it proactively planned and sought opportunities to enter international markets through formal ties. Second, if a firm sought out new contacts in international markets through trade exhibitions or social ties, it will be regarded as fairly proactive. Finally, the firm will be considered reactive if a firm did not do anything to international markets, recognised important information about opportunities coincidentally without actively searching for them, or received unsolicited orders. The approach was highly proactive in four of the eight case firms, while the other four cases were fairly proactive, putting them in the middle of the continuum. Because no firm received unsolicited orders during the preliminary stage of its internationalisation experience, none of the cases were placed on the extreme of the continuum near the reactive side. Furthermore, no firm began its internationalisation process by chance or in response to outside initiations. Indeed, family entrepreneurs in firms A, B, D, and H were highly proactive because they were looking for international opportunities with specific target markets, plans, and goals. Furthermore, these firms conducted full or partial marketing research. For example, the entrepreneur from firm A was proactive in his internationalisation efforts because he had established a new distribution centre in the Jordanian market. Moreover, he planned to enter this market ahead of time. Hence, this company is on the proactive end of the continuum when recognising international opportunities.

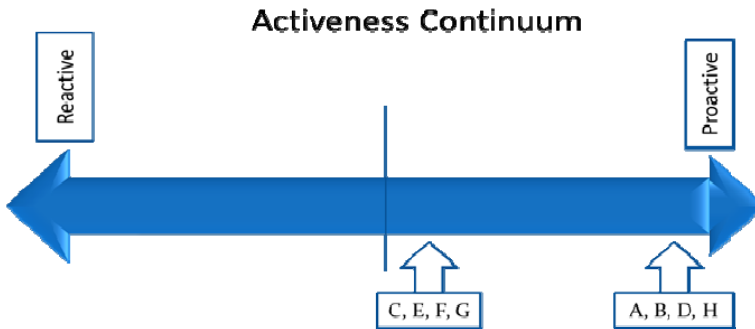
**Table 3** Level of activeness in the case firms (personalised examples)

<i>Firm</i>	<i>Level of activeness</i>	<i>Personalised example</i>
A	Highly proactive	“We had a strategic goal to target and expand our activities in the Jordan market. Therefore, a strategic decision was made to establish a new subsidiary there.”
B	Highly proactive	“Our plan was to start our exportation experience in Jordan since it was similar to our market. To this end, I traveled to Jordan to meet potential business partners who could be interested in our products, and fortunately, I found suitable distributors for our products.”
D	Highly proactive	“Our experience in exporting started from the Jordan market after we had conducted market research. Hence, we decided to establish a subsidiary there to distribute our products. Then, we succeeded in exporting to other markets such as Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Kuwait, Germany, Ukraine, and Turkey. We depended mainly on direct search in target markets in seeking opportunities in addition to participation in important international trade exhibitions.”
H	Highly proactive	“We established an office for sales in Jordan as a distribution channel for our products. Moreover, we used this office as the main point for exporting to a number of other Arab countries.”
C	Fairly proactive	“We participated in international exhibitions seeking potential business partners. We were interested in the USA and Europe markets, and we received the first order from Spain. Since then, we have kept participating in international exhibitions on a regular basis.”
E	Fairly proactive	“I was interested in the USA market as the largest Catholic assembles was living there. Therefore, it was considered the most important and attractive market for our handcraft industry. As such, I began to connect with some of my friends and relatives living there, till one of my relatives helped me find good opportunities in the USA market.”
F	Fairly proactive	“We were seeking an opportunity to export our products anywhere. We Just wanted to keep afloat in light of a significant decline in our domestic market share. As a consequence, we traveled to Jordan and Egypt with samples of our products looking for distributors.”
G	Fairly proactive	“The first market we exported to was Germany, and that happened after we had participated in a trade exhibition there. We were looking for exporting opportunities in Europe without a specific market in mind, but the German market was the first market we targeted.”

The remaining case firms, C, E, F, and G, take a fairly proactive approach to international markets, placing them roughly in the middle of the continuum. This is because they intended to expand their business into international markets. Some of them, for example, had made a strategic decision to internationalise without considering a specific target market, or they had participated in international exhibitions to connect with business partners from all over the world. This fact indicates that they had considered the need for new international markets, with the option of following up if they found promising opportunities. Firms C and G, for example, took part in trade exhibitions related to their

industry. However, they did not actively seek specific opportunities within a particular market; rather, they attended international exhibitions to seek out new contacts, regardless of the country from which the connections originated. Furthermore, despite conducting a formal search for international opportunities, firms E and F can be considered fairly proactive because they did not have a specific market or plan, and their investment in the internalisation process was low. They wanted to stay afloat by expanding into new markets. Finally, Table 3 provides personalised examples from case firms.

**Figure 1** The level of activeness in the case firms in their search for international opportunities (see online version for colours)



## 5 Discussion

The current study's findings indicate that business ties are more important than social ties in recognising international opportunities for family businesses in developing countries. Based on this, four of the eight cases used business ties as the primary context for recognising international opportunities. On the other hand, only two firms recognised the opportunity through social ties. As a result, social ties play a minor role in international opportunity recognition compared to business ties. Moreover, the study discovered that information obtained through social ties is of poor quality and accuracy. Furthermore, the current study's data analysis revealed that six out of eight cases relied primarily on business ties in the advanced stages of its internationalisation process. This finding suggests that as family firms gain international experience, they rely more on business than social ties. Indeed, these findings are consistent with Coviello (2006), who contends that business ties predominate throughout all stages of internationalisation for new international ventures. According to Kryeziu et al. (2022), by embedding family firms in business networks, they can gain knowledge, information, and experience in foreign markets, allowing them to understand local customers' needs better and develop and modify products. As a matter of fact, social ties are most beneficial in straightforward and uncomplicated industries. For example, in response to the question, "why don't you look to your social ties when looking for international opportunities?" Most family entrepreneurs who do not rely on social ties to seek international opportunities stated that their social network members are unspecialised and lack knowledge of our industry. Although social ties can be a reliable source of information about new opportunities, they are less likely to generate new and unique information (Burt, 1992; Hayton et al., 2011).

Ozgen and Baron (2007) report that social relationships with family members and close friends do not improve entrepreneurs' ability to identify new opportunities. Moreover, according to Kontinen and Ojala (2011b), family SMEs recognise international opportunities through their business networks rather than social or familial ties. Managers are assumed to interact with business networks; thus, these networks can provide them with unique information they may not have access to through their social ties (Burt, 2004; Singh, 2000). As a result, we might argue that family firms in developing countries are more reliant on business ties than social ties, owing to these ties' inability to assist them in penetrating new markets. These findings lead us to postulate the following propositions:

*Proposition 1:* Family firms recognise international opportunities by using business ties more than social ties or intermediary ties.

Moreover, this study indicates that only two-family entrepreneurs recognised the opportunity for foreign market entry through trade exhibitions as a primary context. It is also worth noting that only two of the eight family firms in this study used trade exhibitions as a primary tool for identifying international opportunities. In contrast, five of the eight family firms maintained annual participation in international trade exhibitions. This finding is consistent with previous research (see Altnaa et al., 2021; Ellis, 2000; Measson and Campbell-Hunt, 2015; Gerschewski et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2017; Meyer and Skak, 2002; Senik et al., 2011) that has found that intermediary networks such as business meetings, trade shows, and government agencies assist family firms in meeting potential business partners and acquiring resources, mainly foreign market information and knowledge and regulations. As a result, intermediary networks positively impact family firms' international strategies by lowering barriers and assisting with foreign expansion decisions (Gao et al., 2010; Narooz and Child, 2017). It should also be noted that family businesses compensate for their limited bridging network ties by participating in international exhibitions where they can form new network ties (Kontinen and Ojala, 2011b). This is due to the fact that family firms in developing nations lack the necessary experience to enter foreign markets. As a result, they attend international exhibitions in search of possibilities to network with other firms in the target markets. On this basis, we can postulate the following propositions:

*Proposition 2:* Intermediary ties (trade exhibitions) are important for recognising international opportunities for family entrepreneurs in the early and advanced stages of internationalisation.

According to the current study's findings, family entrepreneurs were proactive rather than reactive in their search for international opportunities. Indeed, the approach was highly proactive in half of the case firms, fairly proactive in the other half, and reactive in none of the cases. Consequently, there was no case in which an international opportunity was identified through an unsolicited inquiry. The case firms with a medium level of activeness realised the international opportunity via trade exhibitions. Therefore, the high level of activeness towards opportunities in the international markets in the present study may lie because family entrepreneurs in developing countries must make extensive efforts to enter international markets due to their lack of reputation, competitiveness, and the negative image of their country of origin. The findings are not in line with the literature (see Chandra et al., 2009; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011a; Kraus et al., 2017; Zaefarian et al.,

2016) which states that family firms tend to learn about international opportunities through accidental discovery (passive research), such as through the founders/owners' social networks, rather than proactively initiating international opportunity identification and systematic search (active search). However, the study findings align with Marinova and Marinov (2017), who suggest that most family firms studied actively sought international clients.

In the current study, most family firm owners and managers decided to seek international opportunities abroad proactively, and some were drawn to a specific market. In addition, in all cases, the request for information about international opportunities was initiated internally by family members within the firm. SEW dimensions are strongly related to intrafamily social relationships in the literature on family firms (Zellweger et al., 2019), manifesting in the maintenance of family control, emotional attachment, binding social ties, identification, and generational continuity (Berrone et al., 2020). External relationships may jeopardise family legacy, goals, decision-making, and harmony. Furthermore, take precedence over rational economic decision-making at times (e.g., Gómez-Mejía et al., 2011). According to Xu et al. (2020), increasing international scope increases resource demands and the risk of SEW losses. Therefore, family firms will desire to preserve SEW and reactively look for international opportunities. However, according to our results, family firms in developing countries proactively search for international opportunities. We can explain this by pointing out that the number of companies operating in international markets from Palestine is limited. However, suppose the family business will expand and grow in global markets. In that case, it may be forced to search for opportunities effectively due to a lack of experience and valuable networks and a lack of a good reputation for the products manufactured in that region.

Given these facts, the study concludes that family businesses in developing countries are proactive in searching for international opportunities. These facts also lead us to the following proposition:

*Proposition 3:* Family firms are typically proactive rather than reactive in their attempts to enter international markets.

This section discusses the differences between the current study's emerging empirical evidence and prior literature findings in the context of developed countries. According to the study's findings, there is no significant difference between developing and developed countries in terms of network ties primarily used by family firms. In terms of social ties, existing literature in developed countries suggested conflict results. For example, some studies emphasise the importance of social ties in discovering opportunities (see Altnaa et al., 2021; Crick and Spence, 2005; Ellis and Pecotich, 2001; Jeong et al., 2017; Rutashobya and Jeansson, 2004; Zaefarian et al., 2016; Zain and Ng, 2006), whereas others undervalue the importance of such ties (see, Kontinen and Ojala, 2011a, 2011b; Ozgen and Baron, 2007). However, our emerging empirical evidence suggests that the importance of social ties is limited, both in the early and later stages of the internationalisation process within specific and uncomplicated industries. Therefore, the role of social ties remains ambiguous and inconsistent. Furthermore, the current study discovered that business ties are the most important network ties for family entrepreneurs in recognising international opportunities. As a result, this is consistent with existing literature in developed countries that emphasise the significance of business ties as frequently used ties by family firms in recognising international opportunities. This finding is consistent with Coviello (2006), who discovered that business ties dominated at

all stages of new venture internationalisation. When compared to other business ties, one can argue that the potential for recognising international opportunities is far greater than other ties, regardless of whether the study was conducted in the context of developing or developed countries (Burt, 2004). The current study discovered a significant difference between developed and developing countries in terms of activeness in seeking international opportunities. Given this, our emerging empirical evidence suggests that family entrepreneurs are generally proactive in their attempts to enter international markets, as four family entrepreneurs were highly proactive, four were fairly proactive, and none were reactive. As a result, these findings contradict previous research (see Ardichvili et al., 2003; Ellis, 2011; Kirzner, 1979; Koller, 1988; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011b; Shane, 2000; Zaefarian et al., 2016). According to these studies, firms in developed countries are seeking international opportunities in a reactive manner. Finally, based on the findings of our study, the following propositions can be advanced:

*Proposition 4:* There is no discernible difference between developed and developing countries in terms of the types of ties used by family firms to recognise international opportunities.

*Proposition 5:* When emerging empirical evidence is compared to prior literature findings, family entrepreneurs in developing countries are more proactive than those in developed countries.

## 6 Conclusions and managerial implication

The current study provides unique empirical insights into the internationalisation of family firm behaviour in developing countries. It does, however, contribute to network theory and family business studies. Moreover, it shows how different types of network ties (business ties, social ties, and intermediary ties) influence international opportunity recognition and the level of activeness in seeking such international opportunities.

**Table 4** The summary of the main findings

<i>Type on network ties</i>	<i>The first stage of internationalisation</i>	<i>The later stage of internationalisation</i>
Social ties	Limited Important	Not important
Business ties	Highly important	Highly important
Intermediary ties	Limited important	Average important
<i>Activeness of networks</i>	<i>Developing countries</i>	<i>Developed countries</i>
Proactive vs. reactive	Proactive (according to our results)	Reactive (according to the literature)

Table 4 shows that family businesses recognise international opportunities primarily through business ties, with social ties playing a minor role. Although we discovered some evidence of social relationships being used as a source of international opportunities, their role remains limited. In terms of intermediary relationships, they were most often formed at international trade exhibitions. We found them to be important for the internationalisation process. Furthermore, we found that family entrepreneurs were proactive rather than reactive in their attempts to recognise international opportunities.

When these findings are compared to prior literature in the context of developed countries, it appears that family entrepreneurs in developing countries are more proactive than those in developed countries. This seems to be due to a lack of reputation and competitiveness and a negative image of their home country. This is especially evident when considering unsolicited orders, which were not available in any of our cases but were abundant in other studies conducted in the context of developed countries (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Ellis 2011; Kirzner, 1979; Koller, 1988; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011b; Shane, 2000).

The current study's findings have important implications for practice. First, by emphasising the importance of network ties, whether social or business ties, in recognising international opportunities for firms, the study implies to managers and entrepreneurs in family firms that to develop internationally, they must consider the types of network ties they have. Second, they should avoid relying too heavily on personal and social ties, as the study's findings indicate that the information obtained from such ties may lack the level of quality and accuracy required for success. Third, managers should ensure a diverse network of connections, as these will influence their market selection decision and the entire internationalisation process. As a result, from a management standpoint, family entrepreneurs with limited international networks should actively seek new ties that can provide them with novel and valuable information about international opportunities. Moreover, international exhibitions provide a valuable opportunity for family entrepreneurs to network and find suitable business partners. Fourth, while family firms in developing countries may face some unique challenges and barriers to internationalisation (for example, a negative image of their country of origin or a lack of competitiveness), these obstacles can be overcome by actively seeking new networks and relationships. This can provide new and valuable information on international opportunities to family business managers and entrepreneurs. Finally, our research has significant policy implications. Family firms play an important role in the economic development of emerging economies by exporting as an essential component of business strategy. As a result, policymakers in such countries must carefully consider the means and methods for facilitating internationalisation.

## **7 Limitation and future research**

Like all other studies, the current study has some limitations, including the relatively small number of investigated family firms and the length of some of the interviews. Furthermore, while networking in Palestine may differ from that in developed and stable economies, the constructs and methods we used are appropriate for a study based on direct and personal interviews with family entrepreneurs. Moreover, our sample was restricted to family firms in the Palestinian manufacturing sector. However, Palestine faces unique challenges as an occupied country because it lacks a normal or stable political and economic situation. Furthermore, because Palestine has no control over its resources or borders, the possibility of generalising the findings to other developing countries is limited. Furthermore, having only one interview per firm may be viewed as a constraint. However, because the findings of this study cannot be widely generalised due to methodological constraints, the study proposes five hypotheses for further quantitative testing. Finally, based on the research of Saridakis et al. (2019), we could expand the analysis by linking innovation and family firms' internationalisation networks. We hope

that the current study will inspire other scholars to conduct additional research in this field.

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