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The Role of Non-Family Employees' Psychological Ownership in Counteracting Organizational Inertia During the Business Model Innovation Process

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Abstract: This research explores the internal antecedents that affect business model innovation in family firms, with a particular focus on organizational inertia. While existing research has mainly focused on family management, we investigate instead the role of non-family employees. Their actions can be crucial in shaping the success of the business model innovation process, with prior research recognizing organizational inertia as a significant obstacle. We conducted qualitative research using a single case study on a family firm engaged in business model innovation. Our research suggests that psychological ownership among non-family employees may act as an enabling mechanism for overcoming organizational inertia. Our theoretical model illustrates how psychological ownership manifests in specific behaviours that appear to reduce insight, psychological, and action inertia, potentially facilitating the success of the business model innovation process. This study contributes to the understanding of the enablers of business model innovation in family firms and expands our knowledge of psychological ownership, proposing its previously unidentified outcome of reducing organizational inertia.

Keywords: family firms; psychological ownership; organizational inertia; business model innovation antecedents

1 Introduction

Business model innovation, which concerns the modification of key elements of the business model and/or the ways in which they are linked (Foss and Saebi 2017), is

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regarded as one of the most effective tools available to companies for dealing with the rapid changes that are characteristic of today's business environment. In this dynamic context, typified by technological, social, regulatory, and competitive change, the average period for which firms are able to sustain a competitive advantage has decreased significantly (Wiggins and Ruefli 2005). The innovation of the business model is a predictor of a firm's competitiveness and competitive advantage (Bashir and Verma 2019) and represents one of the most viable paths for companies to continue to survive and grow over time. This is especially important in the case of family firms, which have as one of their main objectives maintaining the longevity of the company so that it can be passed on to future generations (Kim and Gao 2013). Although business model innovation is closely related to the well-consolidated research stream on business models, scholars have identified a need for further investigation into the antecedent factors (enablers or barriers) that influence this process (Ancillai et al. 2023; Bashir and Verma 2019; Bashir et al. 2020; Bock et al. 2012; Foss and Saebi 2017; Wirtz and Daiser 2018; Zhang et al. 2021; Zott et al. 2011). Despite the increasing attention to this topic, however, research on the antecedents of business model innovation is still in its infancy (Foss and Saebi 2017) and little has been observed empirically, especially in relation to family firms.

The extant literature has distinguished two main categories of enablers and barriers: internal and external. For example, Bashir and Verma (2019) identified organizational structure, organizational culture, organizational inertia, leadership, and technology as the main internal factors, while Zhang et al. (2021) pointed to market opportunity, situational factors, value network, and technological innovation as external influences. This research examines the internal antecedents of business model innovation within family firms, with a specific focus on organizational inertia. Organizational inertia occurs when the speed at which a company adapts to change is much lower than the rate at which the environment is changing (Hannan and Freeman 1984). It has consequently been identified as a key reason why well-established companies fail to innovate or modify their business models compared to new entrants (Bashir and Verma 2019). This underscores the need in the family business literature to explore organizational inertia, especially given the long-standing heritage that such companies tend to have, which can sometimes be difficult to balance with innovation (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2005).

Business model innovation is a complex and interconnected process, which requires effort at every level of the organization: from the management to the employees as a whole, without any distinction between family and non-family employees (Weimann et al. 2020). Previous strategic management literature on family businesses has focused predominantly on the role of family members in positions of power. However, investigation of the antecedents of business model innovation – especially organizational inertia, which is connected to individual stagnancy (Moradi et al. 2021) – cannot neglect to consider that family businesses are characterized by the coexistence of family and non-family employees, and this idiosyncratic characteristic can influence the innovation processes. Since we were not interested in the top-level decision-making processes that lead to innovation in the business model, but in the way such decisions are implemented and brought to completion, we put the employee role at the centre of our research. We identified the following research questions: How do non-family employees deal with organizational inertia during the business model innovation process in family firms? And what allows to reduce non-family employees' organizational inertia and succeed in the business model innovation process? These questions were open-ended, and we did not have any preconceptions about what we would find from the empirical evidence (Figure 1).

We explored this question empirically using a qualitative approach. More precisely, we carried out a single case study on a medium-sized company chosen because it was a family firm that was succeeding in business model innovation process. The company operates in the telecommunications and energy infrastructure sector, and following the introduction of the new 5G technology, decided to innovate its business model. This new technology required new products and services, competences, relationships, and customers, and represented a great growth opportunity that had enabled the company to almost double its turnover in three years. We collected data from primary and secondary sources, which we examined using the thematic analysis method. This allowed us to adopt a flexible, data-driven approach. Our data showed that the non-family employees felt and behaved as though they owned the company. This had important implications for the way in which they faced the business model innovation process, because it reduced inertia.

After several failed attempts to theorize from the data and link this characterizing element to a theoretical construct (for example, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or organizational identification), we found a correspondence with the concept of psychological ownership (Pierce et al. 2001). Although the different constructs mentioned are all conceptually related and partially overlap (Ashforth et al. 2008), we found psychological ownership to be the most appropriate theoretical lens

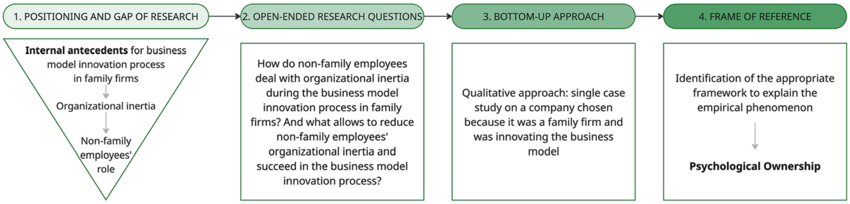

Figure 1: Research design process.

for interpreting our findings (see Table 1 in Appendix A for a detailed comparison). The phenomenon we observed involved a deep connection between employees and the organization. This led us to exclude job satisfaction, as this construct primarily refers to an evaluative assessment of one's own job or its facets, without necessarily implying an emotional bond with the organization itself (Judge et al. 2017). Furthermore, job satisfaction reflects a mere appraisal of the job, rather than an attachment to it (Brooke et al. 1988). Similarly, while organizational commitment captured some aspects of the behaviours we observed (particularly those related to attachment and continuity), it did not fully account for the dimensions of identification and control that were clearly present in our case (Klein et al. 2012). Organizational identification seemed to align more closely with our data, particularly given its focus on belongingness and self-definition through organizational identity (Lee et al. 2015; Rousseau 1998). Indeed, prior research has noted the conceptual closeness between organizational identification and psychological ownership (Knapp et al. 2014). Nevertheless, psychological ownership provided a more comprehensive framework for explaining our findings. It not only reflects the sense of identification and belonging that emerged in our data, but also incorporates the psychological experiences of possession and perceived control, which were central dimensions in the dynamics that we observed (Dawkins et al. 2017).

Using the psychological ownership construct, we developed a theoretical model to explore potential connections between manifestations of psychological ownership and different forms of organizational inertia during the business model innovation process. The novelty of this model is that it creates a link between the already recognized manifestations of psychological ownership and the reduction of insight inertia, psychological inertia, and action inertia (Moradi et al. 2021), which are all regarded as barriers to the business model innovation process (Bashir and Verma 2019). More precisely, the model suggests that psychological ownership, through the manifestation of entrepreneurial behaviours and information and knowledge sharing, impacts the reduction of insight inertia, while through the safety feeling, it overcomes psychological inertia, and finally, through efficacy and efficiency aimed at achieving the firm's objectives as if they were their own, negatively affects action inertia. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has highlighted the role of psychological ownership in overcoming inertia behaviours. While such behaviours are well recognized as having a detrimental impact on the success of the business model innovation process, previous research has only hinted at the impact of psychological ownership on change in these areas (Pierce et al. 2001).

Our study offers three main contributions. First, it enriches the literature on the internal factors that influence business model innovation (Bashir and Verma 2019), particularly in the context of family firms (a setting in which this topic has been largely overlooked). We shed light on the way psychological ownership may help reduce various forms of organizational inertia – namely, insight inertia, psychological inertia, and action inertia – that hinder the business model innovation. Second, this study introduces a novel analytical perspective by examining the role of non-family employees, an often-neglected group that can be pivotal actors within family firms (Calabrò et al. 2019). Given the unique coexistence of family and non-family employees in family firms, which represents an idiosyncratic characteristic of these organizations, this perspective offers new insights into how internal dynamics may influence the innovation process. Third, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore explicitly the potential role of psychological ownership in addressing different forms of organizational inertia – widely recognized as major obstacles to business model innovation (Moradi et al. 2021). While prior research has suggested a general link between psychological ownership and change (Pierce et al. 2001), no previous work has systematically considered its specific relevance in relation to organizational inertia.

This paper is structured as follows: first we outline the theoretical framework of the business model innovation process, focusing particularly on the internal facilitators and barriers, and the psychological ownership theory, as it relates to non-family employees. Subsequently, we discuss the methodology used to answer our open-ended questions and present the findings. Finally, in the discussion section, we highlight the implications of our findings and set out the main theoretical and practical contributions of this study.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Internal Factors Influencing the Business Model Innovation Process

Recently, scholars have considered the business model (Zott and Amit 2010) as a potential unit of innovation (Baden-Fuller and Haefliger 2013; Zott et al. 2011) and have talked about business model innovation (Ancillai et al. 2023; Bashir et al. 2020; Foss and Saebi 2017). Changing the business model formula is pivotal in helping companies to adapt and maintain their competitive advantage (Mitchell and Coles 2003), firm competitiveness (Bashir and Verma 2019), and strategic flexibility (Pohle and Chapman 2006) in response to new competitive scenarios, the advent of new technologies, and the consequent changes in their operating environment (Carayannis et al. 2014; Hossain 2017; Ibarra et al. 2018; Mezger 2014).

According to Foss and Saebi (2017), there remains a research gap regarding the antecedent conditions that facilitate the business model innovation process. These can be both internal and external. Internal factors are important, since the changes arising from business model innovation can involve customer value proposition, profit formulas, key resources, and key processes in an interdependent way. This may require organizational transformation, and the management of any tensions that this creates. In other words, business model innovation has an "organizational dimension", because the way in which a company creates and delivers value is influenced by its internal configuration (Fjeldstad and Snow 2018). In addition, the ability to change the business model is also related to more intangible phenomena, such as employees' perceptions (Foss and Saebi 2015). Building on this view, Andreini et al. (2022) argue that business model innovation should be understood as a process embedded in the organizational context and continuously refined through the interactions between individuals and broader organizational processes. Accordingly, business model innovation should not be analysed solely at the organizational (macro) level, but also at the individual (micro) level, since individual actions and cognitions can interact with (and either enable or constrain) the process. This perspective highlights the importance of considering the role of non-family employees in shaping or impeding business model innovation. In line with this perspective, the nature of the organization, and its tangible and intangible internal factors, has been seen as a key element in supporting or constricting the business model innovation process (Bashir and Verma 2019; Bashir et al. 2020; Bock et al. 2012; Foss and Saebi 2017). Among the internal factors, Bashir and Verma (2019) identified organizational structure, organizational culture, organizational inertia, leadership, and technology as the factors most discussed in previous literature.

This study falls within the research stream of the antecedents of business model innovation, and contributes to advancing knowledge on organizational inertia in the realm of family firms. Literature on business model innovation in family firms is scarce, and the subject area is still in need of exploration and enrichment. Researchers have focused on the factors that influence innovation in this context either negatively (Block et al. 2013; Habbershon et al. 2003; Jocic et al. 2023; Kets de Vries 1993) or positively (Chirico and Nordqvist 2010; Craig and Dibrell 2006; Werner et al. 2018; Zahra et al. 2004), but little has been said about the internal (or external) factors that influence business model innovation in family firms. Recent conceptual work (Labaki and Haddad 2019) calls for further research by highlighting that innovating the business model in family firms requires recognizing the unique catalysts and constraints arising from the intersection of the family, business, and ownership systems (Tagiuri and Davis 1996) and from the emotional attachment to the firm that can significantly shape both the willingness and the ability to innovate the business model.

2.1.1 Organizational Inertia: An Internal Factor Influencing Business Model Innovation

Family firms frequently show inflexibility and resistance to change (Chirico and Nordqvist 2010), and are prone to inertia due to emotional ties to existing assets and rigid mental models (König et al. 2013). Organizational inertia refers to a condition in which companies exhibit a low speed of adaptation, representing a barrier to organizational change (Godkin and Allcorn 2008; Kelly and Amburgey 1991). This concept (which has been adopted in social sciences from physics) indicates a state in which a company is not able to adapt and modify its processes and practices in response to external changes (Singh and Lumsden 1990; Starbuck et al. 1978). When an organization initiates a change process, inertia behaviours appear, due to the embedded nature of the previous model and its related experiences (Huang et al. 2013). This inflexibility stifles innovation (Amabile et al. 1996; Nijssen et al. 2006). More precisely, it is one of the main obstacles to business model innovation (Chesbrough 2007; Huang et al. 2013; Koen et al. 2011; Moradi et al. 2021), because it causes a resistance to change (Godkin and Allcorn 2008; Nelson and Winter 1982) which prevents companies from being efficient, rapid, and engaged in the innovation process. Moradi et al. (2021) identified five different types of organizational inertia: *insight inertia, psychological inertia, action inertia, structural inertia,* and *economic inertia*. *Insight inertia* involves a lack of understanding of the organization's environmental changes (management is not able to sense the environment effectively); *psychological inertia* is manifested in members of the organization that resist change because of the implications it has for relationships, job expectations, new skills, and so on; *action inertia* occurs when, after surveying the environment, the management's response is prolonged or they do not possess the required information to proceed; *structural inertia* refers to the difficulties of changing organizational processes; and *economic inertia* is tied to costs.

Organizational inertia has been recognized as a significant factor contributing to the failure of the business model innovation process in well-established companies (Bashir and Verma 2019). Furthermore, existing research on family firms indicates that these companies are often entrenched in their long-established structures (Weimann et al. 2020) and emotional attachments (Brinkerink et al. 2020). This renders them particularly susceptible to inertia (Santiago 2015). At the same time, the extant literature has also shown some characteristics – such as a low level of formalization – that allow organizations to implement the decision to change more quickly and more effectively (König et al. 2013). Hence, an investigation is needed of the factors that can overcome organizational inertia and prevent family firms from being entrenched in their routinized behaviour. Previous research has mostly focused on the family governing the company (Rondi et al. 2019), and has given little attention to non-family employees as individuals who compose part of the whole (Felin and Foss 2005) and play a pivotal role in determining company success. Understanding the phenomena that affect family business requires observing not only the family members, but also the non-family employees, who are inevitably influenced by the family firm context and their working together with family members. According to Tabor et al. (2018), non-family employees are key participants in the durability and development of the family firm.

2.2 Non-Family Employees' Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership manifests itself when – regardless and independently of formal ownership – a subject feels a certain object as his/her own and behaves accordingly. Pierce et al. (2003, 86) defined psychological ownership as 'that state where an individual feels as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is "theirs"'. During the last 20 years, scholars have tried to further identify and clarify the nature, manifestation, and impact of psychological ownership.

Because psychological ownership "satisfies certain human motives, some of them genetic and others social in nature" (Pierce and Jussila 2011, 30), scholars have observed that individuals can develop feelings of ownership towards a wide variety of targets, as long as these motives can be fulfilled (Olckers and van Zyl 2016, 2017). The "target" refers to the object of possession, which may vary. For instance, it could be the organization itself, or the job. While this flexibility has expanded the range of application of psychological ownership as a concept, it also calls for careful specification of the ownership target. In this research, we focus on organization-based psychological ownership, which refers to ownership directed towards the (family) firm as a whole, rather than job-based psychological ownership, where the target is the specific role (Dawkins et al. 2017).

The psychological ownership construct has been incorporated into the literature on family firms (Henssen and Koiranen 2021; Mustafa et al. 2023) and is used by scholars to explain the behavioural dimension of such firms, with reference to both family and non-family members, and with the aim of investigating both its antecedents and its consequences (Almlöf and Sjögren 2023; Azila-Gbettor et al. 2022; Bernhard and O'Driscoll 2011; Brundin et al. 2023; Henssen et al. 2014; Pittino et al. 2018; Ramos et al. 2014; Rau et al. 2019; Sieger et al. 2011; Sieger et al. 2013). Rau et al. (2019) found that psychological ownership can affect innovation output in family firms by influencing the relationship between generations, though the study itself focused on family members. This current research applies the concept of psychological ownership to deepen our understanding of the perspectives of non-family employees. According to psychological ownership theory, it is not just family members with legal ownership who can behave as owners; non-family employees can also develop psychological ownership and show a high level of personal commitment to the company (Henssen and Koiranen 2021; Rantanen and Jussila 2011). Psychological ownership is thus particularly suitable for exploring non-family employees' emotions, which are a crucial factor in family firms (Ramos et al. 2014), and for explaining their higher personal commitment (Pieper 2010), which is one of the major assets of these companies (Vallejo 2008). In other words, psychological ownership has the potential to explain non-family employees' attitudes towards the company (Bernhard and O'Driscoll 2011; Feldermann and Hiebl 2022; Lee et al. 2019; Ramos et al. 2014; Sieger et al. 2011). The investigation of this behavioural dimension is important precisely because of its impact on the performance of family firms (Luu 2023; Memli et al. 2013).

2.2.1 The Psychological Ownership Construct: Manifestations and Outcomes

Clarifying the conceptual boundaries of psychological ownership is essential, particularly in order to distinguish this concept from related constructs such as organizational commitment, organizational identification, or job satisfaction (Van Dyne and Pierce 2004; Zhang et al. 2021), with which it shares some common elements. Psychological ownership, however, is grounded fundamentally in the concept of possessiveness (Etzioni 1991), and its core differentiator lies in the feeling of possession. This involves placing an external target under one's own control (Brown et al. 2014) and feeling responsible for it (Parker et al. 1997). In contrast, organizational identification refers to defining oneself through organizational membership, and emphasizes identity bonding, without necessarily implying possession or control (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Brown et al. 2014). Organizational commitment reflects an employee's psychological attachment and intent to maintain a relationship with the organization, regardless of ownership or identification (Meyer and Allen 1991). Finally, job satisfaction, rather than being an affective state, is simply an evaluative state that expresses the degree of contentment a person feels about their job (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2012). As such, it can be considered – at most – as a psychological ownership outcome (Zhang et al. 2021). Thus, the feeling of possession remains the distinctive feature of psychological ownership, and clearly sets it apart from these other related constructs (Pierce et al. 2001; Van Dyne and Pierce 2004). For a systematic comparison of the constructs concerned, see Table 1 in Appendix A.

Previous literature suggests that psychological ownership emerges when three factors are satisfied: (a) the *need for efficacy*; (b) the *need for self-identity*; and (c) the *need for belongingness* (Block et al. 2013; Calabrò et al. 2019; Craig and Dibrell 2006; Dawkins et al. 2017; Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007; Habbershon et al. 2003; Kets de Vries 1993; Nelson and Winter 1982; Weimann et al. 2020; Werner et al. 2018; Zahra et al.

2004). The need for efficacy reflects the desire to control and influence, and the ability to modify circumstances (Beggan 1992). The need for self-identity is fulfilled when individuals express themselves through the possession of the object (Dittmar 1992). According to Zhang et al. (2021), it can be concretized both through a spontaneous high level of effort to transform the target into a representation of the employees' self-concept (Chi and Han 2008), or through an investment made by the company to stimulate this effort and make employees think and behave as owners (e.g. profit-sharing plans) (Chiu et al. 2007). Finally, the need for belongingness refers to the sense of being in a place (physical or symbolic) that induces comfort, pleasure, and security (Pierce et al. 2001). This sense is often fostered by organizational tenure, which promotes familiarity and social bonding (Perry-Smith 2006; Pierce et al. 2009), and by access to valuable information, which strengthens the employee's connection to their role and the organization (Chen et al. 2015).

With a few rare exceptions regarding the issue of territorial behaviours (Brown et al. 2005; Guo et al. 2022), research on psychological ownership has mostly led scholars to emphasize its beneficial effects on the organization and on employees' actions and performance, such as the enhancement of efficiency and effectiveness (Liu et al. 2012; Mustafa et al. 2022), commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviour (Avey et al. 2009). Zhang et al. (2021) grouped the positive outcomes of psychological ownership into: (a) *attitudinal outcomes* and (b) *performance outcomes*. Attitudinal outcomes include *job satisfaction* (Avey et al. 2012; Mustafa et al. 2016), *work engagement* (Ramos et al. 2014; Su and Ng 2019), the *reduction of turnover* (Giordano et al. 2020; Knapp et al. 2014; Zhu et al. 2013) and *affective commitment* (Liu et al. 2012; Mayhew et al. 2007; Sieger et al. 2011). As for performance outcomes, psychological ownership has been linked to behaviours such as *knowledge sharing outcomes* (Li et al. 2015; Peng and Pierce 2015; Pittino et al. 2018), as it fosters greater commitment and altruism, making employees more willing to share information (Li et al. 2015). Indeed, psychological ownership motivates employees to "protect, care and sacrifice for their organization" (Pierce et al. 2001: 303), contributing to higher *organizational performance* through a stronger alignment of interests between agents and principals (Sieger et al. 2011, 2013; Zhang et al. 2021). Finally, Pierce et al. (2001) proposed that psychological ownership influences organizational change. In this context, it may also encourage entrepreneurial behaviour by fostering a proactive mindset (Mustafa et al. 2016), as this can lead employees to take risks, drive change, and introduce new ideas, especially when such change is gradual, inclusive, and not imposed from above.

These theoretical insights suggest a potential connection between psychological ownership and specific forms of organizational inertia, particularly those that are directly shaped by employees' behaviours, such as insight, psychological, and action inertia. Figure 2 shows the relationship among the main concepts through a visual

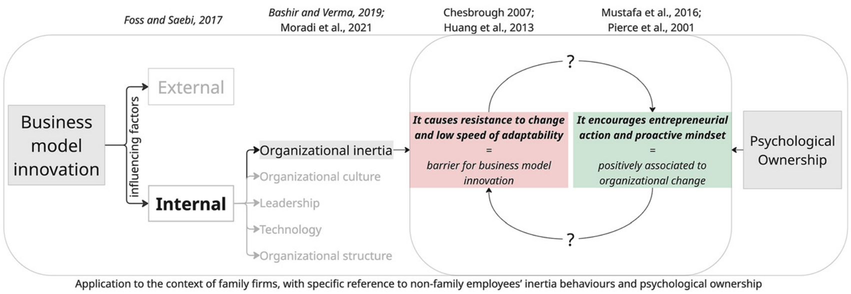

Figure 2: Relationships among the main concepts.

diagram. Although prior research has not systematically examined these links, existing studies indicate that psychological ownership is associated with proactive behaviours (including information sharing), higher levels of commitment, and enhanced initiative (Avey et al. 2009; Li et al. 2015; Mustafa et al. 2016). Such behaviours may plausibly contribute to reducing inertia within organizations by fostering greater openness to change and facilitating adaptive processes, such as business model innovation or other forms of organizational transformation. Moreover, psychological ownership can empower employees to challenge established routines, take risks, and actively participate in shaping change initiatives. It thereby directly counteracts inertia at both the cognitive and the behavioural levels. It is also worth noting that the role of psychological ownership in the organizational change process has been recognized since its earliest conceptualizations (Pierce et al. 2001), positioning it as a key item for consideration.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, as this is considered appropriate for understanding complex processes and evolving phenomena (Langley and Abdallah 2015). It is also the case that predetermined and inflexible methods are regarded as less suitable for analysing changing contexts (Buchanan and Bryman 2007: 487). In addition, we needed an unbounded approach to answer our open-ended research questions, as we began with no expectations regarding the answer, due to the existing research gap. The purpose of the research design was to allow the answer to emerge spontaneously from the data, so that by following a bottom-up approach we would be able to link our hunches to a frame of reference (Suddaby 2006) (Figure 1).

Furthermore, a qualitative approach "*is more apt to capture the specific complexity and dynamics unique to family business*" (Nordqvist et al. 2009). More precisely, this research was carried out using an inductive in-depth longitudinal analysis that allowed us to investigate the situation in depth, and explain how the company succeeded in its business model innovation process. We carried out a single case study to achieve theoretical generalization (Tsang 2014). The case was not randomly chosen (Siggelkow 2007), but was picked specifically as being appropriate for investigating the research questions.[1] This was based on three main characteristics that had been previously identified as minimum requirements: first, the company was experiencing a change in its business model; second, it was a family firm, and thus allowed us to investigate the behavioural dimension of non-family employees; and third, we were given access to a very wide range of sources (Pettigrew 1997) that allowed us to deepen the process over a period of three and a half years. Indeed, even though the research questions to some extent had an open-ended nature, we knew from the outset that we wanted to enter the "black box" of business model innovation in family firms by exploring non-family employees' organizational inertia. However, we did not start the study with a predefined theoretical construct. Psychological ownership emerged inductively from the data, particularly during the first round of open-ended and exploratory interviews, rather than through the use of previously validated measurement scales (e.g. SAPOS; Avey et al. 2009; Olckers and van Zyl 2017; Van Dyne and Pierce 2004). Nevertheless, these instruments informed the design of the second round of interviews, helping us to develop more focused questions relating to the key dimensions of psychological ownership. Psychological ownership itself was only chosen as the most appropriate construct after a careful theoretical analysis of the potential risks related to construct validity (Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010) and interpretative bias. As discussed in the Introduction and detailed in Table 1 in Appendix A, we compared different theoretical frameworks using an in-depth literature review. We also consulted with an external colleague to ensure that our set procedures led to an accurate observation of reality (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). We presented to this colleague selected empirical materials (such as interview excerpts and preliminary themes) to critically assess which theoretical lens best captured the phenomena emerging from our data, before ultimately selecting psychological ownership. Construct validity was further reinforced by triangulating multiple data sources (interviews, direct observation, archival materials) (Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010).

1 How do non-family employees deal with organizational inertia during the business model innovation process in family firms? And what allows to reduce non-family employees' organizational inertia and succeed in the business model innovation process?

3.2 Research Site

SI is a second-generation family firm operating in the telecommunications sector. The company designs and builds telecommunications infrastructure, and has more than 300 employees. This high number of employees is due to the type of work involved, which requires a lot of manpower, but the structure of the company remains simple: the strategic decisions are made by the two family CEOs, who are supported by the first-line managers. These are composed of nine non-family employees and two family employees. Today, the company is led by the second generation; however, they are ready to give way to the third. In fact, the third generation is already working in the company, and the succession process has been outlined. The employees know the company's intentions and are witnessing a gradual shift in control. The telecommunications industry, in which the company has been operating for 80 years, has experienced both small and disruptive changes linked to technological innovation. However, the most disruptive period in the historical memory of the company began in 2019 and is still in progress, with the transition to 5G technology. This has required new infrastructures to be implemented, along with new skills and ways of working, to create the conditions needed to operate in mobile telephony (and no longer only in landlines). This new business activity represents an opportunity for the company because of the present and prospective public and private investments in this new technology, and the higher added value involved arising from the greater professional competences needed. However, it also involves a completely new way of working that calls for new processes, know-how, organizational structure, and external relationships. Thanks to the access we were given to internal documentation, we were able to verify the positive impact of the business model innovation process from an economic and financial perspective: the company's turnover grew from 48 million in 2019 to 88 million in 2023, due to the changes that were introduced within the company. The company changed its offer (by introducing a new product and related services), some of its clients, some of its suppliers, its income model, competences, and its way of organizing the work (in relation both to the teams operating on the construction site and to the company management in handling tenders).

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection period covered three and a half years (August 2020 to May 2024). The business model innovation process had begun in 2019, and during our last conversation with one of the CEOs (December 2022), we understood that all the major changes had been addressed and that we were witnessing a stabilization of the activities, processes, and economic results. Data were mainly collected through primary sources, such as individual interviews with informants who had lived through the process and an initial group interview with the family members involved in the management of the company. The latter allowed us to understand the suitability of the case with respect to the topic of interest, and to collect preliminary information about the history of the company, its activities, and the specificities of the industry. Subsequent interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, which was designed to identify changes in the business model and the impact of these on the employees' work. For instance, interviewees were asked to describe how their work had changed following the introduction of 5G-related products and services. They were also asked to explain how they (and their colleagues) dealt with these changes, so as to investigate the presence of resistance or fears. In the second round of interviews, additional questions were included to explore employees' perceptions of their own influence on the company's operations, and their sense of belonging to and identification with the company. These questions were consistent with the psychological ownership framework, and the areas of focus were developed based on insights from previous literature on psychological ownership (particularly Avey et al. 2009; Van Dyne and Pierce 2004).

We also had the chance to join two meetings in the company. The first of these involved the family CEOs and the front line of management, and had the purpose of sharing and commenting on the results for the year 2021. The second meeting involved only part of the front-line management team, and was an organizational meeting held for the arrival of an important new order. We also had access to secondary sources, including corporate material provided by the company, such as strategic plans, financial statements, organization charts, the website, the company profile, a letter written by a retired non-family employee, and two historical photographs provided by an employee.

Individual interviews were conducted following a previously shared protocol, which outlined the rules of conduct to be followed, to ensure quality and to avoid any bias. For example, we agreed not to reveal to non-family employees that our interest was in family firms, but only that we were looking to explore the change process in companies. Interviewees were selected using an initial list of names provided by the CEOs, combined with the snowball sampling technique (Parker et al. 2019), in which additional participants were suggested by those already interviewed, until these suggestions became redundant or pointed to individuals who had already participated. We decided to conclude the interview process once it became clear that additional interviews were unlikely to generate any new or relevant insights (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The interviews were conducted in two rounds. The first of these was purely exploratory, and designed to provide information about the history of the company, its functioning, and the people who make it up. A loosely structured approach to the collection of data – especially at an early stage – is also important for the researcher to maintain a good degree of flexibility in defining the key aspects to be analysed (Bell and Bryman 2007). In line with this, these interviews were not structured, and we only asked people to tell us about themselves, the company, and the change that they were living through, so that the conversation followed a spontaneous course within the domain of interest. This first round of interviews involved 10 non-family employees and 5 family members (these details are reported in Table 1). Family members were included in this exploratory phase to better understand the ongoing changes within the company and to triangulate their perspectives with those of non-family employees, so as to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the events. A peer not co-authoring the paper was asked for their opinion after the first, exploratory round of interviews, so that the study could avail itself of multiple investigator techniques (Gibbert and Ruigrok 2010). This dialogue with an external party allowed us to improve our practices before the most decisive round of interviews. We repeated this approach before starting the data analysis, by sharing the case study database. Finally, we held a second round of interviews, in which we focused primarily on non-family employees, in line with the aim of the study to explore their perspectives in greater depth. Thus, none of the family members interviewed in the first round, apart from one CEO, were re-interviewed. Only one of the two CEOs was interviewed again at the end of the process, to enable final triangulation of data, and to verify that we had heard from all those with important information.

We collected data from a total of 25 individual interviews (Table 1), a single group interview, and two meetings. The interviews lasted for an average of an hour and a quarter each, and we discussed our impressions and took notes to crystallize our ideas (Bell and Bryman 2007). The other sources listed in Table 1 were used to triangulate the information.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is normally conducted subsequent to the data collection, but in this case, we tentatively began it during the interview process, because we felt the necessity to start familiarizing ourselves with the case by mapping the temporal sequence of the changes that had occurred in the company on a shared file. Visual notes can also help facilitate getting a grasp on the data ((Braun and Clarke 2021), 46). In addition, the meeting with a third researcher not co-authoring the paper, held after the first round of interviews, was useful in providing some suggestions about what was emerging. For example, the third researcher helped us notice the repetition of certain words.

Table 1: Data collected. Not interviewed in the second round due to reasons beyond the scope of the study.

	Interviews			
	Interviewee	**Number of interviews –1° round**	**Number of interviews –2° round**	**Family member**
1	Site manager area 1	1	1	NO
2	Site manager area 2	1	1	NO
3	Human resource manager	1	1	NO
4	Plant manager	1	1	NO
5	Tender and procurement manager	1	1	NO
6	Tender and procurement clerk	1	0	YES
7	Mobile telecommunication manager	1	1	NO
8	Purchase and warehouse manager	1	1	NO
9	Administrative manager	1	1	NO
10	Administrative clerk	1	0	NO
11	Sales manager	1	0	YES
12	Fixed and telecommunication manager	1	0	YES
13	Project manager	1	1	NO
14	CEO 1	1	0	YES
15	CEO 2	1	1	YES
	Total number	15	10	25

Direct observation		
What	**Number of times**	**Pages of notes**
Mobile world congress	1	3
Family CEOs and front-line management meeting	1	7
Front-line management meeting	1	2

Documentation
Financial statement 2019
Financial statement 2020
Financial statement 2021
Financial statement 2022
Financial statement 2023
Company history on website
Thank-you letter by a former employee

The official data analysis phase, however, began in May 2024, upon completion of the collection of the primary and secondary sources (the last acquired source was the financial statement for the year 2023). The data were loaded and systematized in a shared repository, and then read separately to select useful elements and develop the initial ideas. We decided to work separately, so as to have the chance to cross-check the selection of the material and make sure we had not missed anything useful. We then proceeded with the thematic analysis, with the aim of identifying and describing the themes and the relationships between them. The thematic analysis was conducted following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for identifying the major themes within qualitative data. We undertook a process of manual coding data based on the interviews, internal documents, and notes. We began with a broad coding, and followed this with a second phase of analysis that allowed us to refine this work. We only concluded the analysis once we had revisited the data again after a period of time (no shorter than a week), and confirmed that no new themes were emerging (Saunders et al. 2018).

The initial coding phase was conducted independently by both authors. We then met to review and refine the coding together, resolving any discrepancies. The only notable divergence concerned the inclusion of statements relating to individual consideration. After in-depth discussion and further examination of the relevant literature, we agreed to retain this theme in the analysis. This decision was based on both its frequent recurrence in the empirical material and its theoretical relevance, as well as for its consistency with the research question. Our analysis remained anchored to the main aim of the paper, trying to understand from the data the perspective of non-family employees and how they overcame organizational inertia. The process of reducing the raw data into themes (Boyatzis 1998) was guided by the dimensions of psychological ownership (the construct that was assessed as appropriate for explaining the phenomenon after the exploratory analysis described in Section 3.1), as defined by Pierce et al. (2001) and Avey et al. (2009). Excerpts were initially grouped based on their similarities, and this gave rise to five themes emerging from the data. These were then assigned to the dimensions of the construct, according to their alignment with the theoretical definitions. The five themes identified were: "*sense of influence on circumstances*"; "*perception of the family firm as an extension of the self-concept*"; "*social network with family and non-family employees*"; "*long-term relationship with the family firm*"; and "*individual consideration*". For example, under the theme "*sense of influence on circumstances*", we grouped all the statements in which non-family employees expressed a strong desire to bring about change and achieve results within the organization. These statements reflected not only a proactive and entrepreneurial attitude towards the changes they were experiencing, but also a willingness to take ownership of situations, actively drive initiatives, and move things forward. This theme was then traced back to the "efficacy" dimension of psychological ownership through an interpretative and iterative process of engaging with the theory. Indeed, the content of this theme is consistent with the satisfaction of the need for efficacy, which is defined as the expression of a sense of control and influence capable of modifying circumstances (Beggan 1992). The same process was followed for all the other themes (see Table 2). However, some excerpts, although recurrent and relevant, could not be clearly associated with the established dimensions of psychological ownership. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, we chose to retain those reflecting "individual consideration", as they emerged consistently throughout the data, and provided valuable insights for further interpretation and analysis. By means of this process, we gradually moved from descriptive codes to increasingly interpretative and conceptual ones, enabling us to capture meaningful patterns across the dataset. The identification, examination, categorization, and recombination of themes was an iterative and interpretative process that led us to connect our empirical observations with theory and so answer the research questions.

We acknowledge that our empirical data did not fully overlap with all the theoretical dimensions of psychological ownership or organizational inertia. Only three core dimensions of psychological ownership – efficacy, self-identity, and belongingness – were consistently observed. Other dimensions of psychological ownership, such as accountability or territoriality (Avey et al. 2009), were not evidenced in our data. Similarly, some dimensions of inertia, such as structural and economic inertia, remained absent from our analysis, as these forms of inertia are typically linked to organizational structures and resource allocation, rather than to individual psychological or behavioural processes. Their absence is reasonable and consistent with the nature of this study. *Structural inertia* refers to the rigidity of organizational processes, which can make structural change unfeasible, while *economic inertia* is tied to financial costs and constraints; both of these factors lie beyond the direct influence of individual behaviour. The results will be presented in the following section.

4 Findings

Consistent with the interpretive nature of our qualitative inquiry, we do not make any claims for causality. Rather, we present our findings as theoretical propositions and interpretive mechanisms that offer insights into how non-family employees' psychological ownership may contribute to addressing different forms of organizational inertia in the context of business model innovation.

The data analysis revealed that non-family employees perceived the family firm as their own. This overlap was confirmed not only by the words and behaviours of non-family employees, but also indirectly by the family CEOs and other family members

Table 2: Overview of the analysis process, linking emergent themes to the dimensions of psychological ownership.

Emerging themes	Interpretative and iterative process		Psychological ownership dimension
	Theme description	**Theory**	
Sense of influence on circumstances	Non-family employees emphasized their propensity to actively change situations, achieve results and take initiatives, reflecting a proactive and entrepreneurial stance	This aligns with the need for efficacy, and reflects the desire to control and influence, and to be able to modify the circumstances (Beggan 1992)	Efficacy dimension of psychological ownership
"Clients do not wait for you to learn. They purchase a service and naturally expect it to be flawless, even if it is something new for you. From that premise, I began to ask myself how I could help. This led to the idea of creating the Academy, in partnership with [name of the partner] to train people before they join the company. Now service quality is higher and mistakes are much less frequent". Human resource manager			
Perception of the family firm as an extension of the self-concept	Non-family employees described the firm as being part of themselves, and narrated company successes and failures as personal events	This aligns with the need for self-identity which is satisfied when the target (here, the company) becomes part of the individual's self-conception (Chi and Han 2008; Dittmar 1992)	Self-identity dimension of psychological ownership
"The perception of this company as serious, high-quality, and reliable is not just internal. People outside see it. When I talk with others in the area, the difference compared to similar firms is striking. We are well known locally, and there is a strong sense of pride in working here and in maintaining this reputation also in facing this new challenge". Administrative manager			
Social network with family and non-family employees	Non-family employees described feeling part of a social network that extended beyond professional relationships, fostering inclusion and community with both family and non-family members	This aligns with the need for belongingness, which is fulfilled through affiliation and forms of social connectedness that provide comfort, pleasure, and security (Pierce et al. 2001)	Belongingness dimension of psychological ownership
"I have known [names of family members] since 2006, when I came here from [distant place] to study. They have become like a second family, a kind of safety net I did not have otherwise. Of course, once I joined the company there were roles and hierarchies, but our informal relationship I think helped in navigating some critical changes, for instance when (…)". Project manager			
Long-term relationship with the family firms	Non-family employees have a long stay in the company that goes beyond their own career to extends to their descendants, generating	This aligns with the need for belongingness, which is fostered by organizational tenure, as this promotes familiarity and	Belongingness dimension of psychological ownership

Table 2: (continued)

Emerging themes	Interpretative and iterative process		Psychological ownership dimension
	Theme description	**Theory**	
	intergenerational continuity	social bonding (Perry-Smith 2006; Pierce et al. 2009)	
"When I am here with [CEOs names], they often tell me stories about things they experienced with my father who worked here. It moves me deeply, because he passed away twenty years ago now. I grew up hearing good things about SI from him. My father was proud to work for SI, and he passed that feeling on to me. I never saw him discouraged or demoralized, always committed and dedicated." Administrative clerk			
Individual consideration	Non-family employees highlighted being considered for their individual aptitudes, personal needs, and expectations	(/)	No connection with the dimensions of psychological ownership. This represents a valuable insight for further interpretation on the perception of change
"Almost everyone was affected by this change. But let me say, it wasn't traumatic. First, because it did not happen overnight, and second, because the company knew it was asking people to do something unfamiliar, something they had never done before. People could feel there was support, or rather, a kind of shared responsibility and risk. I think that was crucial not taking for granted that people were ready, or treating readiness as something owed, but instead helping them see that it was normal to feel unprepared and even to make mistakes. Does that make sense?" Mobile telecommunication manager			

involved in the business. Collecting the two sets of perspectives was useful for triangulating the data and checking for any lack of consistency between the informants. The family firm represents the target of possession, and this was manifested through a strong sense of control over circumstances and willingness to influence the final results (1); the perception of the company as an extension of the self-concept (2); strong social network with the family and non-family members (3); and the sense of security about having a place, not only during the time working with the company but beyond the end of the working career (4). These patterns suggest that psychological ownership may have shaped the way non-family employees engaged with the business model innovation process. In particular, the alignment of interests between non-family employees and family owners appeared to foster behaviours that mitigated inertia during the change efforts. While our study does not establish causality, it offers an interpretive account of how shared psychological ownership can be associated with reduced inertia-related behaviours during business model innovation.

First of all, our findings suggest that the non-family employees had a sense of control over what was going on in the company (circumstances), over their role content, and over the way in which their job was carried out. This "*sense of influence on circumstances*" shows their attentiveness to the surrounding environment, which allowed them to identify and take on board new opportunities. According to the informants, these opportunities were often discussed with the family leadership, and then, in many cases, pursued. Non-family employees felt part of the business model innovation process – even if not in its embryonic decision-making phase, which came from one of the family members – in the subsequent phase of sensing for opportunities to be implemented consistently with new objectives. Indeed, the interviews highlighted the way the employees felt a natural and spontaneous duty to scan the environment (both internally, and external to the company), in order to help maintain the longevity of the business, so that it must be transmitted to future generations (which was one of the main goals imparted within the company). This "*sense of influence on circumstances*" seemed to counteract any tendencies towards passivity or inertia in recognizing environmental changes, not least because the non-family employees felt that they had a high level of independence (which was made possible because of the clear guidelines and values transmitted upstream).

For example, during the first joint meeting, we noticed that non-family employees were sensitive in scanning the external environment for opportunities not directly covered in the strategic guidelines. In this case, the project manager suggested developing specific skills related to a project he had seen at a telecommunication fair held in Barcelona, in order to make the company ready to respond to future market requests. This proposal, although very future-oriented, was welcomed because it was considered consistent with the company's business aim. The Human Resource Manager offered to identify the most suitable people within the company to take on these skills, to talk further about how to proceed in the next meeting. The following comments also came from the interviews:

> To succeed in this new challenge, I immediately realized that the company's cash flows needed to be improved. The projects that they would have commissioned from us from then on involved the use of greater resources than in the past, which could have put the company in difficulty if it had continued to operate as usual. The problem came from the internal management system and how it was used: I proposed simplifications, which led to shortening the time and obtaining payment from the clients a few months in advance. This is not something that was into my responsibility, but it was clear that it was necessary to change things also by comparing the behaviour of our competitors in this aspect of management. (Site Manager Area 1)

> I am the plant manager, but I really feel like I am the owner. I say this without hesitation. The family knows this, I call them if there are serious problems but otherwise, they trust my intuition and my decisions which I make autonomously also because I have always worked here, my dad worked here. There is mutual trust". (Plant Manager)

Second, our findings indicate that non-family employees often "*perceive the family firm as an extension of the self-concept*", fulfilling a need for self-identity. For example, a story common to all those interviewed concerned the repeated request of non-family employees to continue working even after retirement, so that they could carry on being part of the company. The narratives about the company's successes and failures shared by non-family employees were often framed as personal matters, suggesting a strong sense of identification with the firm. This perceived personal connection appeared to motivate employees to take action towards achieving positive outcomes and avoiding failure. Indeed, any failure – for instance, in the business model innovation process – would have been experienced as a personal failure. Thus, these findings suggest that the employees' self-identification with the company helped in overcoming inertia in the business model innovation process, because it made them more willing to implement the necessary changes and behave in an efficient and effective manner to achieve desired results.

> I'll tell you a nice story that means a lot about how people feel here. ***, who is now our site manager for the area 2, when he was a child and his father worked here, he had wanted the company uniform to dress up at carnival. We also had a picture! He already felt like us… I think it is nice, is not it? (CEO 1)

> What I have done in my life to study and commit myself was in order to work in SI, do you understand? I speak for myself, but it is the same for many others, I have embraced the SI cause and I carry it forward. I want to see what happens and be part of it. When I go home, I think about what I did or did not do for this change we are facing and what I expect from this. We are really going to make something different, bigger and we need to be focused on that. (Site Manager Area 2)

> We are working hard for these changes, and it would be a real defeat not to see an impact on the end-of-period results, it could be frustrating for many. (Administrative Clerk)

Third, our findings suggest the presence of a strong sense of belongingness in relation to both the family and the firm. Non-family employees feel part of a social network that goes beyond their professional relationships with the family or other non-family employees. The data show that non-family employees' "*social network relationships with the family members and non-family members*" allow them to engage in an exchange of information that is useful for building up an overall picture to analyse the competitive environment and the internal functioning of the company. In addition, the direct contact with family management creates the conditions for the creation and diffusion of a homogeneous vision. In other words, strong social networks are a source of information that is useful for observing the surrounding environment and deciding whether and how to welcome new opportunities or identify potential threats. This information exchange was also reinforced by a policy of collaboration between new entrants and older employees: new entrants, even those with experience, are required to work on specific projects involving long-time employees. This is not just a period of training, which is carried out in parallel, but rather an effort to create the conditions for a mutual exchange of visions, skills, and the transmission of the company's founding values. Over the years, this approach has led to major improvements in processes and, according to the CEO 1, proved crucial in ensuring that the entry of many new people did not distort the nature of the company that had been built by the so-called "historical employees".

> The best moment is when I'm in the car with *** (CEO), maybe when she has to go somewhere and asks me for a lift. She always tells me about her doubts for the company's future, about what we have to do". (Human Resource Manager)

> It's not just a company, it's something more for me… it's that relationship with people that is still alive and well, and they've known each other for a lifetime and feel at home. (Sales Manager)

> I've always really appreciated the idea of putting the new guys and us older people in close contact. This thing is very incentivized, and the conditions are created. I know things that they cannot know, I know the values of this company. They are fresh in their ideas, fast. Solutions and ideas were born from these exchanges as well as friendship". (Site Manager Area 2)

Then, social networks are also reinforced by low staff turnover, and a long employment period in the company, not only for the individual, but also for his/her descendants. Indeed, a word that emerged repeatedly in the interviews was "dynasty", in reference to those non-family employees who were the children or nephews of former non-family employees. This situation strengthens bonds and, combined with the prospect of transmission to future generations that is the clear vision of the company, generates a "*long-term relationship with the family firm*". Such long-term ties were perceived as reducing anxiety or defensiveness towards change, as employees expressed confidence in the company's continued existence and their own or their descendants' future involvement. A non-family employee confessed that he was very proud of his daughter's university career as it was brilliant and very useful, but he was somewhat disappointed, because it was not consistent with SI's business activities and consequently, she would never be able to work in the company. We interpreted this anecdote as closely resembling the typical owner's desire in family business succession of transmitting the company to heirs, even if in this case the protagonist was a non-family employee without any legal ownership.

> We are the second generation in my family to work here. A very long story. I have witnessed all the changes and future changes cannot scare me because in the past there have been dark moments, but we have always overcome them. This is an industry that has changed many times. At least three times that I remember, and a solution has always been found by putting people at the centre. As far as I can remember, no one has ever been left behind. (Tender and Procurement Manager)

> The third generation is now here and it is progressively taking place. We all are happy about their entrance because they have new ideas, competences. Also, this big change we are facing I am sure that is the fruit of their intuitions, and let me say this will take us into the future. I am happy about that! (Tender and Procurement Manager)

> We have dynasties within our company. Perhaps we have even reached the third generation! This has always led to positive effects. People are rooted because their parents who had a good time here passed it on to them. Just as they often passed on valuable skills and information to them. (CEO 2)

Ultimately, the data also showed the strong presence of *individual consideration*, which is manifested, for example, by considering individual aptitudes, personal needs, and the expectations of employees. This helps to deal with change because it is perceived as more moderate and less disruptive with respect to their role content. This individualized attention was often associated with a smoother experience of change, as employees perceived adjustments as moderate and non-disruptive with respect to their specific roles. During the meetings, we noticed a great consideration of non-family employees' needs, and usually, the actions to be carried out emerged and were assigned on a voluntary basis:

> The change we faced and are currently facing has generated a modification in our organization. Many new people with skills, that we did not have before, have entered both at the lower and at the management level. We have often had to move people or give them new training that would allow them to deal with change but what we have always tried to keep in mind are their aptitudes and needs. And not only that, because in this company relationships are also important. It has always been clear that the change should not be too invasive in this sense, otherwise we would have hit a wall. On the contrary, I can state that thanks to this approach the majority of our employees is collaborating well. (Human Resource Manager)

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the business model innovation process in family firms and contribute to the current debate on family business innovation (Rondi et al. 2019; Urbinati et al. 2017) by investigating the role of non-family employees in the innovation process. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research on family firms has explored business model innovation by focusing on the perspective of non-family employees and the role that they play. Instead, previous research has concentrated almost exclusively on the involvement of family members in this process (Bogers et al. 2015; Soluk et al. 2021; Weimann et al. 2020). Our study thus contributes to the literature on the internal factors (Bashir and Verma 2019) that are able to influence the business model innovation process and finds psychological ownership as an intangible internal facilitator.

The findings from our case research confirm, in line with the literature on psychological ownership (Pierce et al. 2001), that not only subjects with legal ownership (family members) can behave as owners, but also non-family employees (Wagner et al. 2015). This leads this latter group to have a high personal commitment to the organization (Henssen et al. 2014). What emerges from our analysis – and herein lies the novelty of this study – is that these manifestations of psychological ownership appear to foster a series of behaviours that may reduce organizational inertia in a context of evolution and non-disruptive business model innovation. Starting from the data, we developed a theoretical model (Figure 3) that seeks to explain how the manifestation of psychological ownership represents a facilitator in the business model innovation process of family firms by reducing inertia (insight, psychological, and action inertia). While the model may appear complex and multi-layered, the novel contribution of this study lies in proposing a conceptual bridge between manifestations of psychological ownership and the potential reduction of organizational inertia. Indeed, manifestations of psychological ownership are already well known in the literature (Avey et al. 2009; Giordano et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2012; Mustafa et al. 2016; Pittino et al. 2018; Rau et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2021), as is the positive relationship between the reduction of inertia and business model innovation success (Bashir and Verma 2019; Bashir et al. 2020; Huang et al. 2013; Moradi et al. 2021).

First of all, we noticed that non-family employees, in satisfying their sense of control over circumstances (1), have the natural instinct to scan the internal and external environment to look for new opportunities and threats. This is the first step in the business model innovation process (Teece 2018). This confirms that

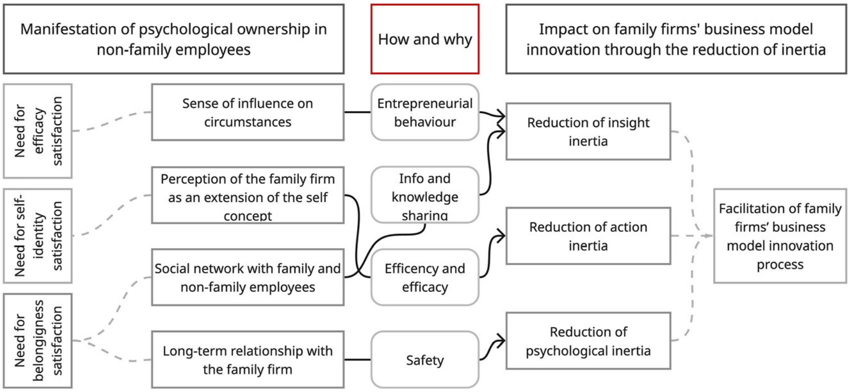

Figure 3: The influence of non-family employees' psychological ownership on organizational inertia.

psychological ownership has an impact on *entrepreneurial behaviours* (Mustafa et al. 2016), through the effect of the business initiatives of non-family employees. Consequently, these aptitudes serve to reduce insight inertia (Moradi et al. 2021), because non-family employees continuously examine the environment to make sure they have it under control, and to respond accordingly.

Second, we found that when non-family employees perceived the family firm as an extension of their own self-concept (2), they were more willing to work towards achieving the company's goals. This is because they experienced these as personal successes or failures. The data indicate that the identification with the company leads non-family employees to make the effort to actively implement the company's objectives in an efficient and effective way (Liu et al. 2012). Indeed, they experience the success or failure of the company as something personal, and this in turn generates engagement and an alignment of interests between agents and principals (Sieger et al. 2013), including in the effort to innovate the business model. By following this reasoning, led by the data, we confirm that psychological ownership positively affects efficiency and effectiveness (Liu et al. 2012).

Third, the data show that when psychological ownership manifests itself through the establishment of social networks with family and non-family employees (3), a negative effect on insight inertia emerges (Moradi et al. 2021), because people are more willing to share information and knowledge in the best interests of the organization. This equips non-family employees with the necessary tools to analyse the environment around them and select information that is useful to the company. Previous research on psychological ownership has identified knowledge sharing as one of the main outcomes (Han et al. 2010; Li et al. 2015; Peng and Pierce 2015; Pittino et al. 2018) but no previous empirical study has observed its relevance for overcoming inertia.

Finally, we also found that, when the satisfaction of non-family employees' need for belongingness (4) was concretized through a long-term relationship with the family firm, both retrospective and ongoing, they perceived this as something immutable. This produced the sense of safety needed to reduce psychological inertia (Moradi et al. 2021). This long-term orientation generates less resistance to change because it reduces anxiety regarding the protection of old relationships, skills, and job expectations.

Furthermore, this study also empirically enriches Pierce et al.'s (2001) intuition about the influence (positive or negative) that psychological ownership has on organizational change, when this is not "violent". The change that we observed indicated "a before and after" in the company, but this did not appear to be imposed, revolutionary, or subtractive. On the contrary, people felt part of the decision-making process, and thought they would benefit from the expected results. This can be identified as job satisfaction that is able to promote change (Mustafa et al. 2016). We found that the impact of change is moderated by the perception of a strong individual consideration (5) (Bass et al. 2003). This, according to the literature, is a trait of transformational leadership (Burns 1978), as well as an antecedent to the development of psychological ownership (Zhang et al. 2021). This confirms that psychological ownership promotes organizational changes only when they are not subtractive (Pierce et al. 2001). In more disruptive forms of business model innovation – characterized by a significant threat to established roles or structures – psychological ownership feelings may translate into conservatism, territorial behaviours, or resistance to change, as indicated by previous research (Baer and Brown 2012; Basco 2023). In these studies, disruptive scenarios led ownership feelings to undermine organizational flexibility, amplifying defensive reactions and resistance to change. This highlights the need for future research to understand the conditions that transform psychological ownership from being a driver to becoming a barrier to strategic renewal.

Therefore, our model sheds light on the relationship between some of the manifestations of psychological ownership and the reduction of insight, psychological, and action inertia, which is pivotal in facilitating the business model innovation process. This research advances the literature on business model innovation by deepening and broadening our understanding of its internal facilitators, and answers the need for further exploration of the issue of business model innovation in family firms. Considering the family firm context in which the study was carried out, and in contrast to past research that has stated that family businesses are more resistant to change (Kets de Vries 1993), this study suggests that analysis cannot ignore the roles and perspectives of non-family employees. We contribute to the literature on family business innovation by showing the importance of the role of non-family employees' psychological ownership, which is consistent with the idea that their behaviour affects firm continuity (Vallejo 2008) through the successful implementation of change. In doing this, we show that continuity – regarded as the essence of family businesses – is not safeguarded solely through the action of family members, which is what most scholars have focused to date (Duran et al. 2016; König et al. 2013; Rondi et al. 2019). In fact, prior literature has stressed that family involvement in the management of the company constitutes a central driver in family firm innovation (Calabrò et al. 2019; De Massis et al. 2016). Our study adds to this stream of research by offering a broader and novel perspective that includes the role of non-family employees. Our findings suggest that the perception of ownership among non-family employees may elicit behaviours similar to those typically associated with family owners. In particular, when non-family employees develop a sense of psychological ownership, they tend to act in ways that can be assimilated to the typical intent to protect socio-emotional wealth, which usually distinguishes members of the owning family (Gómez-Mejía et al. 2007). Socio-emotional wealth, understood as the non-financial value associated with personal and emotional attachment to company and being part of it, is protected through a proactive attitude aimed at avoiding failure – in this case, the failure of the business model innovation process. Similarly, we suggest that the development of psychological ownership can lead to steward-type behaviours (Davis et al. 1997) aimed at safeguarding the firm's long-term continuity as previous literature has already highlighted with regard to family members (Madison et al. 2016). Moreover, in line with this, if it is true that tradition as a guiding force for innovation is transmitted from one generation to the next within family businesses (Erdogan et al. 2020; Kammerlander et al. 2015), our results suggest that such transmission, although typically associated with family members as the actual owners, should not be viewed as confined to family generations alone. Rather, psychological ownership can allow non-family employees to carry forward the tradition too, thereby contributing to the innovation that ensures continuity. Therefore, we contribute to integrating psychological ownership with established theoretical perspectives in the family business field, suggesting that "feeling the firm as one's own" can prompt non-family members to behave in ways similar to family owners.

Furthermore, this study also enriches knowledge of psychological ownership by finding a previously unknown outcome: the reduction of inertia, and the consequent positive effect this has on business model innovation. However, consistent with Pierce et al. (2001), we suspect that psychological ownership could also have a negative effect on change, when this occurs in a more disruptive way then in the case studied. Future research could focus on investigating this specific aspect.

From a practical perspective, this study advises companies that want to innovate their business model to pay attention to the level of psychological ownership inherent in their non-family employees in order to be able to evaluate, alongside other elements, the possibility of resistance to change and take appropriate measures. Our findings suggest that psychological ownership can have a positive effect on the reduction of inertia in cases of incremental or evolutionary change. Psychological ownership should be assessed prior to the business model innovation process to inform the design of the change and enable a judicious allocation of responsibilities. Such assessment could be carried out either through a dedicated questionnaire or through structured interviews specifically designed for the purpose. For example, the validated scale developed by Avey et al. (2009) (the Psychological Ownership Questionnaire – POQ) represents a valuable tool for managerial and consulting purposes. This instrument enables the assessment of not only the presence of psychological ownership, but also its underlying dimensions, including those associated with potentially negative outcomes, such as territoriality. It distinguishes between two forms of ownership – preventive and promotive – thus offering the assessment of its multidimensional nature.

Having prior knowledge of both the level and the type of psychological ownership, together with an assessment of whether employees perceive the upcoming change as disruptive or incremental, allows managers to design targeted interventions to mitigate inertia behaviours. As stressed by Olckers and van Zyl (2017), psychological ownership develops through three key routes: by controlling the ownership target, by knowing the ownership target, and investing in the ownership target. These pathways can guide the design of corrective or enabling actions before and during the business model innovation process.

In concrete terms, managers should be aware that in more disruptive transformations strong ownership feelings might instead generate resistance, territoriality, or defensive behaviours. In such cases, psychological ownership could be complemented with leadership practices (such as individual consideration) that help employees feel that their personal interests and well-being are being recognized and safeguarded during the change process (whether disruptive or not). To operationalize these considerations, human resources managers could design and schedule structured dialogue sessions with employees throughout the change process, thereby institutionalizing active listening as an integral component of any strategic and organizational change. These structured and planned moments of active listening should serve a dual purpose: first, to acknowledge and address employees' concerns, in order to anticipate and implement concrete actions that mitigate resistance, territoriality or defensive behaviours (especially during disruptive changes); and second, to foster non-family employees' participation in decision-making, and thus instil in them a sense of ownership in carrying the change forward and perceived control over the ownership target. Such meetings should therefore be strategically planned not only in terms of timing, but also with respect to the participants involved, balancing 'protected' spaces – where employees can speak freely without hierarchical pressures – with sessions that include family members or direct supervisors. They could then serve a more strategic purpose in shaping the decision-making process.

Moreover, human resource managers may reinforce employees' knowledge of the firm by promoting a structured understanding of its history and values. Rather than leaving the transmission of these elements to informal interactions or to the mere passage of time, organizations can purposefully design dedicated initiatives aimed at embedding these narratives into the employees' experience. Such initiatives can be particularly beneficial for new entrants and can be facilitated by long-tenured employees – who may act as internal ambassadors. In family firms, involving family members themselves in transmitting these narratives is especially valuable, given their central role in embodying and preserving the firm's heritage.

Finally, by strengthening employees' investment in the ownership target, firms may provide tailored training activities that are both firm-specific and change-specific. These initiatives help employees develop competencies that are directly relevant to the transformation at hand, thereby strengthening their personal investment in the "ownership target" and supporting a smoother and more committed engagement in the business model innovation process.

In smaller organizational contexts, where structural or organizational limitations may hinder the implementation of such practices, it may be necessary to rely on external consultants (e.g. change management professionals), who can both design and implement these activities, acting as intermediaries between the family and non-family employees.

6 Limitations and Future Research

Measuring psychological ownership remains a well-recognized challenge in the literature, and how to assess it effectively is still under debate (Olckers and van Zyl 2017). As highlighted by Olckers and van Zyl (2017), no single method can fully capture its complexity. In this study, we relied solely on qualitative thematic analysis, which allowed us to explore the phenomenon in depth, but also limits the ways in which psychological ownership can be operationalized and compared across studies. In light of this, we suggest that future research adopt a mixed-method design that combines qualitative thematic exploration with standardized psychological measurement tools. The latter would also offer the advantage of anonymity and might help participants feel more comfortable about expressing sensitive or potentially negative aspects of psychological ownership, such as territoriality (Avey et al. 2009). Indeed, we acknowledge that while our findings emphasize the positive role of psychological ownership, prior research suggests that psychological ownership may also generate defensive behaviours. This opens up important avenues for future research, and we encourage future studies – especially those adopting mixed-method approaches – to investigate the potential downside of psychological ownership in relation to organizational inertia, as this remains an underexplored but significant area of inquiry.

This study also invites reflection on the potential cultural and contextual specificity of the pattern we observed. The research focused on an Italian medium-sized company that operates at a local and national level, with no multinational structure, and is characterized by the clear and active leadership role played by family members. Contextual factors may have shaped the way psychological ownership manifested itself, and influenced employee behaviours (Olckers and van Zyl 2016). Pierce et al. (2003) argue that both the nature of the ownership target and the way individuals express feelings of ownership may vary considerably across different countries and cultural settings, depending on the societal locus of self-concept. Similarly, Olckers and van Zyl (2017) stress that psychological assessment must account for social and cultural diversity, as the same questions or constructs may produce different meanings and responses in different cultural environments. We encourage future research to examine how national (or local) culture, employment relationships with family members, and organizational characteristics may influence the development of psychological ownership and its impact on organizational inertia. Specifically, we suggest adopting a multiple case study approach in order to bring out, through meaningful comparisons, the elements that allow for greater empirical generalizability of the results regarding non-family employees' psychological ownership and its effect on organizational inertia during the business model innovation processes. For example, comparative studies could involve family firms of similar size and from the same sector, but located in different countries. This would help address the way cultural contexts shape the emergence of psychological ownership and its effect on the business model innovation process. Our case takes place in Italy, where the active involvement of the owning family in the firm's management is a distinctive feature. This characteristic may influence how psychological ownership develops among non-family employees, shaping their proximity to the ownership target. Likewise, it would be valuable to examine multinational family firms by comparing headquarters – where the owning family is present – with geographically distant subsidiaries, in order to deepen understanding of how the presence of family members affects the development of a sense of ownership of the company among non-family employees. Furthermore, our case concerns a long-established family firm, now entering its third generation, and thus strongly embedded in its local context. This rootedness may influence how psychological ownership develops, as many non-family employees are already familiar with the firm's history, which forms part of the history of their local territory. These considerations suggest that long-established family firms may differ from younger ones in how psychological ownership emerges and how it affects employees' response to change. Future research could therefore compare firms with different degrees of organizational longevity to better understand how these contextual elements shape psychological ownership and, consequently, business model innovation success. Finally, contrasting cases of family firms undergoing incremental versus disruptive change would provide insights into how different levels of difficulty affect the role of psychological ownership in counteracting inertia during these processes.

APPENDIX A

See Table 1 in Appendix A.

Table 1: Comparison among adjacent constructs: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, and psychological ownership.

	Job satisfaction	**Organizational commitment**	**Organizational identification**	**Psychological ownership**
Definition	Job satisfaction refers to an evaluative state that expresses the degree of contentment with one's job/-work (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2012; Weiss 2002).	Organizational commitment is a psychological state that (a) characterizes the employee's relationship with the organization, and (b) has implications for the decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organization (Meyer and Allen 1991, p. 67). Commitment is like "an internal force that binds an individual to a target (social or non- social) and/or to a course of action of relevance to that target" (Meyer 2009: 39).	Organizational identification refers to the extent to which an organizational member defines himself/herself with reference to his/her organizational membership (Ashforth and Mael 1989). It is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992: 104). It presupposes a higher psychological involvement than organizational commitment (Edwards 2005; Klein et al. 2012).	Psychological ownership is rooted in theories of possession, and it is a state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership (or a piece of that target) is theirs (i.e., it is 'MINE') (Pierce et al. 2003).
Target	Whole job or "facet" of the job (Judge et al. 2017).	"Target free" (organization, group, individual, goals, occupations, supervisor) (Meyer et al. 2015) or multiple targets (Klein et al. 2022).	Organization but can include relational, occupation/profession, and work groups identification (Sluss and Ashforth 2007; Vough 2012)	Organization, job, specific aspects (e.g. a novel idea, a project) (Dawkins et al. 2017).
Psychological state	Emotional state of liking the job that one	Affective attachment/bond (Meyer	Self-definition through organizational identity (Lee et al. 2015;	Possessiveness that is potentially independent of an

Table 1: (continued)

	Job satisfaction	Organizational commitment	Organizational identification	Psychological ownership
	performs with an evaluation (Brooke et al. 1988)	and Allen 1991; Klein et al. 2012).	Rousseau 1998). Through this process of categorizing the self into a more inclusive social entity, "*I becomes we*" (Brewer 1991, p. 476).	objective legal claim (Vandewalle et al. 1995). Psychological Ownership is an emotional attachment to the target that exceeds the cognitive evaluation of the target (Dawkins et al. 2017).
Type of Connection	Evaluative appreciation of the target.	Relational with the target.	Identity with the target.	Possession and control of the target.
Main Sub-concepts	1. Job factors (intrinsic): recognition, achievement, possibility of growth, advancement, responsibility, work itself. 2. Hygiene factors (extra-job factors): salary, interpersonal relations (supervisor, subordinates, peers), company policy, working conditions, factors in personal life, status, job security. Herzberg et al. (1959).	1. Affective commitment: employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer and Allen 1991, p. 67). 2. Continuance commitment: employees' need for employment. It typically refers to the employee's awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization (Meyer and Allen 1991, p. 67). 3. Normative commitment: employee's feeling of obligation to continue employment (Meyer and Allen 1991, p. 67).	1. Affective component: Emotional attachment to the group. (emotional attachment, belonging* and membership). 2. Cognitive component: Knowledge of being a member. (self-categorization; value and goal sharing); 3. Evaluative component: Positive evaluation of the organization (e.g. pride). 4. Behavioural (conative) component: Including actual behaviour – more specifically, 'participation in action'. (Dutton et al. 1994; Lee 1971; Van Dick 2001) *Belongingness can be considered a sub-dimension or component of organizational identification (Fiol and O'Connor 2005; Wiesenfeld et al. 2001). Indeed, as	Psychological ownership emerges because it "satisfies certain human motives": 1. Efficacy: Possession of tangible or intangible objects can enhance feelings of efficacy as they provide a sense of power, control, or influence. 2. Self-identity: Perceptions of "mine" can clarify the sense of the self. Specifically, possessions can reflect one's self-identity as symbolic expressions of the self that convey core values or individuality

Table 1: (continued)

	Job satisfaction	Organizational commitment	Organizational identification	Psychological ownership
			Ashforth and Mael (1989) note, "identification is a person's sense of belonging with a social category."	3. Belongingness* (a sense of "place"): feelings of comfort, pleasure, and security. *Belongingness can be considered a subdimension or component of psychological ownership. When people feel like owners in an organization, their need for belongingness is met by "having a place" in terms of their social and socio-emotional needs to feel "*safe*". (Avey et al. 2009).
Manifestations	Positive emotional state resulting from a positive evaluation of one's job or specific aspects of work. Job satisfaction reflects an attitude – an evaluative judgment – rather than an affective state (Weiss 2002).	Desire/need/ought to stay with the organization (continuity) (Meyer and Allen 1991). Commitment does not require the merging of self with the target (identification), but it does require some degree of caring about the target (Klein et al. 2012).	As the self and the organization are no longer perceived as separate entities, individuals develop attitudes and engage in actions that benefit the organization as a whole, rather than serving their personal self-interest (Lee et al. 2015).	Sense of possession and responsibility for the target, stemming from a feeling of control, intimate knowledge, and personal investment (Pierce et al. 2001). It manifests through employees' responsibility for and control over the target (Parker et al. 1997).

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