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Understanding the Alternative of Not Growing for Small Mature Businesses

Abstract

A major characteristic of modern capitalist society is the idea of progress and development through economic growth. In this context, business growth in size is typically equated to management success, and not growing is hardly seen as an alternative or a choice. In this study, we explore what the fact of not having their businesses grow means for Brazilian owners of smaller firms with over 30 years of operation. Methodologically, this study is an exploratory qualitative research. We have investigated six mature small firms from the food and drink sectors, through semi-structured interviews. Empirical investigation resulted in three major findings. The first one is that the goal of business growth is not as univocal among smaller firms as the dominant management literature supposes. Secondly, we have identified what the absence of business growth means for sampled firms which inform a choice towards that course of action. Finally, we have found that business success has a much more diverse set of meanings than the mere idea of organisational growth that is found in mainstream literature.

Keywords: organisational growth, mature small firms, meanings of not growing, post-growth organisations
(JEL: M10, O47)

Introduction

The idea of progress has been the driving engine of modern society (Victor, 2008; Schumacher, 1983). In management practice, the idea of progress typically translates into organisational growth (Seifert & Vizeu, 2015; Stanworth & Curran, 1976). Notably, in mainstream managerial literature, organisational growth is taken as the ultimate goal for any modern organisation. In this context, business growth is viewed as the natural consequence of administrative efficiency (Greve, 2008). Ultimately, this has helped legitimising the idea of bigger meaning better (McKenna & Oritt, 1980; Schumacher, 1983).

It is not difficult to note that organisational growth has gained prominence since the emergence of management and organisational studies (cf. Greve, 2008; Lewis &

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Churchill, 1983; Holmes & Zimmer, 1994; Mishina, Pollock & Porac, 2004; Morrison, Breen, Ali , 2003; Peng & Heath, 1996; Penrose, 1959; Rabelo & Speller, 2005; Stanworth & Curran, 1976; Umamaheswar & Momaya, 2011). In this field, most of the proposed theories focus on promoting and contributing to the growth of organisations (Storey, 1994). Globally, organisational growth has earned the support of numerous entrepreneurial and small business agencies; and has counted on the structural support of the financial system. Douthwaite (1992) contends that the financial system has been established as one of the most powerful institutions for growth. Notably, financial loans imply interest, which in turn demand economic growth. In so doing, there is little error when one says organisational growth has become the major, if not, the main challenge faced by entrepreneurs (McGrath & MacMillan, 2005; Rijamampianina & Abratt, 2003).

Developing a critical perspective on the topic, Seifert and Vizeu (2015) argue that organisational growth has become a major managerial dominant ideology in modern society. Despite the incommensurable pressures to growth, one should not forget that many organisations are likely to voluntarily choose not to grow but to remain small (Bridge, O´Neill & Cromie, 2003). Intrigued by critical arguments put forward against the ideology of growth and the post-growth literature (Georgescu-Roegen, 1977; Latouche, 2009; Meadows, Meadows, Randers & Behrens, 1972; Pearson & Parker, 2016; Schumacher, 1983; Seifert & Vizeu, 2015), followed by the recognition that a huge majority of small firms populates organisational reality, this study explores what organisational growth means for owners/managers of smaller firms operating in the service sector for over 30 years without significant growth.

Perhaps, as a major result of the dominant ideology suggesting that ‘there is no alternative to growth’, there are not many studies giving voice to how owners/managers of smaller firms understand growth and/or its absence. This study contributes to the better understanding on how owners/managers in the context small mature organisations understand organisational growth. Our working assumption was that some of these firms would possibly manifest an understanding of growth that is contrary to the dominant growth ideology, or yet, that they could see the absence of growth not as a failure or a problem, as typically portrayed in mainstream management and organisational literature. Our findings offer significant evidence to corroborate this idea. We identify nine categories of meaning attached to a course of action manifesting the absence of growth. By these means, the study contributes to the deepening of theoretical knowledge regarding growth and non-growth of smaller firms. Theoretically, it also gives echo to the argument that interpretations and meanings encompass a fundamental link to understanding organisational choices and actions (Child, 1972; 1997; Daft & Weick, 1984; Seifert, Child & Rodrigues, 2012).

This paper is presented as follows. First, we review the literature on organisational growth and post-growth and the role of interpretation in organisational choice. Second, we present the methods and procedures for conducting empirical investigation. Third, we present the findings of the study. Finally, we discuss these findings and point out conclusions and limitations of our study, pointing out suggestions for future studies.

Literature Review

Specialized management literature typically presents growth as one of the most important variables of organisational behaviour. Literature typically assumes that organisations must grow. In so doing, an extraordinary number of management theories have been proposed, in order to contribute to the process of business growth. Organisational growth, as Starbuck (1971, p.11) argues, means "change in an organisation's size".

The assumption that organisations must grow is rooted in the modern idea of progress. Progress is one of the main pillars of Western civilisation, and according to Victor (2008), it encompasses a desired and necessary quality of modern society.

As Schumacher (1983) argues, the need for growth has become a major characteristic of modern economics. Building on this view, Latouche (2009) argues that contemporaneously economic growth has been characterized by three major drivers: (i) advertisement, which creates the desire to consume; (ii) credit, which provides the means for consumption; and (iii) accelerated and planned obsolescence, which renews the need for consumption.

In a society in which economic growth is understood as a need and an indicator of progress, it is natural to expect that organisations, while being economic actors, grow. In his view, a company cannot survive without growth. Thus, if it stops growing, it will 'fall down the hill' (Powlison, 1953, p. 48). In this context, it is right to say that pressure to growth affects all sizes of firms, and that is taken for granted in most of business and economic literature. Penrose (1959) argues that firms are motivated to grow by their need to increase economic gains. Greve (2008) suggests that organisational growth is an aim for firms in any industry, especially those in which management believes that growth is the result of efficiency or legitimacy.

In specialised management literature, the meaning of the word 'growth' is typically equated to the increase in a firm's size. As Penrose (1959, p. 1) points out, growth is an 'increase in size or an improvement in quality as a result of a process of development (...) in which an interacting series of internal changes leads to increases in size accompanied by changes in the characteristics of the growing object'. According to Starbuck (1971, p. 11), business growth refers to a 'change in an organisation's size when the organisation's membership or employment measure size'. Quantitative increase in size is likely to refer to another business variable besides the number of employees, such as sales, revenues, profits, return over investment, and others (Achtenhagen, Naldi & Melin, 2010). Weinzimmer, Nystrom and Freeman (1998) observed that 83% of the studies investigating business growth used expansion of sales or revenues as the measure for growth. Earlier, Delmar (1997) reviewed 55 studies about business growth, published between 1989 and 1996, and observed that 30.9% of them measure growth in terms of increase in sales/revenues, 29.1% in terms of increase in the number of employees, 19.2% in multiple quantitative indicators, and 12.2% measured growth in terms of performance. Achtenhagen *et al.* (2010) corroborate to this tendency, by showing that between 1997 and 2008, 41.8% of the studies measured growth through sales expansion and 27.3% regarding the increase in the number of employees. Despite the quantitative emphasis, it is important to note that, as Penrose (1959) points out, business growth also includes qualitative aspects. Quantitative and qualitative growth are viewed as two sides of the same coin. As Penrose (1959) argues, qualitative internal growth will translate into quantitative increase in size. In this study, we use the terms business growth and organisational growth interchangeably.

Despite dominant literature suggesting that organisational growth is a necessity for contemporary economy, many authors and organisations have positioned themselves critically about the idea of growth (Alier, 2009; Latouche, 2009; Seifert & Vizeu, 2015; Taibo, 2011). They argue that it is important to recognise that not all firms grow. Many firms start small, remain small and end their activities without having grown, that is, they never embark on a significant path of growth (Aldrich, 1999; Reynolds & White, 1997; Storey, 1994). That suggests entrepreneurs working in the small business context are likely to have different understandings and interpretations regarding organisational growth.

Empirically, owner's motivation to grow, vision and goals have been shown to have a direct effect on the firm's growth (Baum & Locke, 2004; Baum, Locke & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Delmar & Wiklund, 2003; Kolvereid & Bullvåg 1996; Wiklund, 2001; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003; Mok & Tillaart, 1990). These studies indicate that many small business owners have a modest desire for business growth (Cliff, 1998; Delmar & Davidsson, 1999; Dennis & Solomon, 2001; Human & Matthews, 2004). More specifically, studies addressing small entrepreneurs' expectations on positive and negative consequences of growth have found that financial gain is not a dominant interpretation regarding growth (Davidsson, 1989; Wiklund, Davidsson & Delmar, 2003). Wiklund *et al.* (2003) observed that a major negative or undesirable consequence linked to growth among small businesses is that growth can affect the entrepreneur's welfare, for instance, leading to the loss of the informal and family character of the business. Studies have also found that some entrepreneurs fear organisational growth as a means of losing the advantages they see in being small (Arrow 1983; Barker & Gump, 1964; Mosakowski, 2002).

This study aims to contribute to understanding how owners/managers of mature small organisations make sense of growth, or, more specifically, of the absence of growth. Next section presents the methodological procedures that informed our empirical investigation.

Methods and Procedures

This empirical investigation can be characterised as an exploratory qualitative approach to understanding how business owners/founders of small mature organisations, namely firms that have remained small through their lifetime, make sense of organisational growth. Many studies have pointed out the role of interpretation and understandings in organisational action (Daft & Weick, 1984; Child, 1997; Seifert *et al.,* 2012). Interpretation has usually been addressed as the process through which life experiences are given meaning. It entails 'the process of translating events, of developing models for understanding, of bringing out meaning, and of assembling conceptual schemes' (Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 286). In the organisational action context, interpretation is the instance whereby purposes and means/conditions of action are given sense. According to Child (1997), interpretation encompasses the major choice informing feature in organisational action.

Sampling procedures were intentional and focused on small firms with more than 30 years of operation, and which, within their lifetime, have not manifested significant growth in terms of size. In Brazil, firms in the commerce and service sectors, which include the food and drink sector, are considered small if they have less than 50 employees and revenues below BRL 3.6 million/year (Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas [SEBRAE], 2013; SEBRAE, 2016). Given financial and time limits, we opted to focus on small firms located the city of Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil. The identification of firms meeting these criteria was accomplished through personal indications, media reports, as well as websites and Internet search. Nineteen firms that met the selection criteria were initially identified and targeted as potential cases for investigation. Getting access to firms and securing participation was not an easy endeavour. Initially, we contacted all listed firms by telephone in order to confirm secondary information, explaining the purposes of the study and ensuring participation. This process took a great deal of time, since we had to identify and talk to the actual owners of the firms. In total, we carried out 149 telephone calls, performed on different days and periods, according to each situation. By the end of this effort, seven firms agreed on participating in the study. However considering that six out of the seven sampled firms operate in the food and drink sector, and one in the packaging industry, we chose to define our convenience sample with those firms operating exclusively in the food and drink sector. Whilst this choice enabled a more homogeneous and sound sample, we were aware of the fact that whether our findings can be observed in small firms from other economic sectors or not would remain a question for further research. Table 1 presents the name, sector of operation/activity, year of founding, number of employees and the relationship between the founders of the firms that composed the sample of the study and their current owners/managers.

Table 1: Firms Included in the Sample

Name of the Firm	Sector of Operation	Founda-tion	Number of Employees	Current Owner/ Manager	Age of the Owner/ Manager
Armazém Califórnia	Food and Drink - Restaurant	1965	6	Founder´s son. Second generation.	37
Mamma Carmella	Food and Drink - Restaurant	1979	8	Owner. Bought from founder.	56
Pizzaria Itália	Food and Drink - Restaurant	1969	7	Founder`s grand-daughter. Third generation.	41
Churrascaria Ervin	Food and Drink - Restaurant	1950	20	Founder´s grandson. Third generation.	40
Confeitaria das Famílias	Food and Drink – Coffee Shop	1964	24	Founder´s wife. Founder is deceased.	80
Mini Mercado São Jorge	Food and Drink – Mini Market	1963	0	Founder´s son. Second generation.	48

All sampled firms operate in the service sector, and the sample mainly includes small restaurants and one mini market. The average age of the firms is 53 years. Four of them have less than ten employees and two of them, more than 20. Founders do not currently manage any of the researched firms. All firms are family owned, and most of them are currently being managed and controlled by the founder's second or third generation. Current owner/manager average age is 50, and they do not have higher education.

Data collection has been performed through semi-structured interviews with firms' owners/managers. We developed an interview guide to assist the narrative chain during the interview, covering the following topics: i) history of the interviewee and the firm; ii) the firm´s growth trajectory; iii) the meaning of good business and business success; iv) the meanings of growth/non-growth; v) factors that affect business growth/non-growth; vi) reasons, advantages and disadvantages linked to growth/non-growth; vii) growth/non-growth business implications; viii) demographic data of the firm. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted at the interviewee's working place, which was not the best setting for conducting the interviews, as noise and interruptions were somewhat frequent. All interviews were recorded in digital format, and later, fully transcribed.

Qualitative data analysis took into account three general procedures following the recommendations of specialized literature, namely: (1) summarizing and becoming familiar with the data; (2) coding; and (3) drawing conclusions (Ezzy, 2002; Marvasti, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spencer, Ritchie & O'connor, 2003). The process of summarising was the first step for zooming in on some segments of data as suggested in literature (Marvasti, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This selective attention to raw data was guided by research objectives and by the topics that informed the interview guide. Following this, we started the coding process. Initially, a process of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Ezzy, 2002) took place. It attempted to generate an emergent set of meaningful categories. Data was scrutinised and coded in accordance to owners/managers understandings regarding business growth/non-growth. This process evolved through different levels of abstraction. Initially, following the recommendation of Spencer *et al.* (2003), codes remained close to participants' views and were included verbatim. Progressively, researchers moved towards more refined categories and abstract analytical codes (Richards, 2005) to finally reach the stage of selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Selective coding involved identification of the core categories of meanings considering organisational growth. This process was complete when codes and categories were sorted, compared and contrasted until saturated. When all cases were coded, we were able to search for shared and divergent understandings and relationships between meanings of growth in data. That had the help of 'crossing' cases and meanings assigned to growth in an analytical frame (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the first instance, this procedure allowed for recognising the presence/absence of particular meanings in participants' accounts, but also for identifying relationships among different codes and meanings. That procedure provided an important means of comparison between firms, especially regarding the meanings that owners/managers of small mature firms assign to organisational growth. It must be noted that, although these stages and procedures are analytically distinct, in practice they are in many instances intertwined in a continuous reflexive process (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 224; Spencer *et al.,* 2003).

As the study heavily relies on interpretation in the process of data generation, we used researcher triangulation during the process of data analysis as a means to clarify codes and enhance trustfulness of the process of drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We did that by making data available to two independent researchers and asking them to code part of the data related to specific research questions/objectives. In so doing, we were able to triangulate and crosscheck our own interpretations and understandings with those of other people, not engaged in this particular research. It is worth noticing that since our major source of data collection were interviews, triangulation of data collected from different sources was limited, which we assume is a limitation for this research.

Findings

The results of the empirical investigation enabled us to the identify nine categories of meaning attached to a course of business action manifesting the absence of significant organisational growth, or yet informing the alternative of not to grow. Some of these categories were cited more often than others, and some of them may enable slightly different interpretations for each respondent. Each of them will be considered now.

A main meaning that informs a course of action, probably refraining business growth, and in so doing, explaining some aversion to growth, has been labelled as the **need to maintain control over the business.** The need to keep and centralise control entails one of the major reasons why the interviewed owners/managers would choose to keep their business small. They argued that if their firm would grow, they would not have the necessary capacities for controlling it. Interestingly, however, we found that the importance given to a centralised control was not necessarily addressed to the financial aspects of the business, but mainly to intangible dimensions of the business such as the general quality of products and services and the traditional characteristics of the business. Examples of this understanding underlie arguments such as:

> 'If I'd grow, I don't think I would be able to control everything (…) Just me and my father know the recipe for seasoning our products, we don't pass that to anyone' – Owner: Armazém California

> 'I survive because I can take control of everything alone…' – Owner: Pizzaria Italia

What called our attention was that when arguing about the need for control, the owner/managers considered their business as a sort of personal artisanal craft expression. In other words, for them, the need for controlling operations, especially those of intangible nature, was a means to imply their own mark, will and characteristics into the business. Notably, as Sennett (2008) reminds us, the need to evidence the 'hands of the master' is one of the major characteristic of artisanal craftwork. What is interesting here is that in the view of these owner/managers their businesses carry a sort of artisanal imprint that demands their personal control and in so doing prevents growth.

This understanding is reinforced by a second category of meaning informing the absence of business growth among the firms studied, namely the **value of maintaining the traditional characteristics of the business**. This category of understanding points out to the importance given to values and business characteristics such as: being recognised as a traditional business, maintaining the quality of product/service, and the importance that owners/founders give to a personal, close and direct interaction with customers. It is important to remember that organisations included in this study operate in the service sector; thus personal interaction with customers and maintaining traditional values and characteristics of the business seems to be of particular relevance. On this view interviewees argued:

> '…our customers come here to eat, and they have memories of their experiences in the past... so we've got to keep that' – Pizzaria Italia's Owner

> '[...] we've got to keep the tradition of the business, we are a family business' – Churrascaria Ervin's Owner

Regarding the possibility of directly interacting and knowing his customers, one of the interviewees argued that in smaller firms, customers can get to know and interact with owners and that this is something valuable for smaller business:

> 'There are many big firms that you don't even know the owner, but I have a different view of business. I come here and talk to the customers, they know me, and I know them…' – Mamma Carmella's Owner

Linked to the importance of maintaining traditional characteristics of the business, we found that **business conservatism and risk avoidance** is another category of meaning informing the choice of not to grow. It includes the option for not having financial debts in the business, avoidance of the uncertainties of growth, as well as the need to be minimally dependent upon employees. The following talks illustrate this understanding:

> '[...] I know that I can't deal with something (business) bigger, I've got to take care of what I've got' - Armazém California's Owner

> 'There are several factors (problems) that come with growth, (…) we've got to be careful when we talk about growth' – Churrascaria Ervin's Owner

> 'The advantage of being small is that you don't spend a lot with employees' – Mini Mercado São Jorge's Owner

Following categories of meaning informing the virtues of centralised control, the maintenance of traditional characteristics of the business, conservatism and risk avoidance, it is interesting to recognise how owners/managers understand business success. When questioned whether they see their business as cases of success, all of them answered yes. More importantly: in their understanding, success goes beyond the typical link established with growth in specialised management literature. That is not to say that the owners/managers did not recognise such relationship. Rather, it informs that in their understanding **success goes beyond growth of the business size**. As the following citations indicate, for them, business success is related to being happy at work, doing what one likes, not having financial debts, and working in a good environment.

> 'For me, success is to be happy and see the results of your effort (…) Success means a firm that works honestly, with satisfied employees, and mainly where customers return...' – Churrascaria Ervin's Owner

> '[Success] is having the recognition that we have today, to be known in the market, not having financial debts...' - Armazém California's Owner

> '[Success]...is working on what you like, having good profit and being happy with what you do' – Mini Mercado São Jorge's Owner

Fifth, in their arguments, and against what specialised management literature usually considers, owners/managers reasoned that business **growth is not necessary for survival**. While this could be very different in another economic sector, respondents in our sample contended that, for them, surviving without growing is possible. Notably, their businesses are empirical evidence of such argument. All of them are operating for more than 30 years and have not evidenced any kind of growth in terms of size. As they argue:

> 'You don't need much to survive, but to maintain quality and operate honestly...' – Confeitaria das Famílias's Owner

> 'I'm the evidence that you don't need to grow to survive...' – Mamma Carmella's Owner

In addition to that, we found that owners/managers of mature small firms are likely to interpret **growth as something painful**. As the citations that follow indicate, business growth is linked to stress, poor quality of life and more work:

> 'I'll not open another branch, because I'll get stressed, I'll not live, I know how that is...' – Mamma Carmella's Owner

> '[to grow] is too much work, I don't envy anyone that is growing, I let them grow, I stay here [...]" – Confeitaria das Famílias's Owner

We found out that the meanings attached to the reasoning linked with the option for not growing could further trigger a set of meanings establishing a comfort zone or what we called **satisfaction with the current limits of business**. The following statements illustrate this understanding:

> '[...] it is fine like this, I can close the shop when I want, and everything will be fine, that gives me peace of mind...' – Armazém California's Owner

> 'My aim with this business is to be fine... satisfy my wills... And I can live very well from what I get from here' – Mamma Carmella's Owner

Finally, it became patent, during the interviews, that for some firms, meanings informing a biological link between the life of the owner and the life of the business should be established. Some of the owners argued that the purposes for their business have changed in different stages of their own **biological life**. In some of the narratives, it became clear that there is a significant likelihood that the organisation will cease to exist when the current owners/managers are no longer able to take care of the business, given their advanced age. In two cases the owners/managers argued that they were focusing on retirement and pointed out that their heirs had no interest in continuing the business. On this view they argued:

> '[...] in my age, I can't think about growth, my children have no interest in the business, they have other activities.' – Confeitaria das Famílias's Owner

> 'I don't have many objectives but to retire. My children have other businesses, and I am taking my foot off from the accelerator' – Mini Mercado São Jorge´s Owner

It should be noted that, although in our study we have investigated small firms that manifest the absence of organisational growth, it does not mean that respondents see growth as something negative. On the contrary, it became clear that respondents interpret growth as something positive, but not a course of action in which they were particularly interested. This understanding suggests that, for these owners/managers, to grow or not to grow is understood as a voluntary choice. Only one respondent argued that, for his business, the absence of growth was the result of forces and factors external to the business. In the following section, we discuss those findings in the light of the existing literature.

Discussion

As findings pointed out in this study suggest, organisational growth is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, though in many ways blurred in mainstream management literature. First, our findings evidence that the meanings of organisational growth are not univocal among owners/managers of smaller firms. Our findings indicate that meanings and interpretations informing a course of action manifesting the absence of business growth can be many and different. Pointing out to the role of meanings and understandings upon organisational action is in line with the argument of Child (1972; 1997). He contends that, when considering the role of choice as the direct source of variation in organisational arrangements and strategy, analytical centrality must be given to organisational agents' interpretations.

Second, our findings suggest that the choice to remain small are likely to be made when owners/managers understand their business as places where they have imprinted certain quality and service features that need to be kept through their centralised personal control. On this view, our study contributes to the understanding that small mature businesses that have chosen not to grow resemble small artisanal workshops, where the limits of tradition and the need for centralised control by the master craftsman become the own nature and identity of the business (Sennett, 2008). In these circumstances, business growth is likely to be interpreted as a threat to the business and thus something to be avoided.

Third, our findings indicate that not all firm owners/managers desire to grow or see growth as a means of business success. On the one hand, this understanding challenges the ideological view that business growth is necessary and equally desired by all firms. On the other hand, our findings support previous studies indicating that many small business owners have a modest desire for business growth (Cliff, 1998; Delmar & Davidsson, 1999; Dennis & Solomon, 2001; Human & Matthews, 2004). Beyond that, our findings further indicate that interpretations informing the choice to remain small include the understanding that business growth can bring painful and undesirable personal consequences, such as stress and more work, thus further corroborating previous research (Storey, 1994). Moreover, for owners/managers who choose to remain small, business growth is not necessary for business survival, but in their opinion, for finding contentment within the limits of a small business and owner's/manager's lifecycle.

Considering this, we should not conclude that firms that choose not to grow rupture with the modern ideology of organisational growth (Seifert & Vizeu, 2015). Rather, their actions and interpretation seem to inform the establishment of certain limits that are likely to explain why they have chosen to remain small. Nevertheless, it does point out a fracture or a contradiction to the capitalist growth system. For instance, one that informs an alternative route in the organisation and management of smaller firms. Notably, the role of limits to organisational growth is rarely discussed and considered in management theorising. In our view, establishing limits for organisational action is an important issue for future investigation. Finally, we contend that the results of this research help us reflect whether growth is really necessary and whether alternative routes and actions are possible.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the meanings giving to organisational growth by owners/managers of mature smaller firms. Our findings indicate that the choice to remain small by the owners/managers of these firms can be understood in terms of several meanings, namely: to maintain control over the business; to maintain traditional characteristics of the business; conservatism and risk avoidance; the disassociation between growth and business success; the possibility of surviving and being satisfied with current limits of a small business; the fact that growth is likely to bring personal pain and prejudices to welfare, and; the biological association between the owner's/manager's life and the business lifecycle.

We consider and point out how our findings contribute to the field and the organisational post-growth literature. However, it should be noted that this study does have limits. First, we recognise that our sample is small. During the interviews, we noticed that, in some cases, respondents seemed insecure about some of their answers. We believe that a bigger sample, from several economic sectors, would help clarifying some of the issues informing the meanings of growth. That could be addressed in further studies by replicating some of the aims considered here. Second, we understand that since the firms sampled in our study operate in the food and drink service sector, that fact likely renders particular characteristics to the sample, which may not be found in different sectors. In so doing, the presented findings shall not be generalised for small firms altogether. We understand that organisational growth might have different dynamics in different sectors. Moreover, different sectors and firms are likely to render different meanings to organisation growth. The same could be said about the national and local characteristic where the firms operate. Another alternative for a future study would be to compare firms that want or do not want to grow while operating in the same sector. What seems important here would be to understand better the relationship between the meanings of growth and the course of action developed by firms, which were pointed by our findings

Moreover, we believe that, based on our findings, it would be very interesting to understand better what the strategies that owners/managers of smaller firm use in order not to grow in a business environment oriented to growth are. Beyond that, we think the argument that smaller businesses that choose not to grow are likely to resemble artisanal workshops where the limits of tradition, quality, and the personal involvement of the artisan inhibits growth needs further empirical investigation.

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