

# Talking About (My) Generation

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**Talking About (My) Generation:  
The Use of Generation as Rhetorical History in Family Business**

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**Abstract**

The concept of “generation” in family business scholarship is primarily used genealogically to reflect family lineage. This approach fails to account for complementary perspectives that are more established in history: “generation” as a category of societal belonging and a form of rhetorical history. Using a constitutive history approach, we identify four usages of “generation” by which these narratives can establish continuity or change in how families talk about themselves and foreground either family dynamics or embeddedness in societal developments. The form of historical narratives and how they mark time, we argue, is core to understanding rhetorical history processes.

**Keywords:** Family business, history, generation, rhetorical history, narrative

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# **Talking About (My) Generation:**

## **The Use of Generation as Rhetorical History in Family Business**

### **Introduction**

“Generation” is a central but largely taken-for-granted concept in family business studies (Gersick, Davis, Hampton, & Lansberg, 1997; Miller, Steier, & Le Breton-Miller, 2003). A recent literature review (Magrelli, Rovelli, Benedetti, Überbacher, & De Massis, 2022) shows that family business scholarship predominantly relies on a narrow and literal understanding of generation as a biologically determined sequence of family members over time (e.g., first-, second-, and third-generation). For example, family business studies use generation when examining succession processes, exploring how various resources are transferred between different family generations (Hillebrand, 2019; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004; Mazzola, Marchisio, & Astrachan, 2008). More recently, scholars have extended this perspective to include the question of how “rhetorical history,” defined as the “strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy for managing key stakeholders” (Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn Trank, 2010, p. 157), contributes to transmitting values across family generations (Ge, De Massis, & Kotlar, 2021; Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2015; Sinha, Jaskiewicz, Gibb, & Combs, 2020; Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020) and how the temporal orientation of different family generations affects this process (Barbera, Stamm, & DeWitt, 2018; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2011; Magrelli, Rondi, De Massis, & Kotlar, 2020). Yet, Magrelli et al. (2022, p. 16) rightly stress that the multiple understandings of generation across social science fields are ill-reflected in family business studies and thus call for “extending the conceptualization of generation beyond its demographic nature.”

Because the use of generation in family business studies relates primarily to family relations, it largely disregards generation as a societal construct; a view that is well-established in

other disciplines, including sociology (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016a; Mannheim, 1952/1923) and history (Dilthey, 1964/1875; Ricoeur, 1988). This limitation creates two problems. First, applying generation exclusively to the family artificially truncates the concept, disconnecting it from how actors in a family business use generation not only to talk about themselves (as a family) but also to articulate their connection to societal generation and their historical milieu. Second, for rhetorical history approaches to family business, the concept of generation is especially important because it is one of the more common ways (Yanagisako, 2002) of structuring historical narratives in family firms. The use of generation gives order to the flow of time (Wadhwani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018) and periodizes family business history to construct an argument for a desirable future. Yet, researchers interested in rhetorical history (Ge et al., 2021; Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020), entrepreneurial legacy (Barbera et al., 2018; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015), or narratives (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012; Hamilton, Discua Cruz, & Jack, 2017) in family firms have not yet explicitly engaged with the mechanisms by which the concept of generation ties family to society when giving meaning to the past.

We argue that a history-informed approach (Mannheim, 1952/1923; Ricoeur, 1988) can help theorize the characteristics of generation in family business studies. Specifically, we pursue a “history in theory” approach (Argyres et al., 2020; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014), incorporating historiography and historical reasoning into the process of theorizing “generation” in family business studies. We do this by analyzing a collection of historical narratives of the German printing and publishing business Bagel, a seventh-generation family firm, which were created over more than fifty years by a wide variety of narrators from the family, the business, and the surrounding community. Our analysis follows a “constitutive history” approach (R. Daniel Wadhwani & Jones, 2014) that reconstructs, as best as possible, how historical actors act and think

*in their own time* (similarly also, Sinha et al., 2020) and engages with historiographical debates about generation as a source of theorizing the construct (Decker, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2021).

Based on our findings, we offer a framework that identifies four usages of “generation” that give the term historical significance in different ways. Two of them make an argument *over time* and use generation to describe continuity: “generation as lineage” marks the continuity of generations within the family, and “generation as myth” connects the family business to continuity narratives in society. The other two make an argument about the narrators’ place in history *in their own time* and use generation to describe change: “generation as reinvention” focuses on actors’ changing roles and tasks within the family, whereas “generation as critique” foregrounds how actors engage with major changes in society, responding to emerging opportunities or novel threats.

Our analysis advances family business scholarship in two ways. It uses a history-informed approach (Argyres et al., 2020) to engage one of its foundational but weakly theorized concepts: generation. Such history-informed reconceptualizing of generation will help researchers understand how family members relate to and are informed by their family and their societal generation. Second, we clarify how generation works as a marker of time and relate it to debates in rhetorical history research. We differentiate four distinct uses of generation and show by which mechanisms and for which purpose each connects past, present, and future (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, & Lim, Forthcoming), thereby contributing to a more contextualized and socially constructed understanding of time (Argyres et al., 2020; Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016b). Exploring how actors in family business strategically “play the generation card” (Bohnenkamp, 2011) to convey and legitimize their vision for the future is an important contribution to the growing field of rhetorical history as it is applied to family business scholarship and practice.

## **Theoretical Considerations**

### ***The Concept of Generation in Family Business Studies***

Generation is a foundational concept for the field of family business studies (Magrelli et al., 2022). For some family business scholars, the co-existence of multiple generations and the intention of intergenerational transfer is what defines family business and distinguishes this organizational form from others (Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 1999; Salvato, Chirico, Melin, & Seidl, 2019). Yet, despite its relevance, most scholarship fails to explicitly engage with the term generation and tacitly adheres to an understanding which assigns family members a role in the seemingly natural biological order within the family. Based on this notion, scholars then focus on studying transfer processes, such as the potential for innovation and market orientation across family generations (Beck, Janssens, Debruyne, & Lommelen, 2011; Hillebrand, 2019), the planning for intergenerational family transfers (Handler, 1990; Mazzola et al., 2008), or conflict resolution between family generations (Jayantilal, Jorge, & Palacios, 2016; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2004). So construed, family generations provide the rhythm for developing the family business in a quasi-natural progression.

Yet, this narrow conceptualization of generation isolates family business studies from scholarship that suggests a broader socio-historical understanding of generation (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016a; Magrelli et al., 2022). Sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952/1923, pp. 281-282) problematized the concept of generation as early as the 1920s, arguing that generation is less about biological facts and more about the human experience of belonging to a generation, which derives from “an interior time that cannot be measured but only experienced in purely qualitative terms.” Mannheim’s approach to generation goes beyond the accident of contemporaneous birth and asks

how humans “experience and understand their world” (R. Daniel Wadhwani & Jones, 2014) and how they situate themselves in the flow of time (Rudolph, Rauvola, Costanza, & Zacher, 2021).

Building on Mannheim, the French philosopher and historian Paul Ricœur (1988) added that the experience of belonging to a line of generations becomes enacted in historical narrative, which is how humans give meaning to the idea of generation. He explicitly depicts “generational succession” as a narrative tool for constructing what he calls “a third time—properly historical time” (p. 99). Third time bridges between “cosmological time” – the temporality that best describes a biological understanding of generation – and “experience time” – which underpins Mannheim’s idea of generation as a social category marked by shared experiences. Ricœur argues that generational succession is an established form of speaking about and ordering the past, infused with cultural codes and standards of narrating. Such culturally embedded narratives are neither fully determined by demography nor by experiences but rather the outcome of temporal agency connecting cosmological and experience time through storytelling.

Together, these debates of experience- and narrative-based understandings of generation call into question the narrow and naturalized concept of generation that has dominated family business studies so far. They highlight how the term generation refers to an individual’s place within the family and society and ask how actors connect their experiences to family and societal generations.

### ***Generation and Rhetorical History***

A stronger theorization of the generation concept is particularly valuable to recent debates about rhetorical history in family business studies because this stream of research foregrounds the question of how actors interpret and give order to the past to make an argument for the future.

Rhetorical history focuses on the “strategic use of the past” (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 157) and “the

performative role of history in making and unmaking organizational orders” (R. Daniel Wadhwani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018, p. 1664). Scholars have studied strategic uses of narratives of past events and accomplishments in family firms. Such family business research shows that these narratives play an important role in strategy making by serving as a guide for the future (Sinha et al., 2020), supporting change processes (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015; Sinha et al., 2020), realizing competitive advantages (Ge et al., 2021), fostering innovation (Kammerlander, Dessì, Bird, Floris, & Murru, 2015), convincing stakeholders (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Ge et al., 2021), and projecting visions for the future (Barbera et al., 2018; Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al., Forthcoming). They also have a role within the family by motivating family members to engage in the business (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015), legitimizing succession (Dalpiaz, Tracey, & Phillips, 2014), and creating an identity (Basque & Langley, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Narrative approaches about “the stories that people tell” (Gartner, 2007, p. 613) have long had a place in family business studies (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012). Still, they have recently been theorized more systematically in the context of rhetorical history research. Scholars ask not just what gets transmitted as a legacy but also how the process of intergenerational transmission occurs as one way of managing tradition and navigating the tension of continuity and change (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020).

These contributions have in common that they see rhetorical history as a potential resource for family firms. Many of the narratives rhetorical history scholars have analyzed routinely make use of the term generation. Yet, family business scholars have not engaged with how the concept of generation is used beyond the assumption that generations are biologically determined. The link between the ubiquitous talk about generations in family business and rhetorical history has not yet been clearly established.



### ***Form and Semantics of Rhetorical History***

One explanation for the lack of interest in conceptualizing generation is that family business scholars have prioritized the content of rhetorical history over the form or semantics of the narratives they study. By contrast, rhetorical history and literary scholars have also explored how such narratives are structured and by which mechanisms they connect past, present, and future. Suddaby et al. (Forthcoming) explore how rhetorical history draws on “historical tropes” or recurrent modes of argument (White, 1973), and combines them with beliefs or myths embedded in the collective memory of the community. They see them as stories “told in the context of other stories” (Gartner, 2007, p. 614). This is important, they argue, to create “narrative common ground” (Alvarez & Sachs, Forthcoming), a collectively held interpretation of the past that reduces uncertainty for stakeholders. These authors conclude that rhetorical structures that appear familiar not just in content but also in form are a “fundamental feature of rhetorical history” (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al., Forthcoming). Yet, they have rarely been incorporated into the family business literature (for an exception see the exploration of family myth in Labaki, Bernhard, & Cailluet, 2019).

Generation serves as such a rhetorical structure, and narratives telling the history of family business *by generations* are ubiquitous in family firms (Yanagisako, 2002). As is typical for tropes, they are deeply embedded in society, reflecting in aphorisms, such as “shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations,” as well as in literature, such as the 1901 novel *The Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann. While scholars have cast doubt on the accuracy of the statement that family firms routinely struggle to survive in the third generation (Stamm & Lubinski, 2011), scholars have yet to explore the importance of generation as a narrative tool for rhetorical history processes in family business.

In sum, family business studies tend to rely on a limited conceptualization of generation that is rarely openly discussed (Magrelli et al., 2022). Understood in an absolutist and biological way, generation fails to connect to the lived experience of family business actors and isolates the field from debates about generation in adjacent disciplines. Family business scholars have yet to explore how family members relate to and are informed by their societal generations and how this experience-based understanding of belonging connects family and societal generations (Jureit, 2006; Weigel, 2008). This is particularly relevant to rhetorical history because the concept of generation serves as a structuring device for many historical narratives in family business.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design and Historical Case***

We employ a “history in theory” approach (Argyres et al., 2020) to theorize the construct of generation in family business studies, based on a deeply contextualized understanding of how and why family business actors use the construct of generation in narratives. Our research design analyzes historical sources that document written and oral narratives from one family business over decades. Our specific historical approach is a form of “constitutive history” (R. Daniel Wadhvani & Jones, 2014) and closest to what Rowlinson, Hassard & Decker (2014, p. 251) have previously described as ethnographic history because it is based on closely reading narrative sources “in order to recover practices and meanings from organizations.”

Our empirical case, the printing and publishing company Bagel is a private and still active family business in its seventh generation. Founded in 1801, the company is a fitting case because of its long history and detailed and accessible archive, which includes a large number of narratives about the past. These sources have been written in close temporal proximity to the event of telling or retelling the narrative. They often document the process of creating it, thus embedding the

sources in their historical and organizational context (Kipping, Wadhwani, & Bucheli, 2014). As we are tracing the different uses of generation over time, we engage in “historical organizational memory” research, which Decker et al. (2021) call a “more historiographically reflexive” mode of inquiry because it integrates historiography with organization research.

### ***Data Collection***

While not every archive is suitable for a constitutive approach to rhetorical history, many provide a privileged view of narratives and their use in context. The family and business archive of Bagel is a private collection, accessible to researchers upon approval by the Bagel family and in coordination with the Rheinisch-Westfälisches Wirtschaftsarchiv (RWWA) in Cologne, Germany. The RWWA, founded in 1906, is the oldest regional economic archive in Germany and hosts about 600 collections. The Bagel archive is an extensive collection of files originating in both the Bagel company and family. The focus is on the period after 1945 because a bomb attack on the city of Düsseldorf in June 1943 destroyed large parts of the old archive. While the exact process for archiving is not reported, based on articles in the house magazine and an interview with Peter Bagel, we know that archival maintenance was the responsibility of the chief secretary of the family CEO rather than a professional historian or archivist. While this fact could be interpreted as a shortcoming of the collection, it has the advantage that it led to a rich and relatively uncensored collection. These remnants of the past are biased because of their focus on materials that, in one way or another, reached the respective family CEO, i.e., Gerd Bagel (1941-1964) and Peter Bagel (since 1964), and were then stored by the secretary. Yet, many documents written by various authors crossed the CEO’s desk. As he was head of both family and business, the archive holds both private and company material.

The inventory comprises 2,710 fascicles<sup>1</sup> (among them 319 photos) in 246 archival boxes. The fascicles are mostly in a paper cover and vary greatly in length. All fascicles are referenced with their signature and name, allowing future researchers to access the same documents. Historical convention strongly emphasizes the ability to replicate the research, facilitating the reinterpretation of sources and, thereby, a critical rewriting of existing historiography (Kipping et al., 2014).

Our data collection began with reading published material about Bagel before visiting the archive for the first time. Subsequently, one of the authors spent a total of 37 days over a six-month period at the archives to explore the material. She also interviewed the family CEO Peter Bagel, his daughter and then dedicated successor, Dr. Ida Bagel, and three long-term Bagel employees in 2006, in line with an ethnographic history approach. In addition to the archival fascicles, we also used the firm's house magazine "Schwarz auf Weiss" ("Black on White"). It appeared two to three times a year starting in 1952 and was distributed widely within the company. We accessed all issues from 1952 to 2002 at the private home of a long-term Bagel employee who had carefully archived them. Magazines and bulletins by organizations are important sources for historically informed organization studies. In the context of rhetorical history, Anteby & Molnár (2012) used an internal bulletin to study how this organization's leadership fashioned a shared discourse among its members, and Basque & Langley (2018) traced organizational identity work based on a house magazine. Likewise, we used *Schwarz auf Weiss* as a window into Bagel's culture and one of the tools to distribute the company's diverse set of narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> The Society of American Archivists defines a fascicle as "A group of pages, usually in a temporary paper cover, that are part of a larger work and that are issued in installments intended to be bound together." The reason historians speak of fascicles is to highlight that these documents have survived together and usually there is a reason why these (and not other) documents remained together. Archivists try to preserve the logic of a collection by keeping documents together in fascicles.

## ***Data Analysis***

To analyze our historical sources for the meanings of generation, we applied a four-step process outlined by Wadhwani and Decker (2017) and applied to family business by Lubinski & Gartner (2020): reportage, explanation, understanding, and evaluation.

In the reportage step, we reconstructed the narratives people at Bagel told about themselves from our sources (Lipartito, 2014). Given the size of the archive and the richness of the material, we decided to focus on three episodes, which we selected because our analysis of all narratives revealed that since 1945, these episodes were crucial moments of remembrance in the storytelling at Bagel (See Table 1). We judged this based on the number of retellings occurring in temporal proximity and by the intensity of the actors' engagement in articulating these narratives. We paid special attention to the source material that engaged with the company's history for each episode. Rather than focusing exclusively on stories told by the members of the Bagel family, we included all rhetorical reconstructions in the archives, independent of the narrator. In addition to these historical narratives, we also used reports from different managers and the large collection of correspondence between family members and, less frequently, between the family and employees for contextual details. All of these sources have a high degree of credibility and validity (Kipping et al., 2014) due to their proximity to the organization and family, and their closeness in time to the events.

**Table 1: Overview of Episodes and Sources**

<b>Source Material</b>	<b>Author / Narrator</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Archival signature Bagel</b>
<b>Episode 1: The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bagel company, 1951</b>			
<b>Company commemorative book, 1951</b>	Professional author and historian Ilse Barleben, archivist at Henkel	General public	192-2 “Commemorative Book”
<b>Foreword to commemorative book, 1951</b>	Gerd Bagel, family CEO of Bagel	General Public	192-2 “Commemorative Book”, p. 7-9
<b>Several speeches delivered at anniversary celebration, 1951</b>	Gerd Bagel, family CEO of Bagel; Hermann Tenhaef, Work Council Chairman; Josef Gockeln, Major of the city of Duesseldorf	Bagel family, employees of Bagel, regional stakeholders	69-2 “150 <sup>th</sup> Company Anniversary – The Celebration”
<b>House magazine article (issue 1, 1952) and special leaflet for the anniversary (1951)</b>	Anonymous; referred to as “Bagel Archive,” likely secretariat Gerd Bagel and with approval by the family CEO	Bagel employees	Private collection by the authors
<b>Episode 2: Memorializing Gerd Bagel, specifically Gerd’s 25th work anniversary (1962) and his death (1964)</b>			
<b>Obituary notice for newspapers, 1964</b>	Bagel managers	General public	96-4 “Death Gerd Bagel”
<b>Special Issue of house magazine at the occasion of Gerd’s death, 1964</b>	Several, including manager Paul Pfau	Bagel employees	114-1 “Bereavement Gerd Bagel”
<b>Peter Bagel’s “Christmas Speech” (first speech to employees after succession), 1964</b>	Peter Bagel, new family CEO of Bagel	Bagel employees	235-2 “Speeches by Peter Bagel”
<b>Peter Bagel’s first speech to Bagel top managers after succession, 1964</b>	Peter Bagel, new family CEO of Bagel	Bagel top managers	107-3 “Estate Matters Gerd Bagel”
<b>Commemorative book gifted to Gerd Bagel and special issue of house</b>	Several managers and employees of Bagel	Gerd Bagel, Bagel employees	33-8 “House Magazine ‘Black on White’ (1961-1966)” and

<b>magazine at the occasion of his 25<sup>th</sup> work anniversary, 1962</b>			author's private collection
<b>Episode 3: 175th Anniversary of the Bagel company, 1976</b>			
<b>Company Commemorative Book, 1976</b>	Unknown	General public	240-7 "175 <sup>th</sup> Company Anniversary: Commemorative Book"
<b>Peter Bagel's speech at the company at the occasion of the anniversary, 1976</b>	Peter Bagel, family CEO of Bagel	All Bagel employees	236-2 "Speeches by Peter Bagel"
<b>Peter Bagel's speech at the occasion of a celebratory family lunch, 1976</b>	Peter Bagel, family CEO of Bagel	Bagel family members	236-2 "Speeches by Peter Bagel"
<b>Peter Bagel's speech at the occasion of celebrating company jubilees</b>	Peter Bagel, family CEO of Bagel	Bagel jubilees (long-term employees)	236-2 "Speeches by Peter Bagel"

Following Kipping et al. (2014) and Lipartito (2014), we read references to generation in the sources using a hermeneutic process of understanding the meaning of the term by placing it in its semantic context and exploring how and why these sources were created. We paid attention to different sources which addressed the same issue or referred to each other, showcasing the development of the actors' thoughts or their differing interpretations of events. When critically reviewing the existing sources, we departed from the assumption that the Bagel entrepreneurs or the chief secretary may have had strategic or practical reasons for keeping some sources and omitting others (Decker, 2013; Popp & Fellman, 2020). We, therefore, triangulated between the archival records, contemporary published accounts, and secondary literature to multiply perspectives (Kipping et al., 2014). This process allowed us to establish a plausible pattern of facts and, equally important, identify divergent accounts.

Guided by the existing literature on rhetorical history, we then established an interpretation through a process called “explanation through contextualization” (R Daniel Wadhwani & Decker, 2017). This implied reading all sources in their context, then connecting specific narratives to correspondence and other available sources that further illuminated their context. Inspired by rhetorical history research and our research question, we then engaged with the narratives of the past, specifically exploring the different uses of generation and the mechanisms used by the narrators to make their argument. We established that the term generation was used to narrate continuity and change and referred to the family and its relationships with broader society. This led us to the four uses of “generation” that we explicate in our findings. Finally, we engaged in an evaluative process of our findings by which we inferred conceptual claims (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016), specifically our reconceptualization of generation.

## **Findings**

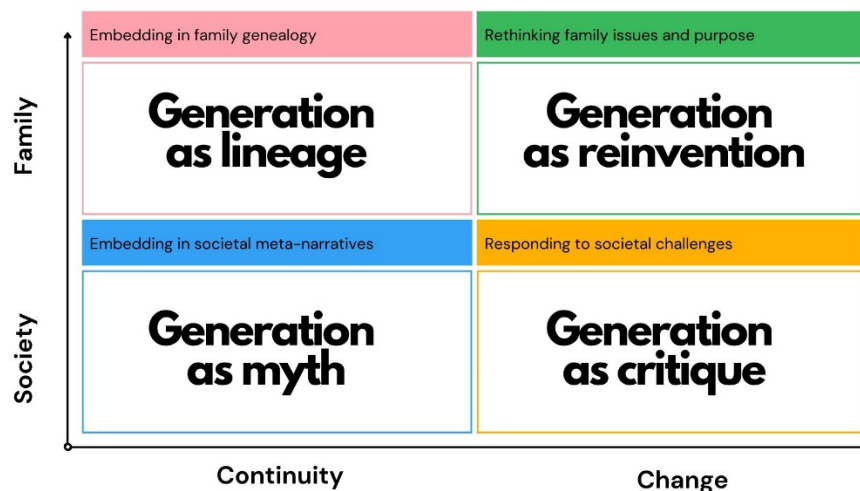
The historical narratives at Bagel that we studied were frequently structured by generation. While they changed dynamically over time, the use of generation as an ordering principle was constant. Engaging with the context of the sources, we found that the authority to tell these narratives was not limited to family members but included a much larger group of stakeholders, including managers, employees, politicians, and professional historians.

These different storytellers regularly used generation in several ways. First, they employed the term generation to mark time, either highlighting similarities between past, present, and possible futures (continuity) or emphasizing ruptures and new beginnings (change). Second, we found that the use of generation did not exclusively relate to family generations determined by kinship (family) but also linked the family business to broader societal developments and the line



of societal generations with distinct experiences (society). These links to society kept the narratives “fresh” and relevant as new opportunities and challenges emerged.

Based on these insights, we distinguish four usages that vest the term generation with historical significance but do so in different ways. Two of them argue *over time* and foreground generation to describe continuity: “generation as lineage” marks the continuity of generations in the family, and “generation as myth” connects the family business to continuity narratives in society. The other two make an argument about the narrators’ place in history *in their own time* and thus emphasize generation to describe change: “generation as reinvention” focuses on actors’ changing roles and tasks within the family, whereas “generation as critique” foregrounds how actors engage with major changes in society, responding to emerging opportunities or novel threats. Table 2 shows the four uses of generation, and Appendix 1 provides exemplary quotes from the Bagel family and company for each use of generation.



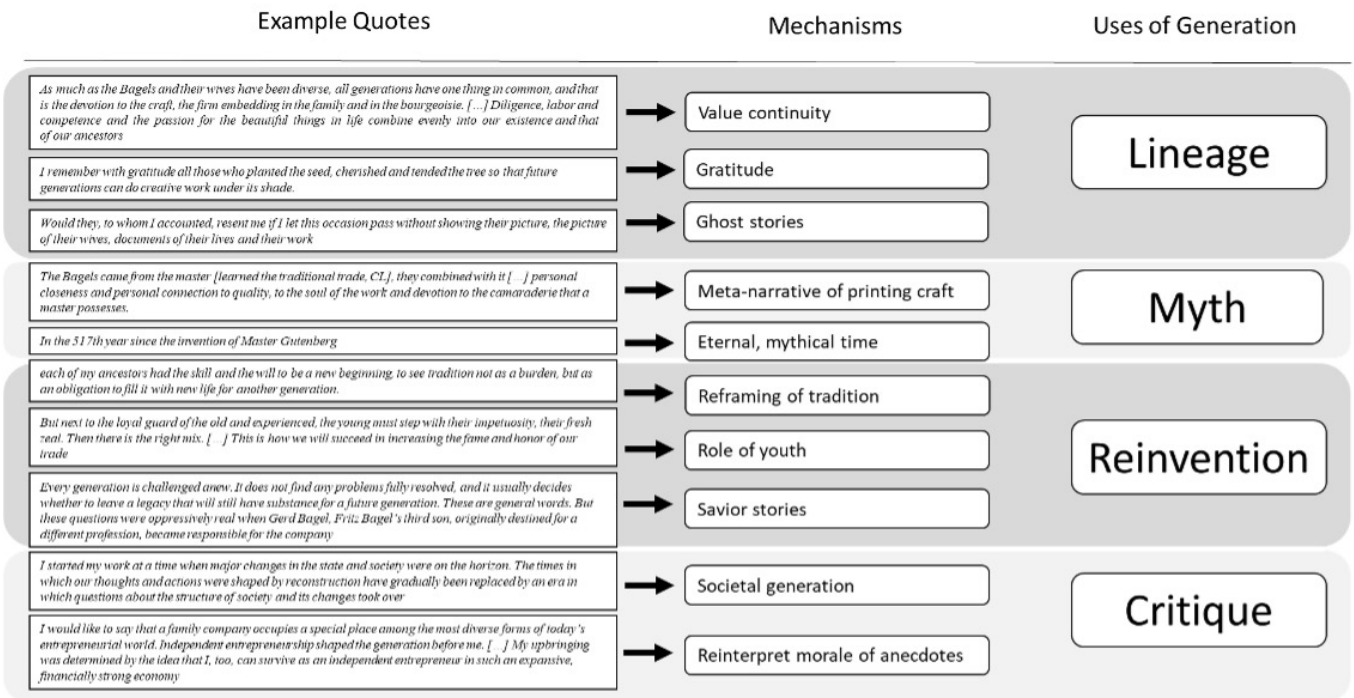
The four uses of generation co-existed in narratives told around the same time, with emphases shifting depending on the concrete context for the narrative uttering, the target audience,

and the objectives of the narrator. We then analyzed our case evidence to understand which concrete mechanisms allowed the narrators to utilize generation in that way. Table 3 and Figure 1 give an overview of the purpose of each use of generation and the mechanisms we found that supported this purpose.

Table 3: Purpose, Temporality, and Mechanisms of Four Uses of Generation

<b>Generation as</b>	<b>Lineage</b>	<b>Myth</b>	<b>Reinvention</b>	<b>Critique</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Embedding in family genealogy	Connecting to societal meta-narratives	Rethinking family issues and purpose	Responding to societal challenges and change
<b>Temporality</b>	Over time	Over time	In Time	In Time
<b>Mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- stress continuity of values</li> <li>- demonstrate gratitude to predecessors</li> <li>- construct ghost stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- connect to meta-narratives</li> <li>- stress eternal quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reframe tradition</li> <li>- stress role of youth</li> <li>- use “savior anecdotes”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- situate in societal generations of significance</li> <li>- omit anecdotes that no longer resonate</li> <li>- create new “fit” between established anecdotes and new challenges</li> </ul>

Figure 1



### ***Generation as Lineage (Continuity in/of Family)***

Generation is a powerful concept that can be used to mark time by stressing the continuity created by generational succession. Used in that way, “generation as lineage” embeds actors into a family genealogy and establishes a periodization of the past. While generation as lineage gives order to the past, it also points to a desirable future in which the lineage continues. Specifically, narrators accomplish this task using three mechanisms: (i) foregrounding value continuity, (ii) demonstrating gratitude to ancestors, and (iii) constructing imaginary interactions with predecessors. Generation as lineage bestows meaning by making an argument over time, highlighting the continuity from the past to the present and suggesting a link to the unknown future.

At Bagel, the theme of transgenerational continuity is deeply embedded. Stories about the family CEOs Gerd and Peter Bagel repeatedly refer to the gapless genealogical lineage that the

owner-managers belonged to, both in words (“continue in the sense that has carried us over many generations,” “Six generations of the Bagel family have contributed to such a success”) as well as in metaphors (“a link in a chain of generations,” “the tree” that allows “future generations [to] do creative work”). Upon Gerd Bagel’s death in 1964, his short, official obituary notice stressed only one theme: generational lineage. *“It was granted to him to preserve the legacy of his fathers in more than 25 years of work”* (96-4, this and all subsequent archival signatures from Bagel Archives and translated from German by author). The notice was written by the Bagel management team and published in newspapers regionally and nationally. Bagel employees expressed their memories in the house magazine. Connecting past, present, and future, one manager argued, *“There is no better way to preserve his legacy than to continue the work in his sense [...] This happens with all the more confidence given that the sixth generation, his son Peter, is already with us [...].”* (114-1) Looking back suggested a linear path forward into the future.

More than with specific characters or their biological relations, narrators rhetorically construct generation as lineage by highlighting *value continuity*. Several narrators engage in this “relay race” of values, showing value persistence across multiple generations. For example, during celebrations of the 150<sup>th</sup> company anniversary in 1951, the official commemorative book celebrated five generations of Bagel owners as *“alike in one thing: in the civic proficiency that makes them masters of their subject, in the generosity of the planning mind, and in the demands that they initially make of themselves.”* (192-2). This value continuity mattered within the company but was of equally great importance to the members of the Bagel family. They were introduced to it from an early age during company visits, in pictures and letters, which circulated among family members (1-3-1 Correspondence). At the 175<sup>th</sup> company anniversary, the Bagel family met for a

celebratory lunch attended by three family generations. In his speech, Peter Bagel addressed specifically the youngest generation when he highlighted the values of their ancestors:

*“175 years, six generations of Bagels, a long time full of events of joy and sorrow. As much as the Bagels and their wives have been diverse, all generations have one thing in common, and that is the devotion to the craft, the firm embedding in the family and in the bourgeoisie. [...] Diligence, labor and competence and the passion for the beautiful things in life combine evenly into our existence and that of our ancestors.” (236-2).*

Commonalities between family members and their value continuity emphasize how meaningful generation as lineage is as a guide for the future.

Generation as lineage also becomes expressed in gratitude for predecessors and in interactions with them, both of which feature in the stories circulating at Bagel. Peter Bagel, for example, remembered: “with gratitude, all those who planted the seed cherished and tended the tree so that future generations can do creative work under its shade.” (236-2). He also gave special thanks to the generation of his father because “this generation [...] has not only protected the inheritance but also increased it and handed it over in an orderly manner.” (236-2) His father, for his part, rhetorically engaged with the voices of the dead when he wrote in his forward to the 150th-anniversary volume:

*“While the manuscripts, pictures, sample sentences and cover drafts of this little book passed through my hands, I kept imagining that the former generations were sitting next to me and taking part in advice and action in a book that was meant for them and their achievements. [...] Would they, to whom I accounted, resent me if I let this occasion pass without showing their picture, the picture of their wives, documents of their lives and their work?” (192-2).*

Gerd specifically addressed his father and reflected, “If I were to take my worries and reflections to him, I’m sure he would shake my hand and agree with me. So, I felt confirmed [...]” (192-2). These voices serve as bridges connecting family members to the family continuity. The inner dialogue with the ghosts of predecessors gives meaning to generation as lineage but also elevates it to an existence beyond time, thereby making it more resilient to change.

### ***Generation as Myth (Continuity in/of Society)***

The term generation is not only employed to show family continuity, as previously described, but also links the family business to broader external narratives of continuity. This usage of generation creates credibility by embedding the family story in an accepted and valued societal meta-narrative. We label this “generation as myth” because, oftentimes, such meta-narratives acquire their status by frequent repetitions over time, eventually leading to a rather abstract but deeply embedded and widely recognized form of narrative. By using “generation as myth,” narrators embed the development of the family business in known societal developments that give it relevance beyond the family or family business.

This is most visible in the frequent references at Bagel to the much older craft tradition of the printing and publishing industry. To enhance the legitimacy of the business, narrators regularly connect Bagel to this mythical story in narratives and social practices. This link elevates the company by attaching it to an existing and revered myth. Members of the Bagel family and external stakeholders referred to this tradition. For example, the mayor of the city of Duesseldorf, where Bagel is located, declared: *“The Bagels came from the masters [learned the traditional printing trade, CL]”* and elaborated:

*“[T]hey combined with it in production, sales and consumption personal closeness and personal connection to quality, to the soul of the work and devotion to the camaraderie that a master possesses. You see, coal and nylon can be produced and mined in abundance, and we need not ask who is behind them; - a book that goes out into the world speaks; it must have a name, it is binding, it is not anonymous. And here lies the great achievement” (69-2).*

Craft traditions were frequently remembered in social practices as well, which in turn provided material for future narratives. As the Bagels celebrated a new building for the company in December 1961, they buried a paper under the doorstep in accordance with craft traditions. It read:

*“In the Year of the Lord 1961*

*In the 517th year since the invention of Master Gutenberg  
In the 161st year since Johann Peter Bagel founded the company in Wesel  
Laid the bearers of the fifth generation -- Mr. Gerd Bagel and Mrs. widow Carl August  
Bagel -- the cornerstone of the new printing house in Mönchengladbach  
Remembering the obligation towards the work of the ancestors  
Boldly advancing forward in the service of future generations.” (33-8).*

By dating the new building to the invention of printing by Johan Gutenberg, the tradition of craft printing became linked to the family business. The “invention of Master Gutenberg” serves as what Ricœur (1988, p. 106) calls the “axial moment in reference to which every other event is dated.”

The distant and legendary moment of creation gives the narratives a continuous, eternal quality that even lends itself to a children’s story. Indeed, Peter Bagel re-told the beginnings of the company, rooted in the craft tradition, in this form when he addressed his daughters in 1976:

*“[B]y now Johann Bagel had been in Wesel for quite some time and the idea to begin his own business was on his mind. After several years of being on his travels through Europe and even to St Petersburg, he wanted to get married and to settle down. It must have been something like this, I imagine, in 1801, when Johann Bagel opened his own bookbindery in Wesel.” (236-2).*

The style of the narrative and, in particular, its opening using the words “by now” (in the original German: “es war”) resemble the German traditional opening for a fairy tale: “es war einmal” (“once upon a time”). They signal a timeless and mythical quality. Generation as myth highlights the continuity of the family business by connecting it to the narratives of deeply rooted, respected, and frequently remembered societal institutions.

### ***Generation as Reinvention (Change in/of Family)***

The third usage of generation as a temporal marker is “generation as reinvention,” which points to the need for rethinking present issues of the family business and re-considering the family’s purpose. It shifts the attention from narratives making arguments *over time*, as typical for generation as lineage and myth, to those making arguments *in time*. This understanding of

generation provides opportunities for integrating contemporaneous context into the generational narratives and argues for each actor “as a new beginning” who, by necessity, relates to newly emerging problems and novel opportunities.

Gerd Bagel raises the point that “*every generation speaks the language of its time*” and uses this argument as a reason to reject a conventional anniversary book (192-2). Rather than bowing to convention, this specific use of generation legitimizes his way of reinventing how the family business remembers its past in a new way, i.e., in an unconventional anniversary book.

His son, Peter Bagel, similarly reframes the notion of tradition. At his first speech to management after his father’s death in 1965, he pleaded not to get “*caught up in tradition*” and “*be alert!*” Asking for the managers’ support when reinventing, Peter states: “*It is therefore important, ladies and gentlemen, that you too help me to be on my guard and intervene if you believe that clear economic thinking is overshadowed by too much tradition.*” (107-3). One decade later, he argues in front of his employees that “*each generation has its own problems.*” And reminiscent of his father’s earlier words, he adds that “*each of my ancestors had the skill and the will to be a new beginning, to see tradition not as a burden, but as an obligation to fill it with new life for another generation.*” (236-2). By reframing what tradition means to him, Peter creates a space for reinventing his role in the business and family.

The theme of generation as reinvention reflects in the often-repeated need for an age-balanced leadership. Assigning the older generation the role of steward and bearer of tradition, the younger generation receives the task of reinventing. “*But next to the loyal guard of the old and experienced, the young must step with their impetuosity, their fresh zeal. Then there is the right mix.*” (192-2). The desired partnership between the mature and the young, allowed narrators to come to terms with the tension between tradition and innovation.



Finally, generation as reinvention also reflects in different anecdotes, which we collectively label “savior stories.” Savior stories describe how actors saved the business or family by breaking with convention or fundamentally reinventing their own role. For example, Gerd Bagel’s entry into the family business prompts a series of narratives that assign him the role of the company’s savior because he had originally planned for a different career but then reinvented himself to fill a void. *“Every generation is challenged anew. It does not find any problems fully resolved, and it usually decides whether to leave a legacy that will still have substance for a future generation. These are general words. But these questions were oppressively real when Gerd Bagel, Fritz Bagel’s third son, originally destined for a different profession, became responsible for the company [...].”* (33-8).

### ***Generation as Critique (Change in/of Society)***

Like generation as reinvention, “generation as critique” focuses on change. However, this fourth use of generation meaningfully connects the family business to larger societal developments that require innovation. It allows narrators to make arguments *in their own time*. However, they see the family business and the family as part of larger societal developments. We call this use “generation as critique” to highlight how it facilitates engaging with novel societal challenges.

For example, Bagel employees embed Gerd’s professional career in the *Zeitgeist* by stressing that *“This economy also shaped its own type of entrepreneur, which changed from generation to generation [...].”* And with a view to large-scale societal changes, they argue, *“It would be a delusion to overlook the fact that two generations are currently replacing each other within the industrialized society.”* (33-8). The term generation, in this understanding, refers to experiences that shaped societal generations, both within the Bagel family and far beyond it.

Generation as critique also becomes expressed by omission, for example, when specific anecdotes no longer resonate and fail to become further repeated. This critique can be difficult to spot without seeing the evolution of narratives over time and thoroughly contextualizing them. For example, one set of anecdotes that initially circulated widely but became increasingly forgotten as their contemporary relevance dwindled were reconstruction narratives, highlighting the work of the generation after WWII in reconstructing the business and society. In 1951, only six years after the end of the war, both the official anniversary book and the house magazine recalled the devastation after WWII and efforts to rebuild. Over time, the moral of the narrative turned from a trial for the company to evidence for the character and resilience of the CEO. In the recollection of one leading manager, *“The severe blows of fate could not bow him [Gerd] down. It was then that it became clear what moral and physical powers were inherent in his nature [...].”* (114-1). Only with the benefit of hindsight did the moral truly crystalize. Gerd successfully running the company for 25 years is what reframed the narrative as one of profound meaning for the company.

Yet, after his death and the succession to his son Peter, this particular narrative about Gerd waned, whereas other narratives about the beloved CEO continued to circulate. As the reconstruction period after the war became less relevant to Bagel employees, especially in the context of societal labor unrest in the printing industry, the narrative failed to connect to lived experiences. Having taken over as CEO from his father, Peter Bagel looked back and highlighted the difference between what he considered his generation and the previous one: *“I started at a time when major changes in the state and society were on the horizon. The times in which our thoughts and actions were shaped by reconstruction have gradually been replaced by an era in which questions about the structure of society and its changes took over”* (240-7). By situating himself and his experiences temporally in one societal generation and not another, Peter communicates the

context challenges he is facing while simultaneously differentiating his fate from that of his forefathers.

“Generation as critique” also reflects in how some anecdotes change and become “updated” in the context of novel societal challenges. This is particularly obvious with narratives that deliver a message of caution. Out of several cautionary tales about Bagel, the one most frequently repeated refers to the year 1921, when Fritz Bagel turned the family business into a joint stock company in the context of German hyperinflation. The official anniversary book of 1951, thirty years after the events, recounts: *Fritz Bagel soon recognized the danger that this anonymous form of company [...] brought with it for keeping the company in family ownership. He succeeded in mastering the incipient foreign infiltration [...] by gradually buying back these shares.*” (192-2). And in a slightly more personal version, Gerd Bagel recalls “*how seriously he [Fritz Bagel] spoke of the dangers that threatened the company as more and more shares passed into other hands*” (192-2).

This cautionary tale was frequently repeated. Yet, its moral evolved. As it connected in different ways with the challenges of the present, the anecdote changed *in time*. In the 1960s, Bagel employees describe it as one of the significant accomplishments of Gerd’s father. Only two years later, Peter reminds the leading managers of Bagel how the knowledge of it has shaped his upbringing.

*“I would like to say that a family company occupies a special place among the most diverse forms of today’s entrepreneurial world. Independent entrepreneurship shaped the generation before me. [...] My upbringing was determined by the idea that I, too, can survive as an independent entrepreneur in such an expansive, financially strong economy”* (107-3).

Over time, the tale evolves from a word of warning about growth through equity financing to a strategic principle. In dialogue with his employees, Peter Bagel refers to this part of the company’s

history to justify strategic decisions. It is important that expansion is “*only carried out in less capital-intensive areas in order to avoid capital-related weakening*” (240-7). Prioritizing organic growth and industries with lower capital requirements is a lesson from the past that became more relevant in the present. To understand the evolution of this episode, the narrative must be interpreted in its historical context. The late 1970s were a period of fundamental corporate governance changes in German family firms (Lubinski, 2011). Several traditional family businesses sold out or merged as the pressures of the recession and the increasing capital intensity in many industries, including printing, challenged their independence. The cautionary tale not only persisted but became increasingly more important in the context of a family business struggling to maintain its independence while needing external capital for technological updates and expansion.

## **Discussion**

Our findings have several implications that advance a more robust theorizing on the generation concept. First, our empirical observations offer an opportunity to reconceptualize generation by integrating its use to describe kinship relations and its ability to link to the flow of societal generations, determined by shared experiences and collectively held understandings about their characteristics. The uses of generation that we describe, moreover, show how generation simultaneously can be used to describe change and continuity, addressing a major challenge in family business. Second, the broader and more sophisticated understanding of generation is insightful for ongoing debates in rhetorical history in family business studies, exemplifying research that also engages with form (the *how* of telling historical narratives) rather than focusing primarily on the content (the *what* of narratives). These issues are taken up in the following sections of the Discussion.

## ***Reconceptualizing Generation***

Specific to family business scholarship and practice, we identified four uses of generation: generation as lineage, as myth, as reinvention, and as critique. They recognize family and society and connect past, present, and future in different ways. With this, we follow a history-informed understanding of time as “a complex, socially constructed concept, which can be perceived by individuals, groups, and organizations in multiple ways.” (Argyres et al., 2020). We then linked these four uses of generation to the mechanisms narrators use to argue for this specific play on the concept of generation (See Table 3 and Figure 1). Some of these interpretations foreground perceived family relations. They can be used to advocate for continuity (generation as lineage) or for change (generation as reinvention), navigating a major tension in family firms (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020). However, narrators also used generation to connect themselves to larger societal developments, a fact less explored in family business studies. Narrators either integrate the story they are telling into widely held societal continuity narratives (generation as myth) or connect their own story to interpretations of broader societal change (generation as critique). Importantly, these uses of generation coexist, thus creating room for strategic historical ambiguity (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021) and agency when managing history (Suddaby, Coraiola, Harvey, & Foster, 2020). Structuring narratives by generation is one way to allow for subtle yet purposeful prioritizations without breaking with the established and recognized form of narrative construction, which guarantees that audiences easily understand and recognize it.

## ***Discussing Generation and Family***

“Generation as lineage” and “generation as reinvention” give order and meaning to the family’s past. Undoubtedly, family and biology provide powerful chronologies of time because

they seem legitimate by nature. However, it is important to remember that much of what is perceived as biological is actually the outcome of a socially negotiated process (Rudolph et al., 2021). How we understand family, for example, and who is considered part of the family depends as much on social norms and conventions as on nature (Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink, & Holden, 1999). Thus, the relationship between different family members is never purely biological. As the sociologist Zerubavel (2003, p. 67) argues, “Genealogies, in other words, are formal accounts of social rather than strictly natural ‘descent.’” Generation as lineage foregrounds the continuity of family history, while generation as reinvention stresses the need of successors to also act as a new beginning and initiate change and innovation. Thus, they allow actors to link past, present, and future in different ways.

Prior research has already engaged with elements of generation as lineage and generation as reinvention; yet without an explicit focus on the use of generation. Closely related are scholarly discussions about the strategic relevance of founders and founder myths in organizations. Basque & Langley (2018), Cailluet, Gorge & Özçaglar-Toulouse (2018), and Schultz & Hernes (2013) have all shown how founder figures can be used to articulate (generation as lineage) but also refresh or reconfigure (generation as reinvention) organizational identity claims. We connect to their findings by showing that invoking a line of previous generations – similar to invoking a founder myths – is particularly effective if the line of generations becomes expressed in value continuity, analogous to how founder myths represent values. Over time, Basque & Langley (2018) argue, founder myths become an increasingly more abstract representation of values, allowing organizations to stretch their identity while still foregrounding the overall continuity of the organizational evolution. Similar to Suddaby et al. (2020) and Dalpiaz & Di Stefano (2018), these authors emphasize how such history

management, especially the framing of change as continuity, helps change management processes and maintains stakeholders' commitment. In line with these arguments, we find that structuring narratives by generation is another way of framing history towards specific future goals, most notably regarding organizational continuity or change.

While these scholars have focused specifically on the workings of founder myths, our analysis shows that, in family business, "generation as lineage" narratives similarly contributes to the relay race of values. We demonstrate, moreover, that these value continuities can rhetorically be expressed in actors' fictitious dialogues with "ghostly" ancestors, as in Gerd Bagel's rhetorical discussions with his predecessors. This confirms Orr's (2014, p. 1057) argument that conversations with ghostly characters in organizations provide "a bridge between the legacy of past decisions and competing manifestos for the future." The organizational ghosts of previous generations stress the function of the narrator to rhetorically harmonize past, present, and future. By showing the narrator as "haunted," they point to a reflexive relation between the dead and the living.

At the same time, abstract values and ghost stories also give narratives an increasingly eternal quality, placing it outside of chronological time. In our case, this shows in the links to timeless craft traditions or the structuring of narratives in fairy tale style. Rhetorical history scholars have argued that distant or mythologized pasts can be more easily repurposed without challenging the established narrative structure (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021; Lubinski, 2018). Our discussion of different uses of the term generation adds to this argument. Generation evokes the idea of family continuity (generation as lineage), while also giving every family generation the opportunity to be a new beginning (generation as reinvention), thus making family narratives more resilient over time. The ambiguity of the generation concept is useful to

family firms because it becomes a tool for change management, reframing innovation and change into a strength of tradition rather than a fundamental challenge to it (Erdogan, Rondi, & De Massis, 2019).

### ***Discussing Generation and Society***

Looking beyond the context of the family, we found that using the term generation also involved connecting the family business to larger societal developments in two distinct ways. Linking to established societal myths supports the arguments for the continuity of the family business (generation as myth), connecting it to institutions in society that are often older than the family business. At the same time, stories about societal generations with distinct experiences also provide material for legitimizing change by highlighting how each generation takes on time-specific idiosyncratic challenges (generation as critique).

Historians and sociologists have long described generation as a form of social belonging based on interpretations of shared societal experiences (Mannheim, 1952/1923). Our empirical findings confirm that the concept of generation and how actors use it in family firms cannot be explained by kinship alone. We found that different people in the family business we studied “play the generation card” to argue about their place in time and society. They do this with various strategic intents, providing them with a coherent narrative of the past and, consequently, “a perception of enhanced agency in the future” (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al., Forthcoming).

Generation as myth and generation and critique are both ways of connecting the history of the family business to larger societal developments, either by telling a story that supports claims for continuity – as in the frequent references to the craft traditions of the industry that legitimized traditional ways of doing things at Bagel – or by pointing to developments in society



that require change – as in the idea of new societal challenges during the 1960s cultural revolution that Bagel entrepreneurs had to critically engage with. We found that the concept of generation serves as a bridge between family history and societal history, thus turning history into a resource and allowing entrepreneurs to seize new opportunities and rhetorically convince stakeholders of the need for future action. Using the generation concept to connect with societal developments is important because historical narratives are not a mere collection of “historical facts” but also involve an engagement with “social facts” or collective understandings that give individual or community behavior broader meaning (Suddaby, Israelsen, Bastien, Saylor, & Coraiola, Forthcoming). The concept of generation is particularly useful to create such connections and to facilitate the specific historical framing strategies that Suddaby et al. (2020) have identified as a dynamic capability. Because of the ambiguity of the term generation, historical narratives structured by generation are able to frame change as continuity (or frame continuity as change) without challenging an established and recognizable form of narrating. For future family business scholarship, analyzing how generation as myth and generation as critique bridge between family and societal history requires a deeply contextualized research approach, as history-informed scholars have previously advocated for (Argyres et al., 2020).

The gist of our reconceptualization is to recognize generation as a “multi-colored” concept (Magrelli et al., 2022) that “envelops theories from different fields according to an intersubjective view (i.e., theories that elaborate on the implications of the interactions between individuals, generations, families, and society over time)” (p. 33) and that the narration of generation involves both family and society. The concept of generation is unique in regulating “the boundary between the procedure of reproduction as described by biology and a process of

tradition understood as culture.” (Weigel, 2008, p. 141). This innate link between family and societal history makes generation so valuable to rhetorical history processes in family business.

### ***Rethinking Generation in Rhetorical History***

Our reconceptualization of generation contributes to recent debates about rhetorical history in family business studies. Family business scholars have paid close attention to history as a form of rhetoric with strategic implications. Yet, there are diverging assumptions about the strategic use of historical narratives in family business. Some scholars argue that history is the “fil rouge linking the entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by entrepreneurial families across generations” (Ge et al., 2021, p. 225) and a tool to create and communicate continuity (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015), while others focus on the role of history in facilitating strategic change (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Sasaki, Kotlar, Ravasi, & Vaara, 2020).

We argue that one way to resolve this contradiction is to pay more attention to strategic historical ambiguity, not just in the content of narratives (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021) but also in their form (Labaki et al., 2019). Family business scholars have mostly asked what is being told in historical narratives and for what purpose. However, our analysis of generation as an ordering principle for historical narrative suggests that **how** stories are being told is equally revealing, helping us understand how to define “the ideal relationship between narrative structure and cultural discourse” (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al., Forthcoming). Understanding the four different uses of generation and how they give meaning to the links between past, present and future is an important contribution to this research agenda.

The uses of generation we have identified connect with recent work by Suddaby and colleagues (Forthcoming), who argue that effective entrepreneurial stories must resonate at two levels. They must be convincing on an “intradiegetic level,” i.e., in the internal context of the

entrepreneur or, in our case, the family business, and they must also be relevant and plausible on an “extradiegetic level,” i.e., in the historical and cultural context of their time. Only by tying their own entrepreneurial ambitions to the collective aspirations of the community can such stories become credible with (current and potential) stakeholders. “Entrepreneurs must articulate their vision of the future in a way that resonates with the collective memory of a community” (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al., Forthcoming).

The fact that the concept of generation speaks simultaneously to family and societal belonging is one explanation for why its use is so prominent in family business narratives. Talking about one’s generation in family business is one way of integrating the extradiegetic level because we determine our generation not only by placing it within a sequence of births within the family but also by interpreting our experiences in society and in relation to societal change. Scholars in family business studies have already determined that these connections to larger societal developments matter for how family businesses tell their history. Ge et al. (2021) describe how such stories “beyond the business” make the history of the business seem more plausible. They coined the term “embedding” to describe this form of scripting strategy to generate acceptance by a broader community. We add to this literature by showing that using generation to structure historical narratives is one important way of “embedding,” pointing towards the need to further engage with the form of narratives in rhetorical history, not just their content.

In sum, we have clarified the role of generation as an ordering principle for historical narratives in family business. Specifically, we show that generation is important for rhetorically navigating the tensions between change and continuity (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020), on the one hand, and the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, et al.,

Forthcoming) on the other hand. Inspired by Ricœur (1988), we have conceptualized generation as a marker of time that connects the idea of family generations with broader societal generations, their experiences, trials, and opportunities. The concept of generation is an established way of talking about the past in the specific context of family business. Narratives structured by generation signal to internal and external audiences why a specific moment or period is significant by making an argument that connects the past, present, and future.

### ***Practical Implications***

Our reconceptualization of generation also has practical implications for family business stakeholders. All organizations are embedded in larger historical contexts, which change over time. Understanding one's history will improve self-awareness and reflexivity for family business stakeholders, which, in turn, has proven to positively affect leadership (Barbera, Bernhard, Nacht, & McCann, 2015). Historical narratives also have been shown to give a coherent sense of self to families in business (Hamilton et al., 2017, p. 6). Yet, to avoid becoming trapped in established historical narratives, advancing skills in rhetorical history (Suddaby et al., 2020) and specifically understanding the diverse uses of generation allows family business members to deal with the tension between managing innovation and tradition (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020). Recognizing narratives with strategic historical ambiguity (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021) and structuring devices that bridge to larger societal narratives, such as generation, can help in that process. As needs and expectations shift, those narratives that can incorporate change without breaking the established narrative structure are particularly important for successfully managing traditions.

Finally, a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of generation can be useful concerning the nature of legacy in family business and how legacy is transmitted (Barbera, et al.,

2018; Hammond, Pearson & Holt, 2016; Jaskiewicz, et al., 2015). By considering legacies as “rhetorically reconstructed narratives of the family’s past” (Jaskiewicz, et al., 2015: 30), the four uses of generation in this article suggest ways that legacies can be continued, changed, or dropped over time. We also propose that this article offers insights into specific ways for how generation is narrated (See Table 3 and Figure 1) that would impact legacy. Understanding the multiple meanings of the term generation and how they shape storytelling processes gives individual storytellers more freedom to connect generational narratives to their own identity stories. In that sense, generational narratives are also an invitation to re-narrate one’s own story in the context of the legacies of family and society. Existing workshops (sometimes facilitated by experts) that debate the family’s and family business’ legacy could usefully guide family members in evaluating the significance of structuring stories by generations and evaluating each member’s place in them, thus helping them come to terms with their history and with developing skills as history managers.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Our study comes with several limitations. Our exploratory historical research design does not claim representativeness but suggests future research directions. While historians frequently engage with in-depth qualitative case studies, future research should scrutinize our findings, test their relevance in different settings, and define boundary conditions. As suggested by Sinha et al. (2020), focusing on different types of companies embedded in different competitive and cultural environments is likely to offer different insights into how families and companies articulate and use their past. It would be interesting to explore if generation as a structuring device of historical narratives is more common in some cultural contexts or at specific moments in time than others and which other forms of narrating shape how family businesses tell their history.

To better understand the fragility or dynamics of the use of generation in narrative, further research should also explore the role of “triggering events,” which Lippmann & Aldrich (2016a, p. 663) define as “disruptive social and historical events that generate the conditions for the creation of new roles for entrepreneurs and other social actors.” This would explore how generational narratives change, why they change, and the role external influences and stakeholder communities play in the continuity or change of rhetorical histories. Major triggering events open a space for new societal generations and thus for a restructuring of past, present, and future.

## **Conclusions**

The genius of studying rhetorical history resides in William Faulkner’s, (1951, p. 73) often quoted aphorism “The past is never dead. It is not even past”. We all live within the history of the present moment, a particular time and place that is bounded by the past and future, yet, by being informed by the past, we then claim and utilize it for moving into the future. We use the methods and perspectives of history to explore what is, intrinsically, a historical phenomenon, rhetorical history. By talking about generation as narrative, there is a recognition of the value of past generations acting entrepreneurially, yet, by not specifying exactly how entrepreneurship occurs, this allows the current generation to reimagine and act in its own way. A generational narrative is also an invitation to continue to act entrepreneurially, given current circumstances, yet informed by the challenges of prior generations. As such, these histories are rhetorical, and in repeating and reinterpreting them, these narratives of prior generations fuel the fires of future initiative.

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