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Evolution of ownership and financing structures among Belgian Hidden Champions

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Foreword

This thesis is the fruit of the support, generosity and trust of many people who made it possible, and to each of them I am deeply grateful.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Bartholomeus Kamp, my thesis supervisor, for his guidance, availability and constructive feedback throughout this process, his expertise on Hidden Champions shaped this work in a fundamental way.

I would also like to thank the survey respondents who took the time to answer my questionnaire despite their busy schedules, their contribution is sincerely appreciated.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family and close friends, I am endlessly grateful for their love and unconditional support through all this journey.

Table of Content

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growing internationalization of investment has raised fundamental questions about how traditionally private and family-controlled firms manage their ownership and financing structures. This thesis focuses on a specific category of firms known as Hidden Champions, or International Niche Market Leaders, first identified by Hermann Simon in Germany. Small to mid-sized companies with outstanding international performance in a very specific niche, Hidden Champions are traditionally family-controlled, privately financed and largely unknown to the general public (Simon, 1996).

This thesis builds on previous UCLouvain master's on Belgian Hidden Champions, notably Georges (2017) on marketing and de Caritat (2019) on mergers and acquisitions, by adding a new layer of analysis focused on ownership and financing structures, a dimension that remains largely absent from the existing literature, particularly in the Belgian context. Belgium, a small open economy deeply embedded within the European market, represents a particularly relevant yet largely unexplored case.

This central research question guiding this thesis is: t*o what extent have the ownership and financing structures of Belgian Hidden Champions evolved over the period 2008-2024, and what role has the growing presence of foreign and institutional investors played in this evolution?* Two sub-questions structure the analysis: first, do these structures align with theoretical expectations, specifically the stewardship model and the pecking order hierarchy? Second, have they evolved over time, and can the observed changes be associated with the entry of foreign and institutional investors?

To address these questions, the thesis combines a literature review, a mixed-methods empirical analysis covering a large sample of Belgian Hidden Champions over 2008-2024, and a discussion confronting findings with theoretical framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

HIDDEN CHAMPIONS: CONCEPT, CHARACTERISTICS & ORIGINS

Management studies have mainly studied and focused on large multinationals, focusing on their strategies, competitive advantages and performance, presenting them as benchmarks for other firms. Mid-sized companies that outperform large corporations in many aspects have long remained understudied. Simon (2009) estimated that small and mid-sized companies generate approximately 80% of German exports, identifying among them a distinct category he termed Hidden Champions, firms largely unknown to the public, whose strategic opacity reinforces their competitive advantage.

Building on this initial identification, Simon (1996) was the first to formalize the concept, defining three criteria to distinguish HCs form other small and mid-sized firms:

- The firm must hold a first or second position in its global market or demonstrate a clear competitive advantage where market share is difficult to measure.
- The firm must not exceed €1 billion in annual revenues.
- The firm must maintain low public visibility.

Simon (2009) later revised these criteria, raising the revenue threshold to €5 billion and broadening market position to include continental leadership, while the core logic remained unchanged: niche dominance, financial discretion and operational scale that keeps them below radar. Beyond these defining criteria, HCs have a set of strategic and organizational characteristics that distinguish them from both large corporations and other small and mid-sized firms.

Their most distinctive strategic trait is an extreme niche focus, markets defined so narrowly that global leadership becomes attainable. This specialization enables early internationalization, with HC owners preferring direct control of foreign subsidiaries over distribution partnerships. These characteristics collectively reinforce one another, sustaining the premium positioning that funds continued investment. Among HCs specifically, ownership and leadership are closely interconnected. Empirical evidence consistently shows that the majority of these firms are founder-led or family-controlled, a pattern documented since Simon's original studies in the 1990s and still predominant today, as illustrated in Figure1 (*Simon, 2009; Venohr & Meyer 2007).*

Ownership/management	Ten years ago (in %)	Today (in %)
Family with family management	62.3	51.8
Family with non-family management	14.1	14.5
Large corporations	21.1	16.1
Public	2.4	9.5
Private equity	-	8.1

Figure 1 – Ten-year comparison of ownership and management at the HCs (Simon, 2009)

This ownership structure is not incidental, it reflects a deliberate commitment to long-term continuity that defines the HC model *(Zellweger, 2017.* Family or founder ownership therefore ensures a high-level of independence in strategic decision-making and provides continuity across generations *(Colli, 2012).*

Most theoretical insights on HCs derive from research on the German market, with Simon (2009) estimating that approximately 80% of all mid-sized world market leaders originate from German-speaking and Scandinavian countries. Since then, academic interest has broadened beyond Germany, with studies examining Central and Eastern Europe and China *(Braček Lalić, 2021; Simon, 2009).*

BELGIAN CONTEXT

However, research outside the Germanic and Scandinavian contexts remains considerably less developed, most studies either build directly on Simon's original framework or use it as a comparative benchmark. The Belgian context remains largely absent from academic literature, despite sharing many of the structural conditions: family ownership dominance, export orientation and a dense mid-market industrial base, that have historically produced HC elsewhere. This gap is precisely what the present thesis seeks to address. A similar approach can be applied to Belgium, despite representing only 3.5% of European GDP, its trade openness stands at 158%, far above the world average of 93%, reflecting an economy structurally oriented towards international markets *(Belgian Economy at a Glance, 2024; Eurostat, 2018; TheGlobalEconomy.com, n.d.).*

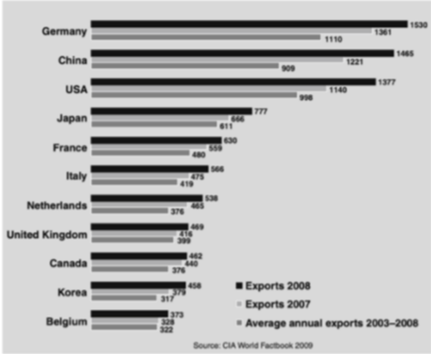

Figure 2 – Exports in 2008, 2007 and in the five-year period 2003-2008 - average annual exports in billion US$ - (Simon, 2009)

Within the Belgian corporate landscape, family businesses account for proximately one third of the GDP and represent 77% of all firms with employees, figures similar to those observed in Germany, despite the considerable difference in country *size (Lambrecht & Molly, 2011).*

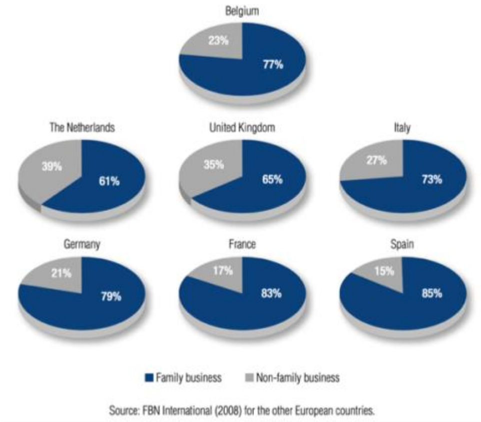

Figure 3 – Number of family businesses in Belgium and other European countries (Lambrecht & Molly, 2011).

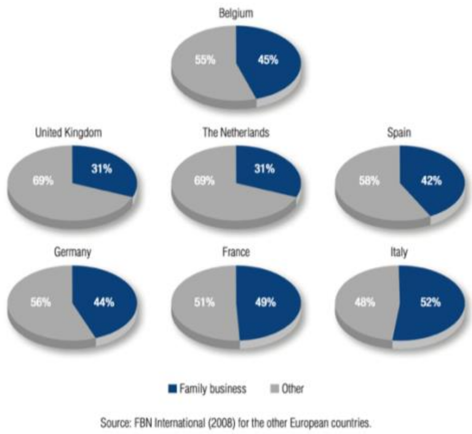

Figure 4 – Share of family businesses in employment in Belgium and other European countries (Lambrecht & Molly, 2011).

This combination of export orientation and family business dominance creates structural conditions particularly favourable to the emergence of HCs, as mid-sized firms are naturally pushed toward internationalization (*Belgian Economy at a Glance, 2024*). Given that neighbouring countries such as Austria and the Netherlands, share similar industrial traditions and proximity to the German market, have already been identified as significant HC countries, it is entirely natural to examine whether Belgium holds a comparable population of HCs, particularly given the favourable structural conditions *(Simon, 2009).*

Ownership structure in HCs is not an incidental feature but a core strategic decision that shapes firm identity, decision-making and long-term direction.

THE STEWARDSHIP THEORY

These observable behaviours, reinvestment over dividends, resistance to outside capital and generation continuity, reflect a governance logic that Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson (1997) formalize as stewardship theory. Unlike the self-interested actors assumed by agency theory, stewards are executives whose personal goals are best fulfilled through the achievement of organizational objectives, prioritizing long-term firm performance over short-term personal gain *(Jensen & Meckling, 1976).*

Fundamentally, stewardship theory holds that autonomy and discretion are preconditions for steward effectiveness: excessive external control undermines motivation and ultimately harms performance *(Davis et al., 1997).* This theoretical lens explains not only the success of family-les HCs but also why the appointment of external managers can succeed, provided those managers are given the autonomy to act as stewards rather than being subjected to the high-powered monitoring mechanisms more typical of listed companies.

THE HC OWNERSHIP MODEL

Simon (*2009*) found that approximately 66.3% of HCs are family owned, as illustrated in Figure 1. Founders and owners consistently highlighted that sole ownership afforded them complete independence in strategic decision-making, with most reporting that this structure did not constrain the firm financially. In most HCs, ownership and management are unified in the same individual, a defining feature of the HC model that eliminates the classic principal-agent conflict *(Simon, 2009).*

In most HCs, ownership and management are unified in the same individual, a defining feature of the HC model that eliminates the classic principal-agent conflict (Simon, 2009). When family succession is not feasible, HCs may appoint external managers to ensure continuity while preserving family ownership *(De Massis et al., 2008).*

While the classic principal-agent is largely absent in HCs given the unity of ownership and management, a different agency tension emerges between controlling families and external creditors or minority partners *(Fama & Jensen, 1983; Shleifer & Vishny, 1997).* This conflict intensifies across generations, Villalonga and Amit (*2006*) demonstrate that firm value tends to decline when descendants assume control without adequate governance structures, making succession the most governance-sensitive moment in the HC lifecycle.

In HCs specifically, ownership concentration manifests as a complete unity of ownership and management, eliminating formal board processes in favour of informal, private decision-making. Consistent with their preference for discretion, HCs disclose only the legal minimum, rarely publishing profit and financial data *(Venohr & Meyer 2007).* In contrast, listed firms face mandatory disclosure obligations, a constraint that applies to only approximately 10% of HCs *(Figure 1, Simon, 2009).* Many HCs deliberately operate outside the scrutiny of analysts, investors and regulators, reflecting a preference for long-term planning over short-term earning pressure *(Simon, 2009; Schenkenhofer, 2022; Schenkenhofer et al., 2025)*.

LIFECYCLE AND SUCCESSION

HCs evolve through a predictable ownership lifecycle, in the founding stage, ownership is fully concentrated in. a single founder-manager, before progressively spread across family members as governance formalizes across generations (*Simon, 2009; Zellweger et al., 2012*).

The most critical moment in this lifecycle is the succession event (Handler, 1994; De Massis et al., 2008). When internal succession fails or no capable descendant is available, the firm must open its capital to outside investors, triggering shift from stewardship to agency logic. A final stage, not reached by all HCs, is the IPO (Initial Public Offer) or trade sale, representing a definitive break form the founding ownership model. Succession and external partner entry are therefore interconnected events that collectively reshape HC ownership over time, with direct consequences for the financing structures examined in the following chapter (*Handler, 1994; De Massis et al., 2008*).

EXTERNAL OWNERSHIP

When family succession is not feasible, HCs may appoint an external manager to ensure business continuity while maintaining family ownership. As illustrated in Figure 1, the share of HCs owned by large corporations declined from the 1990s to 2010, while the proportion of firms that are publicly listed or backed by private equity increased (*Simon, 2009*). External investors can contribute growth capital, professionalization and network access. However, such participation is often minority-based, allowing founding families to retain strategic control while avoiding short-term pressure and cultural misalignment *(Hennart et al., 2019)*.

Private equity entry nonetheless triggers governance formalization: investors require strict performance monitoring, shifting governance logic from stewardship to agency *(Achleitner et al., 2010; Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009)*. While HCs are fundamentally long-term oriented, private equity funds are structurally short-term, operating on a 4–7-year exit horizons that conflict with the generational perspective of HC families. When families retain majority control, private equity interventions concerning employment and restructuring are typically softened, preserving the HC's identity and niche focus *(Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2006; Achleitner et al., 2010; Scholes et al., 2009).*

Where private equity does add value, it often does so by supporting professionalization and international expansion while preserving niche identity, without assuming operational control *(Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009; INDUS, 2010).* With growth and internationalization, foreign investors and strategic acquirers increasingly enter the HC ownership structure *(Simon, 2009; Achleitner et al., 2008).* While foreign institutional ownership brings enhanced capital access and legitimacy, it also introduces heavier reporting standards and governance expectations that can conflict with HC culture *(European Investment Bank, 2024; Ferreira & Matos, 2008)*.

The impact of foreign ownership is not uniform, what matters is not simply who owns the firm but what kind of owner they are and how much control they exercise (*Gedajlovic & Shapiro, 2002; Thomsen & Pedersen, 2003; Giannetti & Simonov, 2006).* Several structural constraints however limit wider investor engagement in HCs, the specialized and niche nature of these firms makes valuation difficult, as public financial data are scarce and governance structure are informal. To navigate these challenges, some investment funds specialize geographically or by sector, supporting HCs across multiple countries while avoiding operational interference *(Simon, 2009; INDUS, 2010; Halder's Advisory Board, 2013).*

BELGIAN CONTEXT

In the Belgian context specifically, this dynamic plays out between patient, culturally aligned domestic investors and incoming foreign capital with different return expectations, a tension that sits at the heart of this thesis *(Beuselinck et al., 2009; PwC Belgium, 2023)*.

SYNTHESIS: OWNERSHIP DYNAMICS AND STEWARDSHIP ALIGNMENT

Ownership arrangement	Stewardship alignment	Pros	Cons
Family / Sole ownership	High	Complete independence Fast decision-making Long-term commitment	Succession risk: value may decline descendants lack governance struct
External professional managers	Moderate to high	Can act as the stewards if granted high autonomy	Performance may suffer if subjected to high-powered monitoring
Private equity	Low	Professionalization Buy-and-build growth strategies	4–7-year exit pressure Shift from stewardship to agency logic
Foreign / Institutional investors	Variable	Enhanced capital access International legitimacy	Heavier reporting standards conflicting with HC discretion culture
Strategic corporate acquirers	Variable	Potential alignment with long-term niche focus	Risk of losing HC identity and strategic autonomy

Table 1: Ownership arrangements among Hidden Champions: stewardship alignment, advantages and structural risks.

HIDDEN CHAMPIONS' FINANCING STRUCTURES

Financing structures in HCs are not a neutral financial decision but a strategic and cultural one, deeply interconnected with the ownership logic established in the previous section. A family can resist outside shareholders will equally resit outside capital. This section examines the financing structures that both reflect and reinforce HC ownership patterns *(Simon, 2009)*.

THE PECKING ORDER THEORY

The pecking order theory, developed by Meyers and Majluf (1984), provides the theoretical foundation for this behaviour. The theory argues that firms do not have a single optimal capital structure but rather follow a hierarchy of financing preferences driven by information asymmetry between managers and outside investors. Because managers know more about the firm's true value than external investors, issuing equity sends a negative signal to the market, suggesting the firm may be overvalued. Firms therefore prefer internal funds first, as they carry no information cost.

When internal funds are insufficient, debt is preferred over equity, as it reveals less private information. External equity is only accessed as a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted *(Meyers, 1984; Meyers & Majluf, 1984)*. For HCs, this hierarchy is not merely a theoretical preference but a deeply rooted cultural practice, external equity is viewed with suspicion, as it inevitably introduces outside voices into strategic decisions *(Gallo & Vilaseca, 1996)*. Internal financing is therefore the purest expression of HC autonomy, the financial equivalent of the ownership concentration and governance informality documented in the previous section (*Simon, 2009; Zellweger, 2017)*.

INTERNAL FINANCING

HCs display a strong and historically consistent preference for retained earnings and self-financing over any form of external capital.

	Past	Future
Self-financing	**78.6%**	**77.8%**
Traditional bank loans	**61.6%**	**44.0%**
Private equity	**15.3%**	**9.7%**
Capital market	**12.8%**	**29.6%**

Figure 5 – Past and future importance of financing sources among hidden champions (Simon, 2009)

Reinvesting profits rather than distributing them allows HC families to fund growth without surrendering control or exposing themselves to the governance expectations of outside investors. An approach that typically results in high equity ratios and low leverage, further reinforcing financial independence *(Zellweger, 2017).*

Simon (2021) reports that HCs maintain a mean equity ratio of 42%, significantly above the German SME average of 25% but below the international average of 50%, confirming that HCs occupy a distinctive financing position. The author also notes that the equity base of most HCs was largely unaffected by the 2008–2010 recession, suggesting that HC financing conservatism acts as a structural buffer against macroeconomic shocks.

DEBT FINANCING AND RELATIONSHIP BANKING

When internal funds are insufficient, HCs turn to bank debt as their preferred external financing instrument, and not just any bank debt, but relationship-based lending with local or regional banks built on years of mutual trust. Relationship lending is characterized by repeated, long-term interactions between borrower and lender, allowing the bank to accumulate soft information about the firm that reduces information asymmetry and lowers borrowing costs over time *(Berger & Udell, 1995; Boot, 2000)*. This mirrors the HC's broader governance logic, just as ownership favours long-term trust-based relationships, financing favours a known banking partner over impersonal capital markets (*Harhoff & Körting, 1998)*.

Family firms systematically prefer bank debt to preserve ownership control while keeping leverage conservative (*La Rocca et al., 2011*). The global financial crisis of 2008 tested this model significantly, as many small and mid-sized firms including HCs faced considerable difficulties accessing bank loans, an episode that reinforced the HC preference for internal financing and highlighting vulnerability of relationship-dependent borrowers during periods of credit contraction (*Mietzner et al., 2017; Berger & Udell, 1995)*. Relationship banking is therefore as much a governance statement as a financing choice *(Petersen & Rajan, 1994).*

Beyond traditional bank debt, family firms and hidden champions may also access hybrid financing instruments, including mezzanine capital, which sits between debt and equity in the capital structure, silent partners who provide capital without assuming operational control, and family offices who invest with a long-term patient capital logic aligned with HC culture (Tappeiner et al., 2012; PwC Belgium, 2023). These instruments represent a middle ground between full equity dilution and pure debt, particularly relevant for firms seeking growth capital while preserving ownership control.

RELUCTANCE TOWARD EXTERNAL EQUITY

HCs display a structural aversion to public capital markets. The first reason is informational, HCs hold deep proprietary knowledge about their niche, technology and customer relationships that they cannot disclose publicly without handing competitive intelligence directly to rivals *(Bhattacharya & Ritter, 1983)*. This information asymmetry is not a market failure for HCs but a strategic asset, their opacity is a source of competitive advantage that public listing would systematically erode.

The second reason is governance, accessing public equity markets means accepting mandatory disclosure obligations, independent board requirements, analyst scrutiny and earnings pressure that are fundamentally incompatible with the HC's long-term relationship-based governance model *(Pagano et al., 1998)*. An increasing number of HCs have nonetheless become listed on stock exchanges recently, reflecting evolving financial needs and growth ambitions, though many remain cautious due to disclosure requirements and concerns over potential undervaluation in niche markets *(Simon, 2009)*.

As internal financing reaches its limits and succession pressures intensify, private equity and venture capital have emerged as increasingly common financing alternatives for HCs seeking growth capital or ownership transition solutions *(Simon, 2009)*. It is however critical to distinguish between two fundamentally different forms of PE involvement: minority growth capital, which provides financing without transferring control, and majority buyouts, which restructure ownership entirely and carry far greater implications for HC governance *(Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009; Tappeiner et al., 2012)*.

Minority stakes are generally more compatible with HC culture, as they allow the founding family to retain strategic control while accessing capital, expertise and international networks. By contrast, majority buyouts trigger a fundamental governance shift, stewardship logic gives way to high-powered incentive structures, informal decision-making is replaced by formalized monitoring, and the firm's long-term orientation is subordinated to the PE fund's 4–7-year exit timeline *(Achleitner et al., 2010; Dawson, 2011)*. Where PE does succeed however, it often does so by supporting internationalization and professionalization while preserving niche identity, demonstrating that the outcome depends critically on the governance arrangement post-entry *(Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009)*.

FINANCING EVOLUTION: IPOS AND INTERNATIONAL CAPITAL

In the HC lifecycle, the most radical and irreversible financing event is the IPO (initial public offering). An IPO definitely resolves capital constraints, providing permanent access to equity markets, but at the simultaneous cost of confidentiality loss, control dilution, short-term market pressure and mandatory disclosure *(Pagano, Panetta & Zingales, 1998)*.

Motivations for listing extend beyond growth: founder exit, debt reduction and succession resolution are equally common triggers *(Ritter & Welch, 2002)*. Family firms specifically resist listing because it structurally separates ownership from control in ways that permanently undermine their governance model *(Claessens et al., 2002)*. While IPOs remain rare among HCs, Gedajlovic and Shapiro (2002) and Simon (2009) both anticipate a growing phenomenon as firms scale beyond what private financing can realistically support.

As HCs internationalize operationally, the same growth logic that pushes them into foreign markets eventually attracts foreign capital into their ownership structure. Three categories of foreign investors increasingly enter the picture: international PE funds, sovereign wealth funds, and institutional investors, each bringing distinct governance expectations and return horizons *(Ferreira & Matos, 2008)*. HCs accept these investors primarily for the capital access, global networks and enhanced legitimacy they provide. The governance consequences however differ critically depending on the type of investor, the size of the stake held, and the degree of control exercised *(Giannetti & Simonov, 2006)*.

In the Belgian context specifically, this dynamic plays out between patient domestic investors, relationship banks and family offices, and incoming foreign capital with fundamentally different return expectations *(Beuselinck et al., 2009)*. Cross-border financing therefore completes the internationalization of the HC but simultaneously introduces the most complex governance tensions the firm will face. This growing interest from the financial sector in HC-type firms is the focus of the following section.

SYNTHESIS: FINANCING INSTRUMENTS AND HC COMPATIBILITY

Pecking order rank	Financing instrument	HC compatibility	Pros	Cons
1 – First preference	Retained earnings	Very high	Full control No governance obligations No information cost	Growth constrained by internal resourc limits
2 – Second preference	Relationship bank debt	High	Long-term trust-based access Conservative leverage Minimal disclosure	Vulnerability during credit contractions as in 2008
3 – Hybrid instruments	Mezzanine silent Partners Family offices	Moderate to high	Middel ground between debt and equity Preserves control	More expensive than senior debt Limited availability
4 – Reluctant option	Minority PE or growth equity	Moderate	Capital access Professionalization International networks	Reporting obligations Return expectations Exit pressure
5 – Major disruption	Majority PE buyout	Low	Governance professionalization	Full shift from stewardship to agency logic 4–7 year exit
6 – Last resort	IPO / Public listing	Low to moderate	Permanent capital access Enhanced legitimacy	Mandatory disclosure Control dilution Short-term pressure
	Foreign institutional capital	Variable	Capital access International legitimacy	Heavier governance expectations conflicting with HC culture

Table 2: Financing instruments among Hidden Champions ranked by pecking order preference.

THE FINANCIAL SECTOR'S INTEREST IN HIDDEN CHAMPIONS

This section examines why the financial sector has developed a growing and structural interest in hidden champions as targets, and how this interest manifests in the Belgian context.

WHY THE FINANCIAL SECTOR TARGETS HIDDEN CHAMPION

This interest is driven by fundamental shifts in the investment landscape, as traditional large-cap markets have become crowded, financial investors have turned to the mid-market, where HCs with secure niches, resilient cash flows and succession-driven transition opportunities represent particularly attractive targets *(Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009)*. Their underdeveloped reporting structures relative to their operational performance define a professionalization potential that PE funds are well positioned to capture *(Kaplan & Strömberg, 2009; Achleitner et al., 2010; Dawson, 2011)*.

INFORMATION OPACITY: BARRIER AND ATTRACTION

Discretion is one of the most valued characteristics of HCs, but it creates a double-edged dynamic when defining their relationship with the financial sector. On the barrier side, limited public information, informal reporting standards and opaque governance structures make due diligence costly, time-consuming and uncertain. For banks specifically, opacity creates a fundamental information asymmetry problem: without reliable financial data, credit assessment relies on soft information and relationship history rather than hard metrics *(Berger & Udell, 1995)*. For PE funds, opacity raises deal execution risk: warranties, representations and valuation benchmarks are harder to establish when a firm has never been externally audited or publicly scrutinized *(Cumming & Johan, 2007)*.

On the attraction side however, opacity is precisely what keeps these assets protected from competitive bidding processes that inflate prices in well-documented markets. A firm whose fundamentals are strong, but whose information environment is thin may be priced below its intrinsic value *(Bhattacharya & Ritter, 1983; Chemmanur & Fulghieri, 1999)*. For sophisticated investors, opacity is therefore not a limitation but a competitive advantage.

DEAL STRUCTURING CHALLENGES

The financial sector's attraction to HCs does not always translate into closed deals, transacting with an HC is structurally more complex than a standard PE or bank transaction. Three challenges define this complexity.

The first challenge is emotional: ownership in HCs is concentrated and deeply identity-laden, meaning valuation becomes a contested negotiation between financial logic and what Granata and Chirico (2010) term the family *emotional premium,* the price above rational valuation that families implicitly require resigning control.

The second challenge is governance, the informality that defines HC decision-making makes warranties and due diligence difficult to execute, as strategic decisions are often undocumented and financial reporting is minimal *(Tappeiner et al., 2012)*.

The third challenge is post-deal influence, founding families frequently retain significant operational or board influence after a transaction, creating governance ambiguities that complicate the investor's ability to implement change *(Achleitner et al., 2012)*. These challenges collectively require deal structures that deviate from standard templates, earn outs to bridge valuation gaps, family reinvestment clauses to maintain alignment, and management retention packages to preserve the human capital that underpins HC performance *(Tappeiner et al., 2012; Achleitner et al., 2012)*."

THE BELGIAN FINANCIAL ECOSYSTEM

Narrowing the lens to Belgium reveals a layered financial ecosystem well suited to HC ownership and financing dynamics. At its base sit large domestic relationship banks, KBC, BNP Paribas Fortis and ING Belgium, providing the long-term trust-based lending arrangements that align naturally with HC financing preferences *(Berger & Udell, 1995)*. Alongside them operates a dense and growing network of Belgian family offices, patient, culturally proximate investors who share the long-term ownership logic of HC families and are consistently preferred over anonymous international capital *(PwC Belgium, 2023)*.

At the mid-market level, regional PE funds with specific Belgian mandates occupy a middle ground between pure relationship capital and international institutional investment, offering professionalization and growth capital while maintaining cultural proximity. Attracted by Belgium's dense concentration of mid-market family firms, international PE funds are increasingly entering the domestic ecosystem, creating a tension between culturally aligned domestic capital and return-driven foreign capital that sits at the heart of this thesis.

3. METHODOLOGY

This thesis aims to deepen the understanding of Belgian HCs, specifically regarding their ownership evolution and financing structures. The purpose is to answer the following research question:

> *To what extent have the ownership and financing structures of Belgian hidden champions evolved over the period 2008–2024, and what role has the growing presence of foreign and institutional investors played in this evolution?*

To what extent have the ownership and financing structures of Belgian Hidden Champions evolved over the period 2008–2024, and what role has the growing presence of foreign and institutional investors played in this evolution?

This study aligns with previous work conducted by Esther Georges (2017) and Gwendal de Caritat (2019), whose master's theses examined Belgian HCs from marketing, innovation and mergers and acquisitions perspectives, and seeks to extend this body of research by examining the financial and ownership dimensions of the same firm type.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Two analytical dimensions have been identified to answer the research question: ownership evolution and financing structure. Ownership is the primary dimension, as it is the first element that changes when external investors (private, foreign and/or institutional) enter and is considered one of the defining characteristics of HCs. Financing structure evolution is studied as a direct consequence of ownership change (Simon, 2009; Achleitner et al., 2010).

	Ownership dimension	Financing dimension
Independent variable	Entry of foreign and institutional investors	
Dependent variables	- Ownership type - BvD score - Transition	- Equity ratio - Leverage ratio - Revenue growth
Theory	Stewardship theory	Pecking order theory
Expected outcome	Concentrated family control aligned with stewardship	Internal financing first, debt second, equity last

Figure 6: Analytical framework: ownership and financing structures of Belgian Hidden Champions (2008–2024).

RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed-methods approach is adopted as the two analytical dimensions require different investigative tools. Financing structures benefit from quantitative analysis while ownership evolution and its qualitative implications require a complementary interpretative approach. More specifically, a sequential explanatory design is applied: quantitative data is collected first from secondary sources and consequently used to inform and guide the qualitative survey phase *(Creswell & Clark, 2007; Halcomb & Hickman, 2015).* This approach is particularly appropriate given that HCs are known for their reluctance to participate in external research and their deliberate minimization of public financial disclosure, making secondary data an essential complement to primary sources (Simon, 2009). Given that Belgian HCs remain an understudied population with structurally limited data availability, this design prioritizes analytical depth over statistical representativeness (Saunders et al., 2019).

DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative data forms the backbone of the empirical analysis and is drawn entirely from secondary sources. Financial data, balance sheet figures used to calculate ratios, where extracted from Belfirst and the National Bank of Belgium for the period 2008 to 2024. Ownership data, shareholder identity, nationality, BvD independence scores and ownership history, was extracted from Orbis and supplemented with information from company websites and press articles where data was incomplete. It is important to note that many Belgian private companies file only the legally mandatory minimum in their annual accounts, meaning financial data is often partial across the sample (Beuselinck et al., 2009). Missing data is marked as not disclosed throughout the analysis, a limitation that is itself consistent with the structural opacity that characterizes HCs as a firm category (Simon, 2009, Venohr & Meyer, 2007).

The survey constitutes the primary qualitative data source, capturing what secondary sources cannot, financing preferences, ownership change trigger and attitudes toward external investors. It was sent to all companies via LinkedIn, email and company websites. Given that HCs are known for their considerably low response rates (Simon, 2009), limited participation was anticipated, responses nonetheless add a qualitative layer that enriches the quantitative findings.

MEASUREMENTS INDICATORS

OWNERSHIP INDICATORS

Ownership type

Ownership type classifies each company into one of six categories based on the identity of its controlling shareholder: family, listed, foreign acquired, private equity and public institution, private non-family. This classification directly operationalizes the research question distinguishing between domestic and foreign ownership, and between family-driven and investor-driven control (Thomsen & Pedersen, 2000). Alongside ownership type, transition events have been documented for each company, capturing whether a change in controlling shareholder has occurred, in what year, and what type of event triggered it.

BvD independence indicator

The BvD independence indicator is a standardized score assigned by Bureau van Dijk (BvD) measuring ownership concentration based on the percentage held by the largest known shareholder (Bureau van Dijk, 2024). The scale ranges from A+, no shareholder above 25%, maximum independence to D, a single shareholder holding close to 100%, full control. This indicator is particularly useful given that most Belgian private companies do not publicly disclose exact ownership percentages, making it the most reliable proxy for concentration *(Ribeiro, Mengardo & Cooney, 2021).*

Figure 7: BvD independence indicator scale and interpretation. Source: Bureau van Dijk (2024) generated by Claude.ai

FINANCING INDICATORS

Equity ratio

The equity ratio measures the proportion of a firm's assets financed by its own equity rather external debt, calculated as:

$$Equity\ ratio\ (\%) = \frac{Total\ equity}{Total\ assets} * 100$$

Companies financing more than 50% of their total assets through equity are generally considered financially stable, while an equity ratio at or below 50% may signal heavier reliance on debt. A declining ratio over time signals a growing reliance on external capital, which is expected to follow ownership transition such as private equity entry or foreign acquisition *(Achleitner et al., 2010).* As a reference benchmark, Simon (*2021*) reports a mean equity ratio of 42% among Hidden Champions globally, which will serve as a comparative anchor for interpreting the Belgian HC results.

Leverage ratio

The leverage ratio used in this study is the debt-to-equity ratio, which measures how much a firm relies on debt relative to its own equity:

$$Leverage\ ratio\ (\%) = \frac{Total\ debt}{Total\ equity} * 100$$

where Total debt = Debts + Provision for doubtful debts *(De Rongé, 2023).*

The debt-to-equity ratio shows how much debt is used to finance operations compared to owner's funds, a higher ratio indicates greater creditor financing and signals heavier reliance on borrowed money, while ratios below 2.00 are generally considered stable in most sectors *(Allianz Trade, 2025)*.

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR

Revenue growth

Revenue growth measures the annual percentage change in revenue:

$$Revenue\ growth\ (\%) = \frac{(Revenue\ n - Revenue\ year\ n - 1}{Revenue\ year\ n - 1} * 100$$

Revenue growth measures annual sales expansion and serves as a proxy for capital intensity and financing pressure, periods of rapid growth create funding needs that internal resources cannot always satisfy, creating conditions for external financing and ownership transitions *(Gurung, 2026; Myers & Majluf, 1984; La Rocca et al., 2011)*. In this thesis, revenue growth is additionally treated as a performance indicator, allowing a directional observation of whether ownership type and financing structure are associated with differences in operational performance across clusters.

SELECTION CRITERIA

This study applies the criteria defined by Simon (2009) as its primary framework, identifying HCs among Belgian small and mid-sized companies on the basis of three conditions: a top 3 global market position, revenue below €5 billion and low public visibility. These criteria have been adapted to better reflect Belgian firm scale. The market position criterion is broadened from global to continental leadership. The revenue threshold is revised downward to €3 billion, in line with more recent work on Belgian mid-markets firms *(Simon, Cœurderoy & Guinchard, 2014)*. The complete set of selection criteria is therefore:

- Founded and headquartered in Belgium
- Top 3 continental market position
- Revenue below €3 billion
- Low public visibility

SAMPLE

The sample is based on the list of Belgian HCs compiled by Professor Bart Kamp (not published, but made available for LSM master thesis purposes), which identifies 47 Belgian firms across a range of sectors and ownership profiles, ensuring maximum analytical variation across the key variable of interest. Financial data was collected for the period 2008 to 2024, a 17-year window capturing the post-financial crisis period, the acceleration of private equity activity in the Belgian mid-market and the COVID-19 shock (Appendix 1).

4. FINDINGS

The set of companies analysed span a wide range of sectors, whereby manufacturing is the most represented with 21 companies, followed by high-tech with 14 companies. Financial data availability varies significantly across the sample, reflecting the structural opacity of Belgian private companies. While 35 companies have full financial data available, 11 companies present partial data for certain indicators, either due to undisclosed balance sheet details, minimal mandatory reporting, or extended periods without published accounts. Lambda-X has no usable financial data, meaning available information is too limited to perform any meaningful analysis.

Data availability	Number of companies	% of the sample
Full financial data	35	74%
Partial financial data	11	23%
No financial data	1	2%
Total	**47**	**100%**

Table 3: Financial data availability across the Belgian HCs sample (N=47). Source: Belfirst; author's own classification.

OWNERSHIP FINDINGS

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF BELGIAN HIDDEN CHAMPIONS

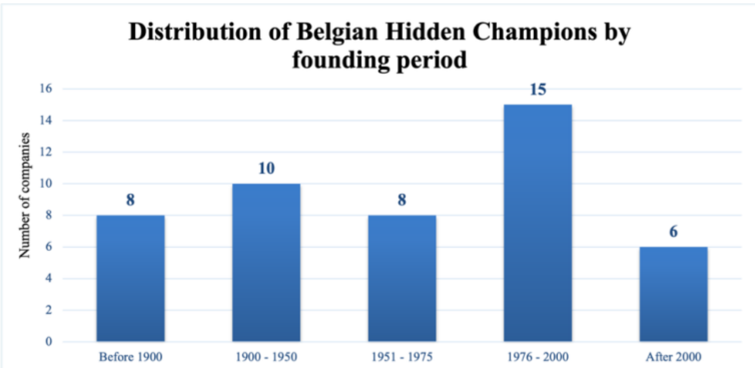

Figure 8: Distribution of Belgian HCs by founding period (N=47). Source: own elaboration based on Kamp

The sample spans cases that have existed over 340 years, like Iwan Simonis founded in 1680 to firms that were founded more recently, including 6 that saw the light in the present century. The 1976-2000 era dominates with 26 companies, representing 55% of the sample. The pre-1900 cluster contains 8 companies, demonstrating extraordinary longevity, while the post-

2000 cluster is the smallest with only 5 companies. Among the oldest companies within the sample are Iwan Simonis (1680), Zinacor (1810), Carmeuse (1860) and Lhoist (1889). It is worth highlighting that 19 companies were founded before 1975, these firms have existed through at least one generational transition. The dominance of the 1976-2000 cluster is notable. These firms are between 25 and 50 years old, meaning many are currently at or approaching their first major succession event. The 6 post-2000 companies are the youngest in the sample, all founded after 2000.

OWNERSHIP TYPE DISTRIBUTION

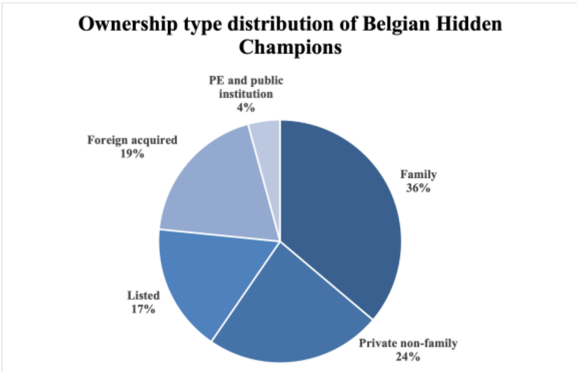

Figure 9: Ownership type distribution of Belgian HCs (N=47). Source: Kamp; Orbis; author's own classification

Family-owned firms is the largest cluster with 17 companies, representing 36% of the sample, followed by private non-family-owned firms with 11 companies at 24%. Together they account for 60% of the sample, confirming that private ownership is the dominant model among Belgian HCs. In line with the sample ownership findings, one family respondent confirmed that their company returned to full family control after a period under external investor ownership, illustrating how some Belgian HCs actively reclaim domestic control following external investor entry.

Eight companies are publicly listed, representing 17% of the sample, while foreign groups having acquired 9 Belgian HCs, account for 19%. Within the stock-listed category, a distinction is worth noting, fully listed companies where the majority of shares are publicly traded, and partially listed ones where only a minority stake is public. IBA is a prime example, with only 36% of its shares listed. However, FN Herstal, EHP and Intermodalics present partial participation from public institutions. Additionally, several HCs have minority stakes held by investment or private equity funds, as these do not represent minority ownership, the cluster classification remains unchanged.

A particularly interesting pattern is cross-holdings between HCs themselves, Vandewiele holds a 25% stake in Barco, and Saluc/Aramith is controlled by the Simonis family through their ownership of Iwan Simonis, suggesting that HC networks can be interconnected through ownership ties. Foreign acquired firms, Heimbach, IP trade, Magotteaux, Meura, Nanocyl and Zinacor, represent cases where Belgian control has been transferred to foreign groups. Private equity penetration remains limited, with only Gantrex acquired by Argos Wityu in 2015 and Lambda-X acquired by Whitestone in 2024, suggesting that private equity remains an exception rather than a norm among Belgian HCs.

GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN OF CONTROLLING SHAREHOLDERS

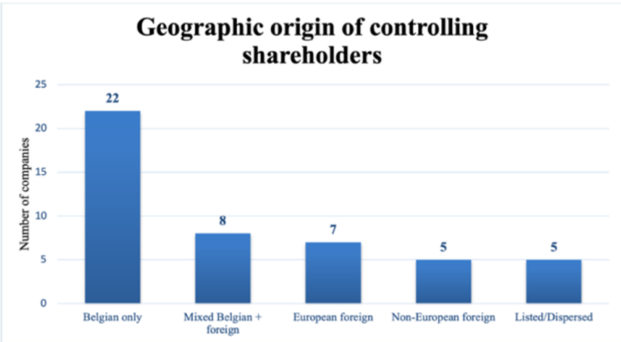

Figure 10: Geographic origin of controlling shareholders (N=47). Source: Kamp; Orbis; author's own classification.

The majority of Belgian HCs have Belgian controlling shareholders, confirming the dominance of domestic ownership in the sample. Where foreign shareholders are identified, European origins are more common than non-European, with shareholders from the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland representing the most frequent foreign presences. Non-European foreign control is limited but notable, the United States, Chile and Hong Kong represent the most geographically diverse ownership cases in the sample.

Mixed ownership, Belgian combined with foreign, suggests partial internationalization without full loss of domestic control. In most of these cases, the foreign element consists of investment funds, private equity arms of banks, or strategic corporate investors, such as the case of IRIS where Canon Group Japan holds a 17% stake. Finally, listed companies with no clearly identified dominant shareholder are subject to dispersed institutional ownership, meaning control is effectively shared among a broad base of international institutional investors rather than a concentrated in a single identifiable party, making them the most internationally exposed ownership profile in the sample.

AGE AND OWNERSHIP TYPE – CROSS ANALYSIS

Ownership type	Average company age
Family	98,0
Private non-family	51,9
Listed	43,4
Foreign acquired	104,3
PE and public institution	42,5
Total	**68,0**

Table 4: Average company age by ownership cluster (N=47). Source: Kamp; author's own classification.

Table 4 cross-analyses ownership type and company age across the sample. The overall average is 68 years, with a wide dispersion ranging from 42.5 years for private equity and public institution firms to 104.3 years for foreign acquired HCs. The most striking observation is that the oldest cluster is foreign acquired, long-established firms combinging strong niche positions with likely succession challenges. In this sample, Meura (1845), Zinacor (1810), Heimbach (1874) and Magotteaux (1920) illustrate this pattern well.

The second oldest cluster is family-owned HCs, with an average of 98 years, long-standing family firms have maintained their ownership model across multiple generations. Notable cases include Iwan Simonis founded (1680), Lhoist (1889) and Carmeuse (1860). Private equity and public institution firms at 42.5 years and listed firms at 43.4 years are the youngest clusters in the sample. Private non-family firms at 51.9 years sit between the two extremes, mature enough to have survived and established a niche position, but young enough not to have fully consolidated family control across generations.

OWNERSHIP CONCENTRATION – BVD INDEPENDENCE SCORE

Ownership type	A+	B+	B-	C	D	Unknown
Family	0	1	1	1	11	3
Private non-family	0	1	2	0	8	1
Listed	4	2	0	1	1	0
Foreign acquired	0	0	0	4	4	0
PE and public institution	0	0	0	0	2	0
Total	**4**	**4**	**3**	**6**	**26**	**4**

Table 5: BvD independence score distribution by ownership cluster (N=47). Source: Bureau van Dijk (2024); Orbis.

The BvD independence score D dominates overall with 26 companies, 55% of the sample, meaning full control by a single shareholder. Scores C and D together account for 68%, confirming that highly concentrated ownership is the norm among Belgian HCs. Consistent with the high ownership concentration observed across the sample, all three survey respondents confirmed their pre-identified ownership type, validating the Orbis-based classification and confirming that controlling shareholders are deeply embedded in the governance structure of Belgian HCs.

A+ scores are exclusively found in the stock-listed cluster, suggesting that only publicly traded firms have dispersed ownership. Unknown scores, 4 companies, all fall within family or private non-family clusters, reflecting the minimal disclosure practices of the opaquest firms in the sample. Within the family cluster, 11 out of 17 firms score D, fully controlled by a single shareholder. Three firms score unknown, Vandewiele, Elaut and Nomacorc, and only one scores B+ and one B-, indicating that a small minority of family firms have allowed external shareholders to take a significant stake while retaining overall control.

The listed cluster shows the most diverse distribution, four firms score A+, two score B+ and one scores C, reflecting the range of ownership concentration levels that can coexist within a publicly traded structure. Foreign acquired firms are evenly split between C and D scores, four each, indicating that foreign groups either take full majority control or acquire the company entirely. The private equity and public institution cluster is the most uniform, both score D, reflecting the tendency of private equity funds to seek full or majority control upon entry. Private non-family firms are predominantly D with 8 companies, alongside 2 scoring B- and 1 scoring B+, suggesting that while ownership is generally concentrated, some firms present a more fragmented shareholder base.

FINANCING FINDINGS

The financing analysis covers 47 Belgian HCs over 2008-2024 across two lenses, the full sample and a fully disclosed subsample of companies with complete financial data throughout the period.

OVERALL EVOLUTION

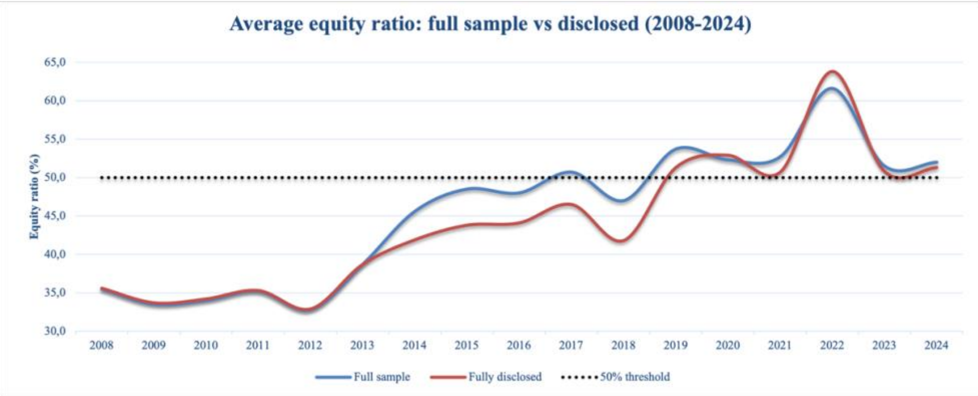

Fig 11: Average equity ratio: full sample vs fully disclosed subsample (2008–2024). Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation

Figure 11 shows the average equity ratio for both groups. Both start at approximately 35.5% in 2008, below the 50% stability threshold, and follow a similar upward trajectory. The overall averages stand at 45.5% for the full sample and 44.1% for the disclosed subsample, both just below the threshold.

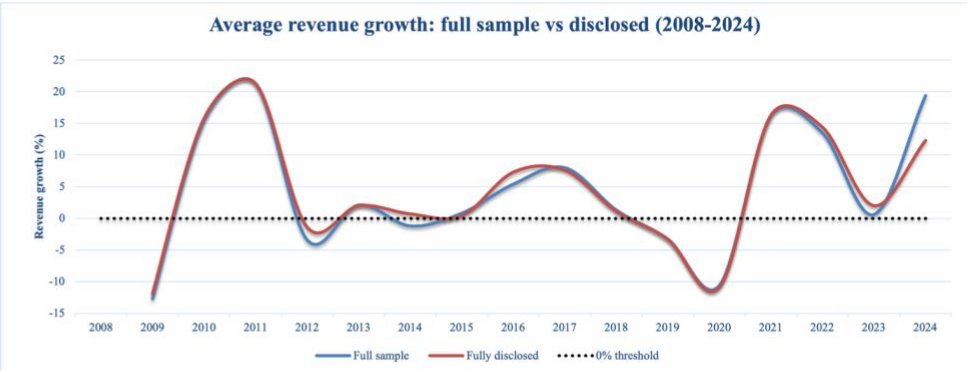

Figure 12: Average revenue growth: full sample vs fully disclosed subsample (2009–2024). Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation

Figure 12 shows revenue growth for both groups. Two universal negative shocks are visible, the 2009 contraction of 12.7% following the global financial crisis, and the 2020 decline of 10.6% caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, separated by periods of moderate positive growth averaging 4.5%. Both samples track closely throughout, confirming that partial data companies do not materially distort the overall picture and that the full sample results are reliable.

EQUITY RATIO BY OWNERSHIP CLUSTER

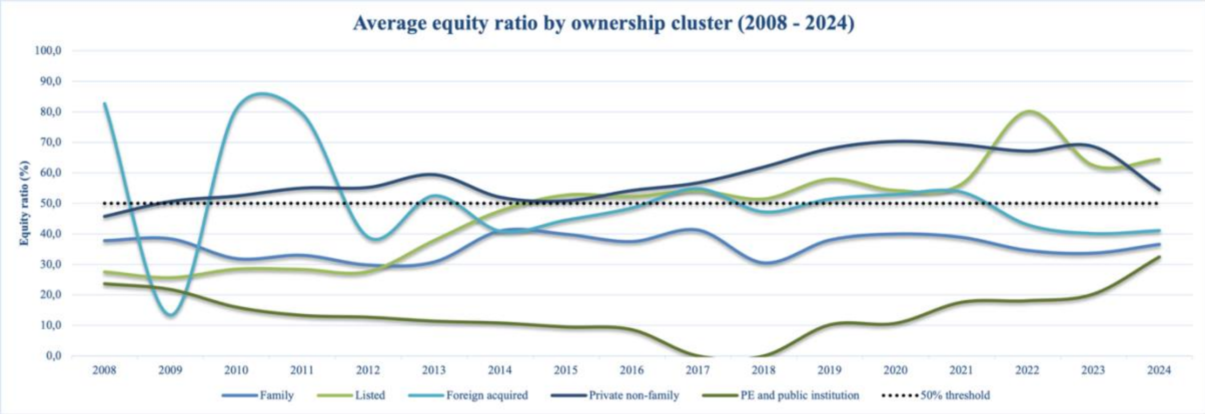

Figure 13: Average equity ratio by ownership cluster. Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation

Figure 13 presents the average equity ratio by ownership cluster from 2008 to 2024. The private non-family cluster maintains the highest average at 58.3%, above the 50% threshold throughout. The foreign acquired cluster follows at 50.9%, also generally above the threshold. The listed cluster shows the most dramatic evolution, from 27.5% in 2008 to 64.4% in 2024, driven by capital raised through IPO events from 2014. Family firms average only 36.1%, the lowest non-private equity cluster, suggesting greater debt reliance than other private ownership types despite their dominant position in the sample.

In line with the low equity ratio observed for the family cluster, all three survey respondents rank retained earnings as their primary source and report working with the same Belgian retail banking partner for over 20 years. The private equity and public institution cluster remains well below the threshold, averaging 15.8%, consistent with leverage-based ownership model.

LEVERAGE RATIO BY OWNERSHIP CLUSTER

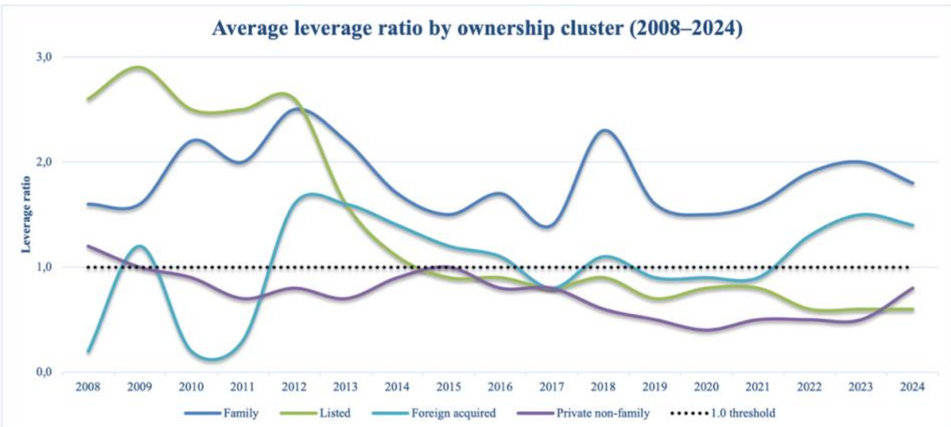

Figure 14: Average leverage ratio by ownership cluster excluding PE and public institution. Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation

Figure 14 presents the average leverage ratio, expressed as a value where 1.00 means debt equals equity by ownership cluster from 2008 to 2024. The private equity and public institution cluster is omitted from the leverage and equity ratio charts given its extreme values, peaking at 10.64 in 2016, and because the cluster comprises only three companies, making any generalization of the observed pattern statistically unreliable.

The listed cluster shows the most dramatic evolution, declining from 2.64 in 2008 to 0.55 in 2024, falling below the 1.00 threshold from 2015 onwards, meaning equity now exceeds debt. Family firms remain persistently moderate leverage at an average of 1.84, consistently above 1.00, with no deleveraging trend. Foreign acquired firms average 1.04, the closest to equilibrium, with a declining trend.

Private non-family firms are the most conservative, declining from 1.19 to 0.42 in 2020. The private and public institution cluster averages 6.26 over its available period, hinting to the debt-heavy profile typical of private equity ownership, before declining to 2.07 by 2024. The leverage ratio of Gantrex, the primary PE-backed firm with available data, rose from 3.23 at entry in 2019 to a peak before declining to 2.07 by 2024, confirming that PE entry creates a measurable leverage increase that progressively resolves over the investment horizon.

REVENUE GROWTH BY OWNERSHIP CLUSTER

Figure 15: Average revenue growth by ownership cluster excluding PE and public institution. Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation.

Figure 15 presents average revenue growth by cluster from 2009 to 2024. The 2009 and 2020 negative shocks are visible across all clusters, confirming that macroeconomic disruptions affect Belgian HCs regardless of ownership structure. Family firms show the most stable profile, averaging 3.7% with limited year-to-year volatility. Consistent with the stable financing profile of the family cluster, two family respondents rate their openness to external equity at 1 and 2 out 5 respectively, citing desire to maintain control, sufficient internal resources and cultural aversion to outside investors as the primary reasons for avoiding external financing.

The listed cluster is the most conservative cluster at 2.1%, while foreign acquired firms show moderate growth at 6.6% with a strong 2021 post-COVID rebound of 22.1%. The private non-family cluster averages 11.7%, but the 86.6% recorded in 2024 is driven by outliers, the intermediate years present a more moderate picture. The private equity cluster shows negative average growth at -4.0%, concentrated in the post-acquisition years of Gantrex, consistent with a restructuring phase rather than operational expansion under new ownership. Reading revenue growth as a performance indicator, family firms, the most conservative financing cluster, show the most stable operational performance, while the PE cluster, the most leveraged, show the weakest growth trajectory post-acquisition.

INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

Figure 16: Average equity ratio of Belgian controlled vs internationally controlled Belgian HCs (2008–2024). Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation.

Figure 17: Average leverage ratio of Belgian controlled vs internationally controlled Belgian HCs (2008–2024). Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation.

Figure 18: Average revenue of Belgian controlled vs internationally controlled Belgian HCs (2008–2024). Source: Belfirst; NBB; author's own calculation.

Figures 16, 17 and 18 address the research question by comparing Belgian controlled and internationally controlled HCs across the three financing indicators. On equity ratio, figure 16, both groups start similarly around 2008 but diverge from 2014-2015 onwards. By 2024 internationally controlled firms reach 62.2% compared to 39.5% for Belgian controlled firms, a gap of 22.7 percentage points. This improvement in equity ratio, form 25.1% in 2008 to 62.2% by 2024, shows that ownership transition toward international control is associated with a measurably stronger financial independence over time, while Belgian controlled firms show no equivalent improvement over the same period.

On leverage, figure 17, internationally controlled firms deleverage from 2.2 in 2008 to 0.6 by 2022, while Belgian controlled firms remain stable around 1.3-1.6 during the covered period. On revenue growth, figure 8, both groups experience the same macroeconomics shocks, but internationally controlled firms show greater volatility, and a notable 56.2% spike in 2024, while Belgian controlled firms average a steadier 4.3%.

Together these three figures suggest that internationally controlled Belgian HCs present higher equity ratios, lower leverage and marginally higher revenue growth than Belgian controlled firms by the end of the studied period. In line with these findings, one respondent whose company was fully acquired by a foreign group noted that strategic autonomy was largely preserved post-acquisition, "*We have always been very autonomous in our business and strategy. Of course, being part of a group means you must report*", illustrating how international ownership reshapes governance obligations without necessarily eliminating operational identity.

5. DISCUSSION

This section confronts the empirical findings with the theoretical framework established in the literature review, with the aim of answering the central research question, to what extent have the ownership and financing structures of Belgian HCs evolved over the period 2008-2024, and what role has the growing presence of foreign and institutional investors played in this evolution?

OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES

ALIGNMENT WITH THE STEWARDSHIP MODEL

Across the sample, a majority of companies operate in specialized manufacturing niches, consistent with Simon's (2009) profile of HCs. As firms that dominate narrowly defined global markets. The long-term orientation and resilience across generation documented in the literature is also clearly visible, 19 companies were founded before 1975 *(Venohr & Meyer, 2007)*. Ownership concentration further confirms the theoretical profile, 55% of Belgian HCs score D on the BvD independence indicator, signalling that strategic decisions are concentrated in the hands of a single controlling shareholder *(Faccio & Lang, 2002)*. This is directly consistent with stewardship theory. Family and private owners act as long-term stewards who centralize decision-making to protect the firm's niche identity and strategic continuity, eliminating the principal-agent conflict that characterises more dispersed ownership structures *(Davis et al., 1997)*. In this regard, the Belgian HC population confirms then archetypal ownership model established in the literature, concentrated, private, long-term oriented and resistant to external governance pressure.

However, the proportion of family-owned Belgian HC is significantly lower than what the literature depicts, 36% against the 66% reported by Simon (2009) globally. Simon's figures date from 2009 and the significant number of ownership transitions in this sample suggests a structural shift away from pure family control. Stewardship logic is progressively being displaced by agency dynamics as external investors enter *(Jensen & Meckling, 1976)*. With private non-family firms at 30% and foreign acquired at 17%, the Belgian HC landscape appears more internationally diverse than Simon's global benchmark, reflecting not a deviance from the HC model itself, but an evolution of its ownership layer driven by the succession pressures and capital needs that Simon (2009) himself anticipated as inevitable consequences of HC growth and generational change *(Ferreira & Matos, 2008)*.

OWNERSHIP EVOLUTION – SUCCESSION AS THE PRIMARY DRIVER

The cross-analysis of age and ownership type reveals a pattern that both confirms and extends the HC lifecycle model established in the literature. Foreign acquired forms are on average the oldest cluster at 104.3 years, older than family firms at 98 years. This is one of the clearest deviations from the standard HC assumption, Simon (2009) presents foreign acquisition as an exceptional outcome, typically associated with financial distress or growth bottlenecks. The Belgian data tells a different story, foreign acquisition is systematically associated with the oldest and most established firms in the sample. Succession failure, not financial weakness, appears to be the primary driver of ownership internationalization among Belgian HCs, consistent with De Massis et al. (2008) and Handler (1994) who identify the inability to identify a capable family successor as the most common trigger for ownership opening. In this sense the Belgian findings confirm the lifecycle argument established in the literature review, when internal succession fails, the firm must open its capital to outside investors, triggering the shift from stewardship to agency logic.

The PE and public institution cluster is the youngest at 42.5 years on average, consistent with the argument that younger firms have had less time to build internal financing capacity and therefore more open to external capital (Myers & Majluf, 1984). This confirms theoretical expectations, younger firms deviate from the stewardship model earlier in their lifecycle, before family governance has fully consolidated across generations. The private non-family cluster sits between the two extremes at 51.9 years, mature enough to have established a niche position but young enough not to have fully consolidated family control, reflecting transitional ownership stage that the HC lifecycle model anticipate as firms move from founder control toward more complex governance structures (Zellweger et al. 2012).

The geographic analysis further enriches this picture. Most external controlling shareholders originate from European countries, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland, with notable non-European cases form the United States, Chile and Japan. Overall, only 17% of the sample is fully foreign controlled, confirming that domestic ownership remains dominant. However, this 17% represents a meaningful and growing share, Simon (2021) estimates that listed companies account for less than 10% of all HCs globally, and the Belgian listed figure of 17% suggests that Belgian HCs are more exposed to international ownership than the global HC benchmark. This is concrete deviation from the theoretical HC ownership model, where domestic family control is presented as the norm (Simon, 2009).

From an agency theory perspective, the entry of foreign and institutional investors into aging Belgian HCs creates a classic principal-agent tension, the new owner pursues return objectives that may diverge form the long-term niche preservation goals of the founding family (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). However, the survey findings partially challenge this, respondents report that strategic autonomy was largely preserved post-acquisition, suggesting that agency conflicts may be less severe in HC acquisitions than theory predicts. One respondent whose company was fully acquired by a foreign group noted *"We have always been very autonomous in our business and strategy. Of course, being part of a group means you must report",* illustrating that governance obligations increase without necessarily eliminating operational identity. These finding nuances agency theory in the HC context, the principal-agent tension is real but attenuated, possibly because foreign acquirers specifically target HCs for their niche expertise and deliberately avoid disrupting the operational model that generates value (*Maurin et al., 2024; INDUS, 2010)*.

The attractiveness of Belgian HCs to foreign and institutional investors is not coincidental, their resilient business models, international niche reach and proprietary knowledge make the particularly appealing targets, as these intangible assets are difficult for competitors to replicate and reduce perceived investment risks (INDUS, 2010; Maurin et al., 2024; Kee Koon Boon, 2018). However, several constraints limit investor engagement, the niche and specialized nature of HCs makes them difficult to evaluate given scarce public data, and owner-managed structures with low visibility create additional barriers to entry for outside investors *(Simon, 2009; Halder's Advisory Board, 2013)*. This difficulty of evaluation due to data scarcity was directly experienced in this study, not all companies published complete financial data across the full 2008–2024 period. The indicators selected for this analysis rely on balance sheet figures that Belgian companies are legally required to publish, making them the most accessible proxy for financial structure available without direct company cooperation. A more in-depth financial analysis requiring specific internal data would face significantly greater constraints in the HC context. This reinforces the structural opacity argument, Belgian HCS are not only difficult to evaluate for external investors, but also for academic researchers *(Simon, 2009; Halder's Advisory Board, 2013)*.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR OWNERSHIP

The ownership analysis produces three conclusions that advance the theoretical understanding of HC governance.

First, stewardship theory is confirmed but not universal. The dominance of D scores, the prevalence of family and private non-family ownership, and the survey evidence of strong control preference all confirm that stewardship logic remains the governing principle among Belgian HCs. However, the 36% family ownership share, significantly below 66% global benchmark, shows that stewardship is not permanent. It erodes over time as succession pressures intensify and external investors enter.

Second, succession is the primary mechanism of ownership evolution. The cross-analysis of age and ownership type shows that the oldest firms are the most internationally controlled, not the youngest or the weakest. This confirms that ownership transitions in the Belgian HC context are driven primarily by succession challenges rather than financial distress or growth ambitions. Foreign acquisition is therefore best understood as a succession solution rather than a value extraction decision.

Third, agency theory is relevant but attenuated. The entry of foreign investors does introduce agency dynamics, reporting obligations, governance formalization and return expectations. However, the survey evidence suggests these tensions are manageable and that HC operational identity is largely preserved post-acquisition. This represents a nuance to the standard agency theory prediction that external investor entry is inherently disruptive to long-term oriented firms.

FINANCING STRUCTURES

ALIGNMENT WITH THE PECKING ORDER THEORY

The financing analysis strongly confirms the pecking order framework at the overall sample level. All three survey respondents rank retained earnings as their primary source, consistent with Myers and Majluf (1984) prediction that firms prefer internal funds first. All three report working with the same Belgian retail banking partner for over 20 years, confirming, that relationship banking is the preferred external financing instrument when internal funds are insufficient (Berger & Udell, 1995; Harhoff & Körting, 1998). Openness to external equity averages only 1.3 out of 5, confirming that external equity sits as the very bottom of HC financing preferences, accessed only as a last resort.

Overall, the full sample average equity ratio of 45.5% sits above Simon’s (2021) global HC benchmark of 42%, suggesting the Belgian HC are marginally more equity-financed than the global HC population. Both the full sample and the fully disclosed subsample follow the same upward trajectory, crossing the 50% stability threshold for the first time around 2019-2021, confirming that Belgian HCs have progressively strengthened their equity base over the studied period. This strengthening is consistent with the pecking order prediction that firms accumulate equity through retained earnings over time, particularly in the absence of external equity pressure.

HOW OWNERSHIP TYPE SHAPES FINANCING BEHAVIOUR

The cluster analysis reveals that ownership type is meaningful determinant of financing structure.

Family firms follow the pecking order, but governance reasons. The lowest equity ratio at 36.1% and highest leverage among non-PE clusters at 1.84 confirm that family HCs rely heavily on debt. This is not financial weakness, it is a deliberate choice. Debt from a trusted banking partner preserves ownership concentration while equity would dilute it. The pecking order hierarchy is therefore not followed passively but actively weaponised as a control preservation mechanism, extending Myers and Majluf's (1984) original information asymmetry rationale into a governance strategy. The survey confirms this, all respondents rank retained earnings first, maintain the same Belgian retail bank for over 20 years, and rate openness to external equity at 1.3 out of 5. Family firms also show the most stable revenue growth at 3.7%, directly reflecting the long-term orientation that prioritises sustainable performance over aggressive expansion *(Simon, 2009; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2006)*.

Private non-family firms show the strongest equity position at 58.3% average and 0.74 leverage, consistently above the 50% threshold with debt below equity throughout. A possible explanation is more professional financial management under institutional or fund ownership.

Listed firms show the most dramatic reversal, from 27.5% equity ratio in 2008 to 64.4% by 2024, and from 2.64 leverage to 0.55. the 2014 IPO events of Ontex and Materialise are the turning point, capital raised was used to repay debt and strengthen the equity base, producing a complete financing profile transformation consistent with listing theory *(Pagano et al., 1998; Ritter & Welch, 2002)*. It is also worth noting that certain listed HCs only listed a minority of shares, IBA with 36% publicly traded being the prime example, reflecting a deliberate compromise between capital access and control preservation *(Myers & Majluf, 1984)*.

Foreign acquired firms show the most balanced profile, 50.9% equity ratio and 1.04 leverage throughout the period, consistent with the « buy, hold and develop » strategy where foreign parent groups inject equity and manage debt conservatively *(INDUS, 2010; Maurin et al., 2024)*. Their strongest post-COVID revenue rebound at 22.1% in 2021 further suggests that integration into a foreign group provides operational resilience during disruptions.

The PE cluster confirms the pecking order inversion, 15.8% equity and 6.26 leverage, debt deliberately loaded onto acquired firms as a value creation mechanism (*(INDUS, 2010; Maurin et al., 2024)*. The Gantrex leverage trajectory, rising sharply at entry before progressively declining, illustrates the classic PE lifecycle. Negative revenue growth of -4.0% confirms a restructuring phase rather than operational expansion *(Nikoskelainen & Wright, 2007)*.

THE IMPACT OF OWNERSHIP INTERNATIONALIZATION ON FINANCING

The Belgian versus internationally controlled comparison provides the most direct answer to the research question, the three financing indicators tell a coherent story. On equity ratio, both groups start similarly in 2008 but diverge sharply from 2014-2015 onwards. By 2024, internationally controlled firms reach 62.2% against 39.5% for Belgian controlled firms, a gap of 22.7% points. Belgian controlled firms show no sustained improvement over the full period, while internationally controlled firms cross the 50% threshold from 2015 onwards and continue strengthening, suggesting that foreign parent groups actively capitalise their Belgian subsidiaries rather than extracting value *(INDUS, 2010; Maurin et al., 2024)*.

On leverage, internationally controlled firms deleverage from 2.2 in 2008 to 0.6 by 2022, equity now exceeds debt by a factor of 1.7 Belgian controlled firms remain stable around 1.3-1.6 with no deleveraging trend, debt consistently exceeds equity throughout the period. On revenue growth, both groups experience the same macroeconomics shocks in 2009 and 2020. Belgian controlled firms average a steadier 4.3% while internationally controlled firms average 5.1% with greater volatility, suggesting international ownership introduces operational variability alongside stronger financial structure.

Taken together, the three indicators confirm that ownership internationalization has a net positive effect on financial structure, stronger equity, lower leverage, marginally higher growth, challenging the agency theory prediction that external investors entry disrupts long-term value creation *(Jensen & Meckling, 1976)*.

6. MANAGERIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Beyond their theoretical contributions, the findings of this thesis carry practical implications for the different actors involved in the Belgian hidden champion ecosystem.

FOR HC OWNERS AND FOUNDING FAMILIES

As the data shows, the oldest HCs are the most susceptible to face successions issues, succession planning should therefore be considered as early as possible, to negotiate under the most favourable conditions before being pressured into limited options. As demonstrated thorough the thesis, foreign acquisition and institutional investor entry do not necessarily mean operational dilution. Survey evidence shows the opposite, with strategic autonomy largely preserved post-acquisition. In practice, HCs have also shown that minority stakes from patient and culturally aligned investors represent a viable middle ground between full family control and complete ownership transfer. Opening a minority stake early, before succession pressure intensifies, is likely to give founding families greater negotiating power and more favourable deal terms.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

The sample appears predominantly Flemish, a targeted Walloon program supporting HC identification, succession planning and patient capital access could help develop a comparable ecosystem in the southern region. Given that HCs tend to be opaque by nature, identifying and supporting them is inherently difficult, developing dedicated tools and mapping initiatives to direct public resources toward this invisible yet economically significant firm category would be a meaningful step.

As covered in the literature review, subsidies and grants are rarely sought by HCs, making them not the ideal financing instrument, however, facilitating connections between HC founding families and Belgian investors or regional investment funds would be considerably more impactful.

7. LIMITATIONS

During this thesis several limitations were encountered and must be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the sample may not represent the full population of Belgian HCs. Given that opacity and secrecy are defining characteristics of the firm category, some companies may have been overlooked entirely, their voluntary discretion making them invisible to any external mapping exercise, including the one this thesis relies on (Simon, 2009).

Second, financial data availability was significantly constrained. Most Belgian private companies file only the legally mandatory minimum in their annual accounts, 11 companies presented partial data. Additionally, for 8 companies where revenue was not disclosed, a proxy was used, either gross margin or total sales, introducing a degree of estimation in the revenue growth calculations. Some companies also had years with no published balance sheet, creating gaps in the longitudinal analysis.

Third, the survey response rate of 6.4%, three respondents out of 47 contacted, limits the depth of the qualitative layer. The three respondents cover only two ownership clusters, leaving PE and public institution and private non-family clusters without any primary qualitative data. Forth, the dynamic clustering approach, reclassifying companies at the year of ownership change, introduces estimation where exact transition date are not precisely documented. A company family-owned in 2008 and acquired in 2014 is reclassified into the foreign acquired cluster form that year onwards, which required precise dating that is not always available for private firms.

Fifth, ownership transparency was limited, particularly for the private non-family cluster where controlling shareholders are often undisclosed or partially identified behind holding structures, making it difficult to determine the identity and nationality of the ultimate owner.

Finally, the three financial indicators selected were chosen primarily for data availability rather than analytical comprehensiveness. More complex indicators would provide a richer financial picture but could not be reliably constructed across the full sample given the data constraints described above. Furthermore, the use of revenue growth as a performance indicator is limited by the small cluster sizes and the short post-transition observation period. More robust conclusions on the link between ownership and operational performance would require a larger sample and longer longitudinal horizon.

8. CONCLUSION

This master thesis aims to examine the ownership and financing structures of Belgian hidden champions over the period 2008-2024, analysing how these structures have evolved and what role the growing presence of foreign and institutional investors has played in this evolution. The research covers two main dimensions, ownership and financing structure, analysed through a mixed-method approach combining quantitative financial analysis of 47 Belgian hidden champion with a qualitative survey.

Information was gathered through secondary financial data extracted from Belfirst and the National Bank of Belgium, ownership data from Orbis, and a survey sent to all 47 companies in the sample. Financial indicators were calculated across the full period and analysed by ownership cluster.

The ownership findings reveal that Belgian hidden champions largely confirm the theoretical HC profile: concentrated ownership, family dominance and domestic control remain the norm, consistent with stewardship theory. However, a structural shift away from pure family control is observable across the sample, driven primarily by succession pressures rather than financial distress. The oldest and most established firms are the most likely to have transitioned toward foreign or institutional ownership, suggesting that succession failure is the primary mechanism of ownership evolution among Belgian hidden champions rather than financial weakness or growth ambitions.

Regarding financing, the findings confirm that Belgian hidden champions follow the pecking order hierarchy, internal financing is the dominant model, relationship banking is the preferred external instrument, and external equity is systematically avoided. Firms use the pecking order as a deliberate governance strategy to preserve control through debt rather than equity, extending the framework beyond its original information asymmetry.

Finally, the findings reveal that ownership internationalization has a net positive effect on financial structure, internationally controlled Belgian hidden champions show stronger financial independence and lower leverage than their Belgian controlled peers by the end of the studied period. This challenges the agency theory prediction that external investor entry is inherently disruptive. For future research, a longitudinal study tracking individual HC ownership transitions over 20 or more years, or a study of post-acquisition financial performance after PE exit would all significantly deepen the understanding of this largely unexplored firm category.

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APPENDIX

COMPANY MASTER DATA

Nr	Company Name	Founded	Sector	Country HQ	Original Ownership Type	Ownership Change (Y/N)	Year of Change	Final Ownership Type
1	**BEA Sensors**	1965	Sensors / Building automation	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2002	**Foreign acquired**
2	**Barco**	1934	Professional electronics / Visualisation	Belgium	Listed	No		**Listed**
3	**Camco Technologies**	1999	Hightech / Port automation	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2020	**Private - non family**
4	**Carmeuse Europe**	1860	Raw materials / Lime	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
5	**DSi - DeltaBeam**	1981	Hightech / Industrial measurements	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
6	**BekaertDeslee**	1928	Textile / Comfort technology	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2015	**Foreign acquired**
7	**EHP**	2001	Hightech / Aerospace	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2017	**Foreign acquired**
8	**EVS Broadcast Equipment**	1994	Media technology / Broadcast	Belgium	Listed	Yes	2024	**Listed**
9	**FN Herstal**	1889	Manufacturing / Defence	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2022	**Private - non family**
10	**Flying Cam**	1990	Hightech / UAV	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2020	**Foreign acquired**
11	**Galactic**	1994	Food ingredients / Biotechnology	Belgium	Family	Yes	2021	**Family**
12	**Gantrex**	1971	Manufacturing / Engineering	Belgium	Family	Yes	2019	**Private equity and public institution**
13	**Heimbach**	1874	Industrial textiles	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2020>2024	**Foreign acquired**
14	**IBA**	1986	Hightech / Medtech	Belgium	Listed	No		**Listed**
15	**IP Trade**	2005	Hightech / Software	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2017	**Foreign acquired**
16	**IRIS**	1987	Hightech / Software	Belgium	Listed	Yes	2006-2009	**Listed**
17	**Intermodalics**	2010	Hightech / Software	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2021	**Private - non family**
18	**Isomatex**	2005	Manufacturing / Composites	Belgium	Private - non family	Yes	2016	**Private - non family**
19	**Iwan Simonis**	1680	Manufacturing / Textile	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
20	**Lasea**	2000	Hightech / Precision technology	Belgium	Family	Yes	2020/2023	**Family**
21	**LVD Company**	1952	Industrial machines / Metal	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
22	**Lambda-X**	1996	Hightech / Optics	Belgium	Family	Yes	2024	**Private equity/Public institution**
23	**Lefort**	1947	Industrial machines / Recycling	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
24	**Lhoist**	1889	Raw materials / Lime	Belgium	Family	No		**Family**
25	**Magotteaux International**	1920	Manufacturing / Industrial materials	Belgium	Family	Yes	2011	**Foreign acquired**

26	**Materialise**	1990	Hightech / 3D printing	Belgium	Family	**Yes**	2014	**Listed**
27	**Melexis**	1988	Hightech / Semiconductors	Belgium	Listed	**No**		**Listed**
28	**Meura**	1845	Manufacturing / Food processing	Belgium	Family	**Yes**	1998	**Foreign acquired**
29	**N-SIDE**	2000	Hightech / Software	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2013/2021	**Private - non family**
30	**Nanocyl**	2002	Hightech / Advanced materials	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2023	**Foreign acquired**
31	**Nomacorc - Vinventions**	1993	Manufacturing / Packaging	Belgium	Family	**Yes**	2021	**Family**
32	**Ontex**	1979	Manufacturing / Consumer goods	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2014	**Listed**
33	**Picanol**	1936	Manufacturing / Textile machines	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2023	**Private - non family**
34	**Recticel**	1954	Manufacturing / Chemistry	Belgium	Listed	**No**		**Listed**
35	**Saluc - Aramith**	1923	Manufacturing / Precision products	Belgium	Family	**Yes**	2020/2026	**Family**
36	**Soudal**	1966	Manufacturing / Chemistry	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
37	**Vandewiele**	1880	Manufacturing / Textile machines	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
38	**Vyncke**	1912	Energy / Mechanical engineering	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
39	**Zinacor**	1810	Manufacturing / Metal	Belgium	Foreign acquired	**No**	1997	**Foreign acquired**
40	**Cartamundi**	1970	Manufacturing / Print & packaging	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2020	**Private - non family**
41	**Christeyns**	1946	Manufacturing / Chemistry	Belgium	Family	**Yes**	2019	**Family**
42	**Devan Chemicals**	1977	Manufacturing / Chemistry	Belgium	Private - non family	**Yes**	2020	**Private - non family**
43	**Dhollandia**	1968	Manufacturing / Automotive supply	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
44	**Elaut**	1959	Manufacturing / Mechanical engineering	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
45	**Petersime**	1922	Manufacturing / Agri-tech	Belgium	Private - non family	**No**		**Private - non family**
46	**Ateliers Vlassenroot**	1926	Manufacturing / Metal construction	Belgium	Family	**No**		**Family**
47	**Enzybel International**	2006	Food ingredients / Biotechnology	Belgium	Private - non family	**No**		**Private - non family**

FINANCIAL DATA AVERAGES BY YEAR

Year	Average revenue	Average equity	Average assets	Average debt	Avg equity ratio %	Avg leverage ratio	Avg revenue growth %
2008	69 848 637,12 €	53 853 122,07 €	151 828 183,83 €	97 975 061,50 €	35,5%	1,8	Base
2009	60 967 468,42 €	49 907 115,84 €	148 996 142,51 €	96 000 783,21 €	33,5%	1,9	-12,7%
2010	70 368 322,56 €	54 031 696,70 €	159 060 949,33 €	107 271 266,95 €	34,0%	2,0	15,4%
2011	85 361 874,65 €	59 017 990,74 €	167 748 197,26 €	107 571 648,35 €	35,2%	1,8	21,3%
2012	82 468 115,14 €	57 186 802,75 €	174 373 522,11 €	120 436 719,20 €	32,8%	2,1	-3,4%
2013	84 211 912,14 €	70 432 227,41 €	182 153 117,30 €	114 971 548,05 €	38,7%	1,6	2,1%
2014	83 166 761,58 €	107 420 291,82 €	235 546 593,42 €	136 805 328,76 €	45,6%	1,3	-1,2%
2015	83 822 885,87 €	120 565 781,51 €	248 845 776,87 €	128 279 995,49 €	48,5%	1,1	0,8%
2016	88 318 668,39 €	120 565 781,51 €	250 981 609,28 €	130 573 003,43 €	48,0%	1,1	5,4%
2017	95 352 856,28 €	128 776 473,98 €	253 774 687,15 €	124 983 104,57 €	50,7%	1,0	8,0%
2018	96 627 765,28 €	118 320 440,20 €	251 789 944,17 €	133 513 004,02 €	47,0%	1,1	1,3%
2019	93 419 655,76 €	140 546 698,09 €	261 731 171,37 €	121 158 194,65 €	53,7%	0,9	-3,3%
2020	83 555 309,63 €	144 202 892,28 €	275 478 848,76 €	131 306 198,15 €	52,3%	0,9	-10,6%
2021	97 091 876,02 €	147 778 026,98 €	280 163 354,30 €	132 630 327,52 €	52,7%	0,9	16,2%
2022	110 225 858,91 €	193 819 016,61 €	314 530 533,46 €	165 596 103,85 €	61,6%	0,9	13,5%
2023	110 834 230,91 €	167 730 782,28 €	325 553 584,53 €	157 822 779,60 €	51,5%	0,9	0,6%
2024	132 368 130,95 €	174 368 419,95 €	335 512 100,41 €	164 806 907,86 €	52,0%	0,9	19,4%
Overall average	89 882 960,57 €	112 266 091,81 €	236 356 959,77 €	127 747 175,01 €	45,5%	1,3	4,5%

Year	Average revenue	Average equity	Average assets	Average debt	Avg equity ratio %	Avg leverage ratio	Avg revenue growth %
2008	83 742 580,94 €	64 611 776,29 €	181 345 367,74 €	116 733 591,14 €	35,6%	1,8	Base
2009	73 797 782,86 €	61 162 621,69 €	181 680 161,80 €	116 723 412,40 €	33,7%	1,9	-11,9%
2010	85 429 576,51 €	66 265 903,46 €	193 909 761,74 €	130 398 333,03 €	34,2%	2,0	15,8%
2011	103 656 151,69 €	72 090 358,97 €	204 463 389,37 €	130 949 658,94 €	35,3%	1,8	21,3%
2012	102 205 755,03 €	71 443 966,91 €	217 467 937,51 €	146 023 970,40 €	32,9%	2,0	-1,4%
2013	104 256 736,37 €	87 828 784,43 €	226 892 155,69 €	143 152 770,37 €	38,7%	1,6	2,0%
2014	105 010 881,29 €	104 190 641,63 €	248 736 058,14 €	155 704 165,66 €	41,9%	1,5	0,7%
2015	105 463 972,20 €	101 901 045,46 €	232 515 518,03 €	130 614 472,74 €	43,8%	1,3	0,4%
2016	113 133 052,86 €	104 379 970,03 €	236 503 988,51 €	132 124 018,57 €	44,1%	1,3	7,3%
2017	121 698 676,00 €	110 430 132,54 €	237 637 025,74 €	127 187 036,14 €	46,5%	1,2	7,6%
2018	123 054 372,00 €	97 563 351,83 €	233 287 242,66 €	135 781 062,37 €	41,8%	1,4	1,1%
2019	118 970 948,14 €	128 039 329,89 €	249 415 105,37 €	121 375 775,60 €	51,3%	0,9	-3,3%
2020	106 046 440,60 €	132 941 274,06 €	251 485 628,40 €	118 544 362,89 €	52,9%	0,9	-10,9%
2021	123 378 269,51 €	137 797 169,97 €	271 582 847,43 €	134 099 963,37 €	50,7%	1,0	16,3%
2022	141 189 452,89 €	204 875 591,94 €	321 266 184,60 €	175 381 735,57 €	63,8%	0,9	14,4%
2023	143 954 004,11 €	175 170 010,89 €	344 748 577,34 €	169 578 564,54 €	50,8%	1,0	2,0%
2024	161 634 275,03 €	169 308 038,57 €	329 783 925,97 €	165 081 087,54 €	51,3%	1,0	12,3%
Overall average	112 742 525,18 €	111 176 468,74 €	244 865 933,89 €	138 203 175,37 €	44,1%	1,4	4,6%

CLUSTER AVERAGES BY YEAR

TABLE — Family cluster averages by year							
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**70 302 146,61 €**	**58 231 234,67 €**	**154 154 434,89 €**	**95 923 199,56 €**	37,8%	1,6	Base
2009	**56 401 865,63 €**	**57 492 769,00 €**	**149 537 007,26 €**	**92 044 238,37 €**	38,4%	1,6	-19,8%
2010	**60 828 297,68 €**	**50 266 282,63 €**	**157 488 096,05 €**	**112 295 844,84 €**	31,9%	2,2	7,8%
2011	**69 570 229,37 €**	**56 572 940,84 €**	**171 236 464,47 €**	**114 663 523,47 €**	33,0%	2,0	14,4%
2012	**73 680 583,39 €**	**52 751 087,78 €**	**176 806 350,94 €**	**131 999 707,22 €**	29,8%	2,5	5,9%
2013	**75 547 869,50 €**	**52 997 819,56 €**	**171 908 593,89 €**	**118 910 773,72 €**	30,8%	2,2	2,5%
2014	**82 460 688,65 €**	**79 283 582,76 €**	**193 575 507,76 €**	**137 262 526,18 €**	41,0%	1,7	9,2%
2015	**82 350 943,76 €**	**69 661 021,65 €**	**174 563 636,94 €**	**104 902 615,35 €**	39,9%	1,5	-0,1%
2016	**78 404 363,50 €**	**66 918 681,56 €**	**178 296 089,89 €**	**111 377 408,44 €**	37,5%	1,7	-4,8%
2017	**84 380 237,72 €**	**77 855 011,83 €**	**188 692 899,22 €**	**110 832 887,56 €**	41,3%	1,4	7,6%
2018	**85 542 976,78 €**	**52 365 051,50 €**	**171 913 952,11 €**	**119 548 956,33 €**	30,5%	2,3	1,4%
2019	**88 283 628,41 €**	**67 179 570,24 €**	**176 649 161,00 €**	**109 469 590,76 €**	38,0%	1,6	3,2%
2020	**83 919 323,71 €**	**75 712 966,35 €**	**189 080 665,71 €**	**113 367 699,41 €**	40,0%	1,5	-4,9%
2021	**102 454 701,47 €**	**81 937 156,35 €**	**210 878 554,88 €**	**129 588 457,53 €**	38,9%	1,6	22,1%
2022	**119 672 737,29 €**	**97 750 158,59 €**	**282 419 797,00 €**	**184 610 815,47 €**	34,6%	1,9	16,8%
2023	**116 291 725,00 €**	**104 047 758,78 €**	**308 322 497,33 €**	**204 330 234,83 €**	33,7%	2,0	-2,8%
2024	**116 694 791,24 €**	**119 883 953,35 €**	**327 590 502,47 €**	**217 187 843,47 €**	36,6%	1,8	0,3%
Overall average	85 105 124,10 €	71 818 061,61 €	199 006 718,34 €	129 900 960,15 €	36,1%	1,8	3,7%

TABLE — Listed cluster averages by year							
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**163 155 023,50 €**	**124 858 160,50 €**	**454 518 217,33 €**	**329 660 056,83 €**	27,5%	2,6	Base
2009	**150 268 953,67 €**	**115 356 820,50 €**	**450 940 472,83 €**	**335 583 652,33 €**	25,6%	2,9	-7,9%
2010	**188 443 853,50 €**	**138 259 099,33 €**	**485 999 592,67 €**	**347 740 493,33 €**	28,4%	2,5	25,4%
2011	**230 767 834,50 €**	**133 924 546,83 €**	**472 740 788,50 €**	**338 816 241,67 €**	28,3%	2,5	22,5%
2012	**230 281 852,67 €**	**136 504 807,17 €**	**493 979 126,67 €**	**357 474 319,50 €**	27,6%	2,6	-0,2%
2013	**221 549 713,83 €**	**214 838 218,83 €**	**568 187 706,00 €**	**353 349 487,33 €**	37,8%	1,6	-3,8%
2014	**173 259 247,50 €**	**318 622 447,38 €**	**670 645 807,25 €**	**352 023 359,88 €**	47,5%	1,1	-21,8%
2015	**156 730 172,00 €**	**401 101 397,63 €**	**760 698 222,25 €**	**359 596 824,75 €**	52,7%	0,9	-9,5%
2016	**170 444 501,75 €**	**394 267 595,13 €**	**755 708 318,25 €**	**361 440 723,50 €**	52,2%	0,9	8,8%
2017	**187 214 456,00 €**	**402 565 486,50 €**	**743 474 771,25 €**	**340 833 659,63 €**	54,1%	0,8	9,8%
2018	**180 407 921,63 €**	**397 873 904,38 €**	**773 892 274,38 €**	**376 268 369,88 €**	51,4%	0,9	-3,6%
2019	**190 851 348,75 €**	**489 548 633,38 €**	**845 647 162,25 €**	**356 098 529,00 €**	57,9%	0,7	5,8%
2020	**166 835 423,00 €**	**488 972 827,50 €**	**902 249 971,63 €**	**413 277 181,50 €**	54,2%	0,8	-12,6%
2021	**176 356 460,75 €**	**491 813 375,38 €**	**873 703 561,13 €**	**381 890 186,00 €**	56,3%	0,8	5,7%
2022	**189 471 090,38 €**	**731 830 623,38 €**	**913 951 226,75 €**	**440 333 103,50 €**	80,1%	0,6	7,4%
2023	**209 983 778,88 €**	**566 746 124,75 €**	**908 758 410,25 €**	**342 012 285,38 €**	62,4%	0,6	10,8%
2024	**202 438 674,88 €**	**588 408 383,38 €**	**913 048 717,00 €**	**324 640 333,88 €**	64,4%	0,6	-3,6%
Overall average	187 556 488,66 €	360 911 320,70 €	705 184 961,55 €	359 472 871,05 €	47,6%	1,4	2,1%

TABLE — Foreign acquired cluster averages by year							
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**27 863 194,33 €**	**49 994 255,33 €**	**60 430 601,67 €**	**10 436 346,33 €**	82,7%	0,2	Base
2009	**23 868 168,00 €**	**8 402 001,00 €**	**62 916 767,67 €**	**10 249 942,67 €**	13,4%	1,2	-14,3%
2010	**26 093 872,00 €**	**52 713 396,67 €**	**65 121 709,00 €**	**12 408 312,33 €**	80,9%	0,2	9,3%
2011	**33 592 115,67 €**	**54 086 496,67 €**	**68 215 321,33 €**	**14 128 824,67 €**	79,3%	0,3	28,7%
2012	**34 090 296,25 €**	**50 296 654,00 €**	**129 152 786,25 €**	**78 856 132,25 €**	38,9%	1,6	1,5%
2013	**33 890 861,25 €**	**52 477 738,00 €**	**99 889 860,25 €**	**83 171 864,50 €**	52,5%	1,6	-0,6%
2014	**33 519 033,00 €**	**56 115 317,00 €**	**137 135 171,00 €**	**81 033 854,00 €**	40,9%	1,4	-1,1%
2015	**43 458 181,40 €**	**57 690 730,40 €**	**129 684 183,20 €**	**71 993 453,20 €**	44,5%	1,2	29,7%
2016	**44 569 860,40 €**	**69 218 786,20 €**	**142 628 473,60 €**	**73 409 687,20 €**	48,5%	1,1	2,6%
2017	**40 147 341,29 €**	**57 025 759,86 €**	**105 370 965,43 €**	**48 345 205,43 €**	54,1%	0,8	-9,9%
2018	**45 249 812,43 €**	**44 910 939,71 €**	**96 603 104,14 €**	**51 692 164,43 €**	46,5%	1,2	12,7%
2019	**43 936 598,29 €**	**48 159 736,29 €**	**94 806 845,86 €**	**46 647 109,86 €**	50,8%	1,0	-2,9%
2020	**42 391 695,57 €**	**47 477 703,43 €**	**91 234 409,86 €**	**43 756 706,00 €**	52,0%	0,9	-3,5%
2021	**43 169 854,13 €**	**45 817 516,13 €**	**86 478 499,38 €**	**40 660 983,13 €**	53,0%	0,9	1,8%
2022	**50 781 941,13 €**	**35 141 063,13 €**	**83 023 724,00 €**	**47 881 411,00 €**	42,3%	1,4	17,6%
2023	**45 343 000,20 €**	**28 149 717,70 €**	**71 403 604,20 €**	**43 153 886,70 €**	39,4%	1,5	-10,7%
2024	**58 044 745,00 €**	**36 424 021,71 €**	**90 749 191,14 €**	**54 325 169,29 €**	40,1%	1,5	28,0%
Overall average	39 412 386,49 €	46 711 872,54 €	94 990 895,17 €	47 773 591,35 €	50,6%	1,1	5,6%

TABLE — Private - non family cluster averages by year							
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**43 170 414,57 €**	**22 274 759,64 €**	**48 730 931,57 €**	**26 456 172,00 €**	45,7%	1,2	Base
2009	**40 976 354,64 €**	**23 845 335,07 €**	**47 140 213,79 €**	**23 294 878,71 €**	50,6%	1,0	-5,1%
2010	**47 151 581,36 €**	**27 018 583,36 €**	**51 521 022,43 €**	**24 502 440,36 €**	52,4%	0,9	15,1%
2011	**61 637 349,86 €**	**35 310 983,79 €**	**64 152 280,00 €**	**25 282 867,79 €**	55,0%	0,7	30,7%
2012	**52 249 168,00 €**	**36 218 167,53 €**	**65 613 405,87 €**	**29 395 238,33 €**	55,2%	0,8	-15,2%
2013	**58 647 841,80 €**	**42 847 825,20 €**	**72 128 367,73 €**	**29 279 875,87 €**	59,4%	0,7	12,2%
2014	**54 510 379,73 €**	**47 275 823,93 €**	**90 832 388,20 €**	**43 556 564,40 €**	52,0%	0,9	-7,1%
2015	**64 323 810,50 €**	**52 874 861,36 €**	**104 110 652,50 €**	**51 235 791,29 €**	50,8%	1,0	18,0%
2016	**76 068 808,36 €**	**59 290 942,79 €**	**109 359 325,43 €**	**50 068 382,36 €**	54,2%	0,8	18,3%
2017	**83 741 544,08 €**	**69 432 567,62 €**	**122 443 730,38 €**	**53 011 163,00 €**	56,7%	0,8	10,1%
2018	**88 083 966,23 €**	**77 138 577,62 €**	**124 655 874,62 €**	**47 517 297,00 €**	61,9%	0,6	5,2%
2019	**70 257 717,15 €**	**81 966 459,08 €**	**120 640 073,54 €**	**38 687 614,54 €**	67,9%	0,5	-20,2%
2020	**58 084 448,77 €**	**84 460 707,92 €**	**120 221 637,92 €**	**35 760 930,00 €**	70,3%	0,4	-17,3%
2021	**78 566 353,75 €**	**91 494 422,08 €**	**132 307 518,75 €**	**40 835 597,08 €**	69,2%	0,4	35,3%
2022	**90 304 716,92 €**	**92 656 915,00 €**	**138 070 428,92 €**	**45 413 596,42 €**	67,1%	0,5	14,9%
2023	**95 671 304,90 €**	**118 790 088,40 €**	**173 198 002,70 €**	**54 407 914,40 €**	68,6%	0,5	5,9%
2024	**178 506 509,90 €**	**65 753 018,60 €**	**120 953 716,10 €**	**55 200 697,50 €**	54,4%	0,8	86,6%
Overall average	73 056 015,91 €	60 508 825,82 €	100 357 621,79 €	39 641 589,47 €	58,3%	0,7	11,7%

TABLE — PE and public institution cluster averages by year							
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**1 298 592,00 €**	**2 690 539,00 €**	**11 369 742,00 €**	**8 679 203,00 €**	23,7%	3,2	Base
2009	**3 078 504,00 €**	**2 461 753,00 €**	**11 274 857,00 €**	**8 813 105,00 €**	21,8%	3,6	137,1%
2010	**1 033 338,00 €**	**2 348 635,00 €**	**14 689 999,00 €**	**12 341 365,00 €**	16,0%	5,3	-66,4%
2011	**420 000,00 €**	**2 727 182,00 €**	**20 457 042,00 €**	**17 729 860,00 €**	13,3%	6,5	-59,4%
2012	**556 744,00 €**	**3 211 769,00 €**	**25 233 663,00 €**	**22 021 894,00 €**	12,7%	6,9	32,6%
2013	**883 128,00 €**	**3 399 611,00 €**	**29 771 278,00 €**	**26 371 667,00 €**	11,4%	7,8	58,6%
2014	**2 866 756,00 €**	**3 514 019,00 €**	**32 620 107,00 €**	**29 106 088,00 €**	10,8%	8,3	224,6%
2015	**398 190,00 €**	**3 709 908,00 €**	**38 922 302,00 €**	**35 212 394,00 €**	9,5%	9,5	-86,1%
2016	**11 570,00 €**	**3 951 711,00 €**	**45 984 939,00 €**	**42 033 229,00 €**	8,6%	10,6	-97,1%
2017	**nd**	**nd**	**nd**	**nd**	nd	nd	nd
2018	**nd**	**nd**	**nd**	**nd**	nd	nd	nd
2019	**48 765 181,00 €**	**4 024 229,00 €**	**39 451 971,00 €**	**34 036 921,00 €**	10,2%	8,5	Base
2020	**30 392 653,00 €**	**4 096 870,00 €**	**38 133 791,00 €**	**35 427 741,00 €**	10,7%	8,6	-37,7%
2021	**25 489 608,00 €**	**5 877 386,00 €**	**33 432 156,00 €**	**27 554 770,00 €**	17,6%	4,7	-16,1%
2022	**30 272 121,00 €**	**6 265 596,00 €**	**34 623 237,00 €**	**28 357 641,00 €**	18,1%	4,5	18,8%
2023	**25 944 521,00 €**	**7 120 050,00 €**	**35 130 170,00 €**	**28 010 120,00 €**	20,3%	3,9	-14,3%
2024	**14 749 299,00 €**	**7 208 933,00 €**	**22 161 320,50 €**	**14 952 388,00 €**	32,5%	2,1	-43,2%
Overall average	12 410 680,33 €	4 173 879,40 €	28 883 771,63 €	24 709 892,40 €	15,8%	6,3	4,0%

BELGIAN VS INTERNATIONALLY CONTROLLED AVERAGES BY YEAR

TABLE	Belgian controlled	HC averages by	year				
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**59 866 818,00 €**	**45 388 882,86 €**	**114 693 074,34 €**	**69 304 191,07 €**	39,6%	1,5	Base
2009	**51 158 776,77 €**	**46 455 663,87 €**	**113 512 036,17 €**	**67 056 372,40 €**	40,9%	1,4	-14,5%
2010	**56 788 943,33 €**	**43 353 832,50 €**	**120 179 753,87 €**	**80 039 474,60 €**	36,1%	1,8	11,0%
2011	**64 180 586,90 €**	**50 303 631,57 €**	**134 636 832,03 €**	**82 672 600,40 €**	37,4%	1,6	13,0%
2012	**65 596 051,83 €**	**47 839 082,20 €**	**134 877 985,33 €**	**91 805 569,57 €**	35,5%	1,9	2,2%
2013	**70 565 786,53 €**	**50 738 186,03 €**	**135 037 332,67 €**	**84 295 812,93 €**	37,6%	1,7	7,6%
2014	**72 239 148,97 €**	**68 178 337,07 €**	**156 304 764,79 €**	**101 591 952,55 €**	43,6%	1,5	2,4%
2015	**76 245 527,17 €**	**65 372 901,66 €**	**151 446 101,17 €**	**86 073 199,62 €**	43,2%	1,3	5,5%
2016	**79 705 547,27 €**	**66 985 920,13 €**	**157 056 906,63 €**	**90 070 986,47 €**	42,7%	1,3	4,5%
2017	**89 634 095,93 €**	**80 733 727,39 €**	**174 837 134,75 €**	**94 100 193,25 €**	46,2%	1,2	12,5%
2018	**92 170 826,54 €**	**68 027 778,18 €**	**165 093 580,11 €**	**97 065 837,75 €**	41,2%	1,4	2,8%
2019	**85 757 383,37 €**	**79 749 043,67 €**	**165 950 394,56 €**	**86 208 091,63 €**	48,1%	1,1	-7,0%
2020	**78 288 741,93 €**	**86 236 087,74 €**	**173 432 439,04 €**	**87 196 351,30 €**	49,7%	1,0	-8,7%
2021	**100 256 869,85 €**	**93 669 876,73 €**	**195 252 972,38 €**	**102 006 172,88 €**	48,0%	1,1	28,1%
2022	**116 055 837,54 €**	**104 224 229,54 €**	**243 982 385,12 €**	**139 719 694,42 €**	42,7%	1,3	15,8%
2023	**113 991 984,00 €**	**115 470 545,23 €**	**275 845 303,88 €**	**160 413 179,19 €**	41,9%	1,4	-1,8%
2024	**108 362 940,69 €**	**101 491 205,69 €**	**256 756 750,65 €**	**161 464 852,81 €**	39,5%	1,6	-4,9%
Overall average	81 227 403,92 €	71 424 643,06 €	168 758 573,38 €	98 887 325,46 €	42,0%	1,4	4,3%

TABLE	Internationally	controlled HC	averages by year				
Year	**Average revenue**	**Average equity**	**Average assets**	**Average debt**	**Avg equity ratio %**	**Avg leverage ratio**	**Avg revenue growth %**
2008	**92 115 772,08 €**	**72 734 886,46 €**	**234 668 043,46 €**	**161 933 157,08 €**	31,0%	2,2	Base
2009	**83 602 910,69 €**	**57 872 005,00 €**	**230 882 541,77 €**	**162 795 577,38 €**	25,1%	2,8	-9,2%
2010	**101 705 351,54 €**	**78 672 921,77 €**	**248 786 785,00 €**	**170 113 864,69 €**	31,6%	2,2	21,7%
2011	**134 241 769,46 €**	**79 128 050,38 €**	**244 159 040,08 €**	**165 030 989,77 €**	32,4%	2,1	32,0%
2012	**118 622 536,50 €**	**77 217 632,50 €**	**259 006 815,21 €**	**181 789 182,71 €**	29,8%	2,4	-11,6%
2013	**113 453 609,86 €**	**112 633 744,64 €**	**283 115 512,93 €**	**180 705 266,14 €**	39,8%	1,6	-4,4%
2014	**102 973 059,44 €**	**178 546 334,81 €**	**379 172 407,81 €**	**200 629 573,13 €**	47,1%	1,1	-9,2%
2015	**97 556 848,50 €**	**220 602 876,25 €**	**425 382 689,06 €**	**204 779 813,00 €**	51,9%	0,9	-5,3%
2016	**104 468 270,50 €**	**220 576 141,63 €**	**427 090 426,75 €**	**206 514 285,25 €**	51,6%	0,9	7,1%
2017	**104 248 705,72 €**	**203 509 635,33 €**	**376 566 435,33 €**	**173 023 188,83 €**	54,0%	0,9	-0,2%
2018	**103 560 781,11 €**	**196 553 470,00 €**	**386 650 954,94 €**	**190 208 596,00 €**	50,8%	1,0	-0,7%
2019	**104 308 148,11 €**	**226 943 364,89 €**	**397 840 696,32 €**	**170 824 130,53 €**	57,0%	0,8	0,7%
2020	**91 039 379,53 €**	**226 576 772,42 €**	**420 492 167,84 €**	**193 988 612,11 €**	53,9%	0,9	-12,7%
2021	**92 977 384,05 €**	**218 118 622,30 €**	**390 546 850,80 €**	**172 441 728,55 €**	55,8%	0,8	2,1%
2022	**102 646 886,70 €**	**310 292 239,80 €**	**406 243 126,30 €**	**199 235 436,10 €**	76,4%	0,6	10,4%
2023	**106 924 631,86 €**	**232 433 932,90 €**	**387 097 170,10 €**	**154 615 618,19 €**	60,0%	0,7	4,2%
2024	**167 042 294,67 €**	**279 635 507,22 €**	**449 269 827,83 €**	**169 634 320,72 €**	62,2%	0,6	56,2%
Overall average	107 146 372,96 €	176 002 831,67 €	349 821 852,44 €	179 897 843,54 €	47,7%	1,3	5,1%

Section 1 — Base information

1. Company name:
2. Your name: *(optional)*
3. Your position:

Section 2 — Financing structure

4. What is your primary source of financing? *(rank from 1 = most used to 5 = least used)*
    - Retained earnings / internal cash flow
    - Bank debt — relationship lending
    - Private equity or venture capital
    - Bond issuance or capital markets
    - Shareholder loans or family capital
    - Family offices
    - Mezzanine capital
    - Silent partners who offer capital
    - Other *(please specify)*

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

5. Has your financing structure changed significantly over the past 10–20 years?
    - Yes significantly
    - Somewhat
    - No — it has remained stable

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

6. If it has changed, what drove that change? *(multiple choice)*
    - Internationalization of operations requiring more capital
    - Succession and ownership transition
    - Entry of external investors
    - Access to new financing instruments
    - Growth ambitions beyond internal capacity
    - Other *(please specify)*

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

7. How long have you worked with your primary banking partner?

- Less than 5 years
- 5–10 years
- 10–20 years
- More than 20 years
- We do not have a primary banking partner

  Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

8. How would you rate your company's openness to external equity financing? *(1 = completely closed — 5 = very open)*
   - 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

     Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

9. If you have avoided external equity financing, what are the main reasons? *(multiple choice)*
   - Desire to maintain control
   - Concerns about disclosure and transparency obligations
   - Preference for financial independence
   - Cultural aversion to outside investors
   - Sufficient internal resources
   - Other *(please specify)*

     Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

10. Has your company ever considered an IPO?
    - Yes and we proceeded
    - Yes but we decided not to proceed
    - We have considered it and it remains an option
    - No and we would not consider it
    - No but we might in the future

      Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

Section 3 — Ownership structure

11. Based on our prior research, we have identified your company as ***[ownership type]***. Can you confirm this is still accurate?
    - Yes this is accurate
    - No — our current ownership structure is better described as: *(please specify)*

      Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

12. Has your ownership structure changed significantly in the past 20 years?
    - Yes entirely
    - Yes partially
    - No

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

13. If yes, what triggered this change? *(multiple choice)*
    - Succession — no family heir available or willing
    - Need for capital to fund investments
    - External approach from an investor or acquirer
    - Strategic repositioning
    - Financial difficulties
    - Other *(please specify)*

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

14. Has your company ever been approached by or involved with the following types of investors?

	Yes, and we proceeded	**Yes, but we declined**	**No**	**Prefer not to answer**
Belgian private equity fund				
Foreign private equity fund				
Belgian industrial company				
Foreign industrial company				
Belgian family office				
Foreign institutional investor				
Silent partners				

Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

15. If your company has had external investors in the past, how would you rate their influence on your company's daily operations and management? *(1 = very hands-off — 5 = very hands-on)*
    - 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5
    - Not applicable

Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

16. If your company currently has external investors, how would you rate their influence on your company's daily operations and management? *(1 = very hands-off — 5 = very hands-on)*
    - 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5
    - Not applicable

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

17. How important is maintaining family or founder control to your company? *(1 = not important at all — 5 = absolutely essential)*
    - 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

18. What is your biggest concern regarding external investors? *(multiple choice)*
    - Loss of strategic control
    - Short-term return pressure
    - Cultural misalignment
    - Reporting and disclosure obligations
    - Threat to company identity and values
    - Other *(please specify)*
    - No concern — we are open to external investors

    Please elaborate on your answer if possible:

Section 4 — Open question *(optional)*

19. Has any ownership or financing event — succession, PE entry, foreign acquisition, IPO — fundamentally changed your company's strategy or identity? If so, how?

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