



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Growth strategy preferences of Turkish tramp shipping companies: A qualitative research

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### ABSTRACT

Tramp shipping has played an important role in world seaborne trade since the 19th century. Shipowner companies operating in tramp shipping, which is a mean of maritime transport associated with bulk cargoes that make up three-quarters of all maritime trade, also provide an important economic power to the sector. These shipowners need to grow by making profitable investments in order to survive and maintain their competitive advantage in such a dynamic and competitive market. Based on this, in the exploratory study, fifteen interviews were made with the managers of the fifteen shipowner companies operating in the field of tramp shipping sector, and their opinions were taken about the concept of growth, growth in terms of quality-quantity, the reasons for growth, the factors considered, and the problems encountered in growth process. The data obtained as a result of the interviews were analysed with *MAXQDA 2020*, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program. According to the results of the research, it has been determined that the shipowner companies mostly grow by expanding their fleet; market conditions and economic situation of maritime sector play an important role in the decision to grow, and financing, economic crises and government policies and laws are barriers to growth.

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### Introduction

World shipping has been dominated by a limited number of bulk commodities transported over all of the world's oceans

and seas since the final third of the nineteenth century (Harlaftis & Theotokas, 2004). Tramp shipping is a means of sea transport associated with bulk cargoes, which account for three-quarters of all maritime traffic. This demonstrates that

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the tramp shipping model is used to carry out the majority of maritime transport activities (Erol & Dursun, 2016).

In 2020, the global commercial shipping fleet grew by 3 per cent, reaching 99,800 ships of 100 gross tons and above. However, global maritime trade decreased by 3.4% on a tone basis (UNCTAD, 2021). In the world, tanker, bulk cargo, container, dry cargo, and passenger ship types accounted for 1,829,113 DWT in 2021. Bulk Cargo ships have the biggest DWT share among these ship classes, accounting for 48.2 percent (DTO, 2021). When it comes to the Turkish merchant fleet, ships of 1000 GT and above is 6.4 million DWT. Bulk Carriers (30%), Oil Tankers (22.5%), Container Ships (16%), Dry Cargo Ships (11.1%), and Chemical Tankers (9.9%) make up the majority of Turkish merchant fleet (DTO, 2021). Shipping companies are reforming to meet new operational and economic demands and to manage their renewed fleets more efficiently (Demirel, 2015). They need to improve their organization and management systems in order to adapt to the constantly and rapidly changing environmental conditions.

Today, organizations are faced with rapidly changing technologies, globalization and increasing competition. In order to be successful and maintain their existence in such a dynamic environment, it is inevitable for organizations to be more competitive than ever before. Businesses cannot grow in a stable environment; thus, they must learn to adapt in order to exist in a dynamic and changing world (Wang & Li, 2013). Dynamic capabilities enable firms to adapt to an uncertain environment, maintain operations, ensure competitiveness, and improve resilience (Bathke et al., 2022). In this regard, shipowners seek strategies to cope with the high degree of competition in the tramp shipping market, and aim to grow their companies in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

Tramp shipping is a branch of sea transportation that is particularly susceptible to market forces such as supply and demand for shipping services, as well as strong rivalry. The dynamic and unstable market is the most important component of tramp shipping; demand for shipping services is impacted by the state of the global economy. Therefore, it is of great importance to reveal how Turkish shipowners have grown their businesses in this competitive environment. From this point of view, this research aims to reveal the growth strategy preferences of shipowner companies engaged in tramp shipping in Turkey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to Turkish shipowners for exploring the growth strategy preferences and other related subjects. When the dynamic capabilities, growth and maritime literature are

examined, it is seen that the number of studies on these issues is not very large. There are studies in the field of liner shipping, but the scarcity of studies in the field of tramp shipping draws attention. Considering these situations, the subject discussed and research field show the originality of this study.

The following section introduces the theoretical background and relevant literature based on dynamic capability and growth in tramp shipping. The third section describes the methodology of the study. In the fourth section, findings of the qualitative study are presented. In the fifth and the last section, the findings of the study are discussed and the conclusion part is given.

### ***Dynamic Capabilities and Growth Concept***

In the strategic management literature, it is seen that resources play a huge and important role in achieving growth and competitive advantage (Penrose, 1959; Rumelt, 1984; Wernerfelt, 1984; Porter, 1985; Barney, 1991). Firm resources comprise all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, company attributes, information, knowledge, and so on that a company controls and that enable the company to devise and implement strategies that increase its efficiency and effectiveness (Barney, 1991).

It has been very important for businesses to develop their management and organizational skills to survive and enhance the competitiveness in dynamic environment that increases with the effect of globalization. To confront the difficulties of globalization, it is apparent that businesses must create dynamic capacities to alter current resources, skills, and ability (Augier & Teece, 2009; Wang & Li, 2013). This situation highly depends on the growth and expansion attempts of the companies.

Growth is viewed as an uneven and discontinuous process characterized by uncertainties related to market dynamics, external factors, and the traits and skills of entrepreneurs and enterprises (Vickers & Lyon, 2014). According to Teece & Pisano (1994), a business's competitive advantage is based on dynamic capabilities anchored in high-performance routines that operate within the organization, are ingrained in its processes, and are conditioned by its history. Dynamic capabilities are higher-level activities that can enable an enterprise to direct its ordinary activities toward high-demand uses, develop new capabilities, and effectively coordinate (or orchestrate) internal and external resources to address and shape shifting business environments (Henderson & Cockburn, 1994; Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2016).

This situation is of great importance for companies in the maritime sector, as it is in all sectors. The maritime sector frequently experiences quick and severe business cycles, emphasizing the importance of dynamism and flexibility in strategic management (Saarni, 2013).

As being one of the maritime transport types, tramp shipping is particularly vulnerable to the rules of supply and demand for shipping services, as well as to fierce competition in the market. The product is homogenous; entry barriers are minimal; multiple enterprises compete for business (each ship, perhaps, is a distinct competitive unit); and information flows make markets transparent. Depending on market conditions, the freight prices that may be obtained in these marketplaces are quite variable (Clarkson Research Services Limited, 2004). This situation naturally pushes the ship owners to take precautions (Erol & Dursun, 2016).

Businesses' survival and long-term competitive advantage are dependent on growth and development activities in an increasingly competitive environment caused by globalization.

When the growth and maritime sector literature is analyzed, it is discovered that the studies are largely focused on liner shipping sector and are few in number. Midoro & Pitto (2000), after examining the major features of strategic alliances in liner shipping, discovered that the major elements driving instability are the alliance's growing organizational complexity and the formation of a certain amount of intra-alliance rivalry. Slack et al. (2002) analyzed trends in container shipping in light of several of the leading companies in the sector forming strategic alliances. The findings confirmed the decade-long increase in the number of services and intensity of service frequency. In their study, Song & Panayides (2002) sought to find the reasoning for cooperation (or non-cooperation) in liner shipping. The present types of cooperation, such as shipping alliances, shipping consortia, and mergers and acquisitions demonstrate the market's complexity.

Brooks & Ritchie (2006) investigated the general pattern of maritime transport-related mergers and acquisitions on a global scale using a database of all mergers and acquisitions worldwide. According to the findings of this study, the maritime transport sector does not exhibit a significantly different pattern than other sectors of the transportation business. Solesvik & Westhead (2010) investigated how a maritime firm's competitive advantage might be strengthened by selecting the suitable partner through a strategic partnership. The findings indicated that strategic partnerships were effective when partners were properly chosen.

When the literature is examined, very few studies have been found that combine dynamic capabilities and maritime transport (especially in tramp shipping).

Tsekouras et al. (2011) identified the existence of strong linkages between organizational and process innovation and dynamic capabilities in the small companies in a traditional service sector. In the research, the case study method was applied in three Greek tramp shipping companies. The findings showed that organizational and process innovations are critical aspects of a dynamic strategy in small service companies. In terms of family businesses and dynamic capabilities perspective, Jones et al. (2013) investigated a family-owned shipping company in Liverpool to see how multigenerational ownership, entrepreneurial cognition, and dynamic capacities are linked in family businesses. In the setting of a failed firm, the study highlighted the relevance of entrepreneurial cognition. Saarni (2013) explored the dynamic capabilities in Finnish maritime industry during the years of weak demand and uncertainty. The results showed that half of the firms have reflected dynamic capabilities already in 2009 and their share has increased by 2012. The findings also revealed that the acts that are most typically lacking from maritime companies are observation and identification of business opportunities, as well as collaboration in R&D. Similarly, Bathke et al. (2022) examined container shipping firms' attitudes to build resilience through developing dynamic capabilities in turbulent times. This study investigated scenarios for container shipping businesses' macro environment using a Delphi-based scenario analysis. Glyptis et al. (2021) identified how dynamic capabilities emerge in connection to family resources in order to help family businesses thrive. The findings revealed the effect of the controlling family on management accounting's seeking, seizing, and reconfiguring processes in order to enable the reconfiguration of family resources in the business across product strategy, governance, networking and personnel, and finance. During the coronavirus pandemic, Dovbischuk (2022) investigated the connections between various innovation-oriented dynamic capabilities, dynamic resilience, and firm performance among logistics service providers (LSPs) and internal logistics departments of industrial businesses. In their study, Hussein & Song (2022) made an effort to forecast the competencies needed in marine sector for the next ten years by critically analyzing a few significant global and industry-based obstacles and, concurrently, identifying possibilities in a creative and forward-looking way. They found out that particularly in view of the dynamic and disruptive global events, it is thought vital to understand the key factors that affect the

present and future state of maritime sector. Additionally, it was appeared that developing a sustainable and stable corporate entity depends on having a broad understanding of the fundamental and required abilities for positions in the sector in the future.

In the light of this information and due to the gap in the literature, this study aimed to reveal the growth strategy preferences of shipowner companies engaged in tramp shipping in Turkey. To identify the reasons that trigger the growth of Turkish Tramp Shipping Firms, to determine which growth strategies they prefer and how they apply these strategies, and to discover the problems they encounter during the growth process are the main research subjects of the study.

## Material and Methods

### Sample of the Study

This study aimed to reach shipowners operating in tramp shipping along with other fields within and outside the maritime sector to identify the growth strategy preferences and other related subjects as concept of growth, factors that are important when determining a growth strategy, barriers of growth and reasons of growth. The study utilized a purposive sampling approach, which is a form of non-probability sampling method. Non-probability sampling, is a method in which the sample is determined not by the probability with which a unit can join the sample, but by other factors such as the sampler's common sense, experience, intention, and competence (Acharya et al., 2013; Etikan & Bala, 2017). Purposive sampling is a method of discovering and selecting instances that will efficiently employ limited research resources by selecting respondents who are most likely to provide acceptable and meaningful information (Sharma, 2017; Campbell et al., 2020).

Turkish Shipowners Association member list was analysed initially to define the population of the study. The list of 136 member firms was scrutinized, and member companies that do not provide tramp shipping services were eliminated. Since 20 of the remaining 60 companies couldn't be contacted because of unanswered phone numbers and inactive website and email addresses, the number of companies operating as shipowners in tramp shipping has been found to be 40. 15 shipowner companies provided feedback and participated in the research.

Figure 1 depicts the process of defining the research population. Furthermore, information about the interviewees and their companies are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

As seen in Table 1, all of the participants hold top senior executive positions. The participants in the sector have a range of experience varies between 7-47 years. Therefore, all of the participants have the necessary know-how to convey their views on the issue, both in terms of their expertise in the sector and their firms, as well as their positions.

According to Table 2, except for one, the base of all companies interviewed is Istanbul. The companies are corporations and limited companies as legal status with a total employee number ranging from 4 to 550, representing shipowners of different sizes. Since, the majority of the companies interviewed are family businesses, and the companies are managed by the founder entrepreneur and second-generation family members. All of the companies have been serving in the tramp shipping sector for many years and are in a position to provide sufficient information on the growth strategies of the companies throughout these years.

In terms of ship type, the majority of the company's fleets consist of dry cargo ships, followed by general cargo and tankers. The presence of container-type ships in the fleet indicates that companies are diversifying on the basis of their field of activity.

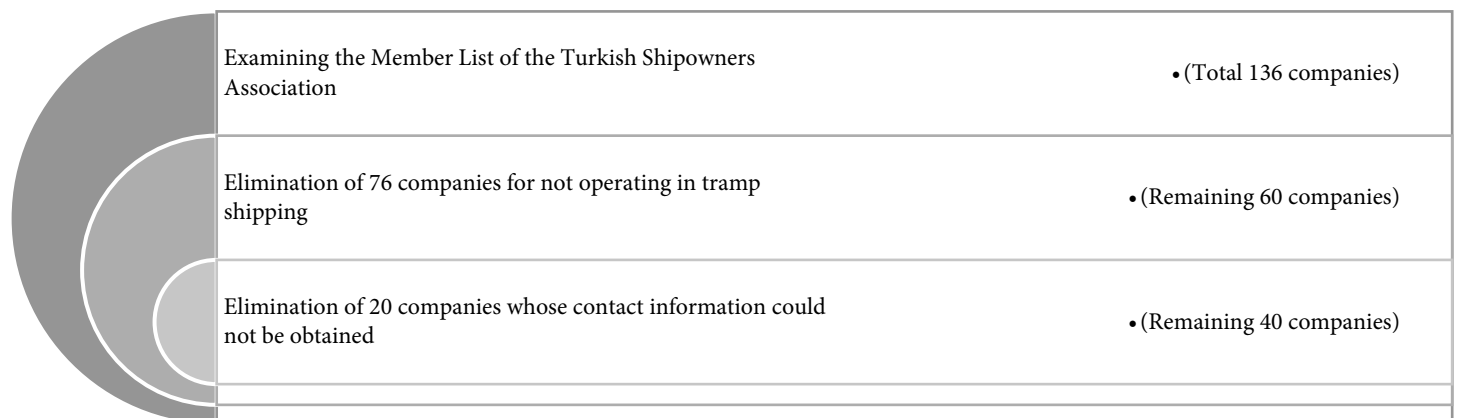


Figure 1. Determination of the study population

**Table 1.** Profile information of the participants

Participants	Age	Education	Position	Total Experience in Company	Total Experience in the Sector
1.	51	Master	CEO	34 years	34 years
2.	39	University	Board Member	17 years	17 years
3.	35	Master	General Manager	12 years	12 years
4.	48	University	General Manager / Owner	16 years	23 years
5.	50	University	Chartering Manager	5 years	25 years
6.	43	University	Chartering Manager	24 years	25 years
7.	43	Master	Operation & Insurance Manager	15 years	20 years
8.	65	University	Chairman of the Board	37 years	45 years
9.	31	University	Chartering & Fleet Manager	7 years	7 years
10.	60	University	Chairman of the Board	31 years	31 years
11.	60	University	DPA & Technical Manager	28 years	39 years
12.	49	University	Chartering Manager	14 years	24 years
13.	73	Master	Chairman of the Board	42 years	47 years
14.	46	University	Chairman of the Board	21 years	21 years
15.	51	University	Executive Manager	31 years	35 years

**Table 2.** Profile information of the companies

Firm	Foundation Year	Legal Status	Ownership Structure	Employee Number	Company Manager
A	1968	Corporation	Family Business	500	Founder Entrepreneur
B	1968	Corporation	Family Business	75 and above	Foun. Entrep. and 2nd Gen. Fam. Member
C	1972	Corporation	Family Business	300	2nd Gen. Fam. Member
D	2005	Limited Co.	Equity Partnership and Foun. Entrep.	4 (except ship personnel)	Founder Entrepreneur
E	1989	Corporation	Family Business	5	2nd Gen. Fam. Member
F	1989	Corporation	Sole Proprietorship	150	Foun. Entrep. 2nd Gen. Fam. Member
G	1960	Limited Co.	Family Business	550	2nd Gen. Fam. Member
H	1985	Corporation	Sole Proprietorship	18	Founder Entrepreneur
I	1990	Limited Co.	Family Business and Sole Proprietorship	100	4th Gen. Fam. Member
J	1990	Corporation	Family Business	88	2nd Gen. Fam. Member
K	1971	Corporation	Family Business	320	Foun. Entrep.
L	1977	Limited Co.	Family Business	50	2nd Gen. Fam. Member
M	1980	Corporation	Found. Entrep.	70	Foun. Entrep.
N	1999	Corporation	Family Business	170	Foun. Entrep.
O	1990	Limited Co.	Family Business Found. Entrep.	50	2nd Gen. Fam. Member

### **Data Collection Method**

The study employed the qualitative research method in order to identify, through exploratory research, the viewpoints of shipowner companies on growth-related issues and how they expand their businesses. As one of the qualitative research methods, interviews provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The possibility of previously unknown information emerging is a big advantage of semi-structured interviews. Participants can be considered experts based on their expertise; so, when ample chance to speak freely is allowed, fresh and original knowledge might emerge (O’Keeffe et al., 2016).

In the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 shipowner companies operating in the tramp shipping sector. The semi-structured interview method was preferred in the study in order to research the subject in depth, to learn the perspectives of the participants about growth strategies, and to benefit from their knowledge and experience. Interview questions were prepared by examining studies in similar fields in the literature, and then they were finalized by taking the opinions of experts from the sector and academia. Interview question form consists of five parts. The form, which starts with the profile information section of the interviewee and the business, continues with the sections of the business’s growth strategy and strategic alliance and ends with the section of diversification measure of the business. The findings of those sections were not included in the study due to the number of businesses engaged in strategic alliance and operating outside the maritime sector is not high.

There are studies on tramp shipping that employ the interview method also in the literature. For instance, Thai et al. (2014) aimed to develop and verify a service quality model in tramp shipping. Emphasizing that tramp shipping is a labor-intensive sector, Holmgren & Pritschau (2015) tried to explore how people in the tramp shipping sector perceive and manage 24/7 work availability by applying boundary theory, and they conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen professionals. Demirel (2015) in his study intended to conduct a SWOT analysis of Turkish shipping companies based on their organizational and management systems. Data for organizational and management systems are gathered from open sources such as information on corporate websites, printed materials, and interviews with company personnel, including ex-workers (both liner and tramp shipping firms).

### **Data Collection Process and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews to collect research data were conducted between August 2021 and February 2022. In order to increase the validity and reliability of the research, the question form was checked by experts from academia (4 people) and sector (3 people) before the interviews were conducted.

The Turkish Shipowners Association was contacted, and support from the General Secretariat was received, in order to reach the relevant shipowners and increase the number of participants in the research area. Furthermore, contact information was acquired from companies’ websites and social media platforms (LinkedIn), and efforts were made to reach relevant experts by phone and e-mail.

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed with MAXQDA 2020, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program. In the analysis process, first of all, a project on MAXQDA 2020 was created and the data was transferred to this project. In the context of the questions asked to the participants, each interview was individually coded and categorized by the authors. Then, the data were reported based on descriptive analysis.

### **Results**

First, the participants were asked what the term “growth” meant to them. Participants expressed different remarks about the idea of growth, which has a variety of definitions and aspects in the literature. The expressions for the concept of growth are shown in Figure 2.

As it can be seen in Figure 2, the participants mostly focused on the increase in the number of ships in their definitions of the concept of growth, and they associated the growth of the company with the increase in their fleet. After the increase in the number of ships, the most repeated growth concept is the increase in the number of employees. Being a corporate business, having a younger fleet, increase in different business lines, investments and business volumes are other factors often included in the definitions. Growing through ships, one of the most valuable assets for shipowners, means growth for the majority of companies. This situation shows that shipowner businesses prefer organic (internal) growth as growth strategy.

The second question posed to the participants was about how their businesses have grown quantitatively since its establishment. Figure 3 shows the statements of the participants about quantitative growth.

According to Figure 3, the majority of the participants stated the quantitative growth of their businesses as the increase in the number of ships. Increase in business lines, profitability, investments, business volume, number of employees and DWT capacity are other quantitative growth expressions stated by the participants. When analyzing quantitative growth, it becomes

clear that shipowners place a heavy emphasis on financial indicators when determining growth.

The third question posed to the participants was about how their businesses have grown qualitatively since its establishment. Figure 4 shows the statements of the participants about qualitative growth.

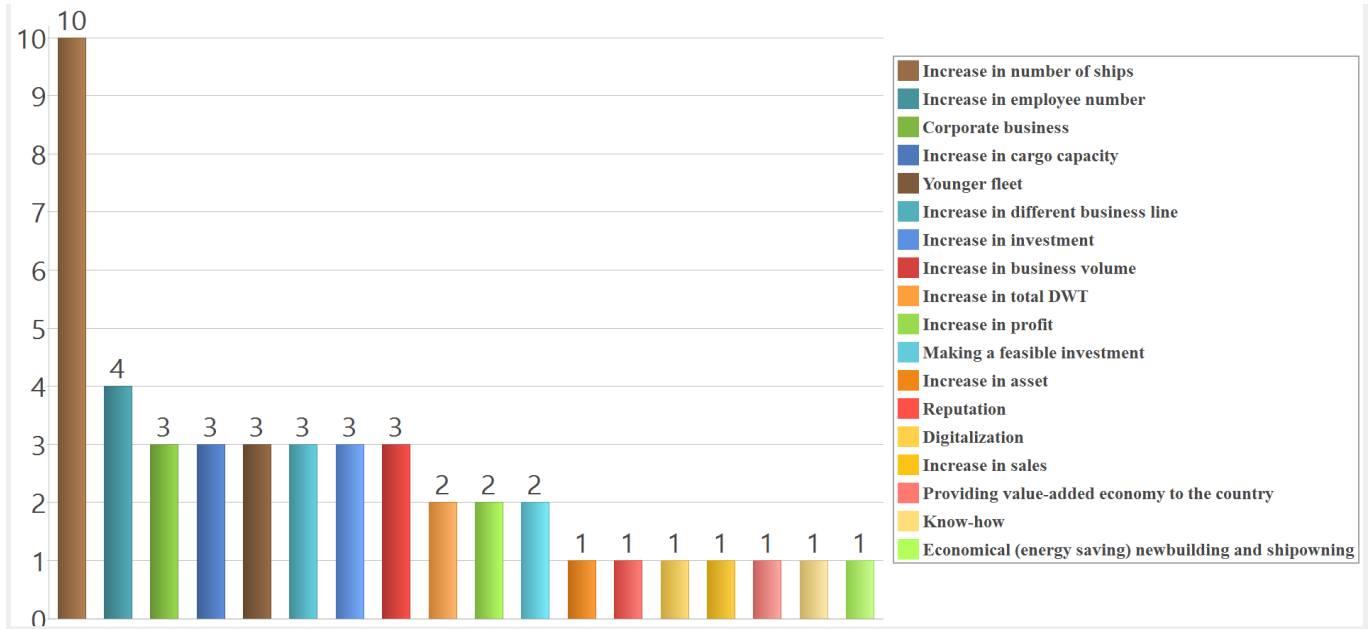


Figure 2. Concept of growth

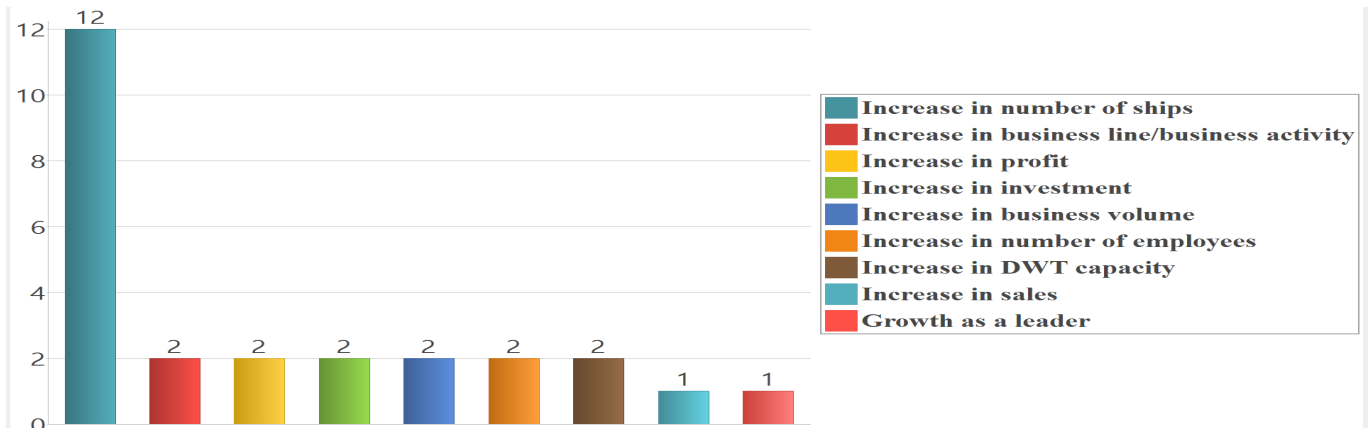


Figure 3. Quantitative growth

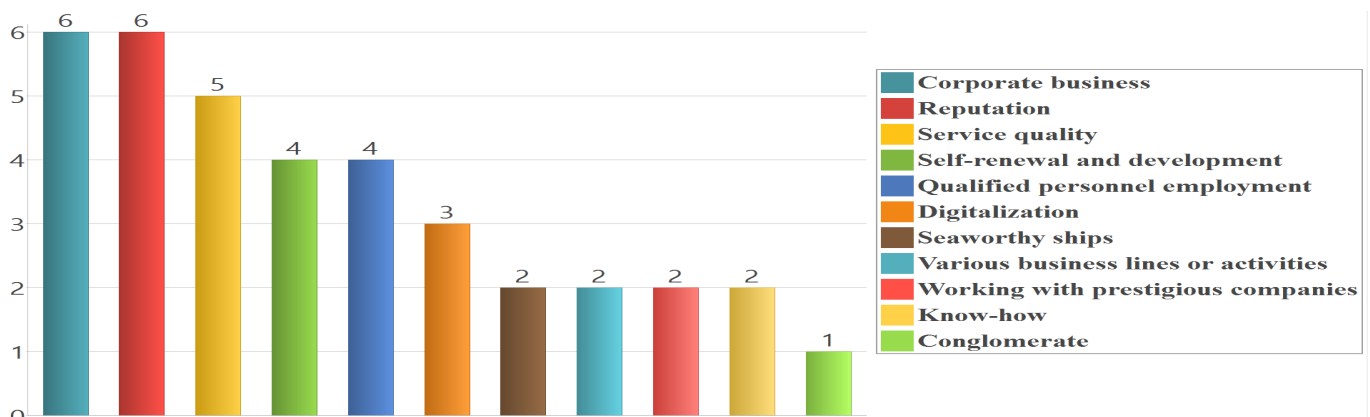


Figure 4. Qualitative growth

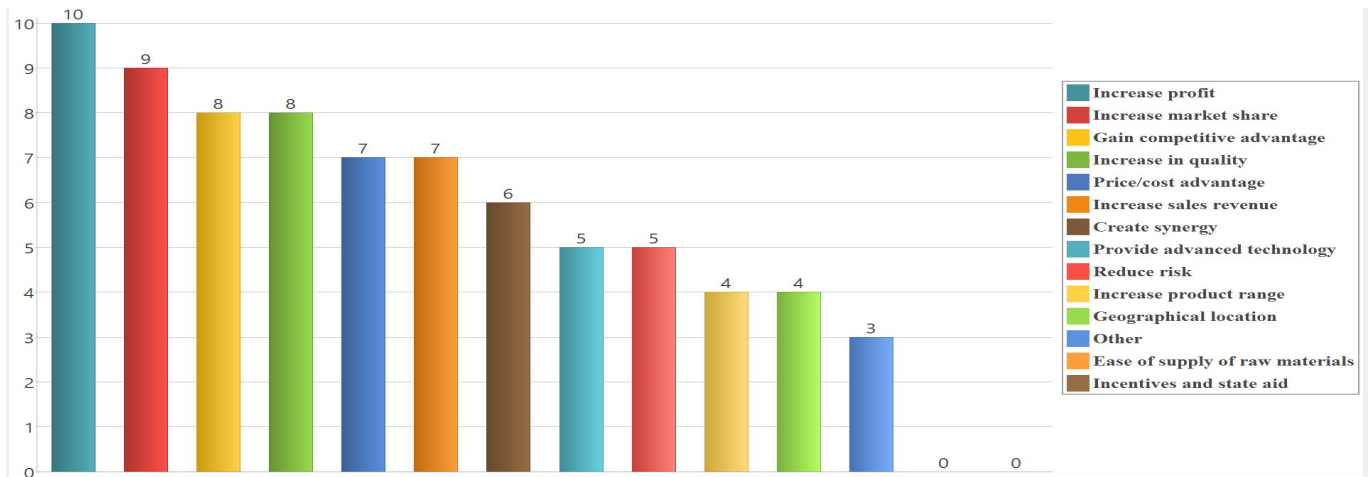


Figure 5. Reasons for growth

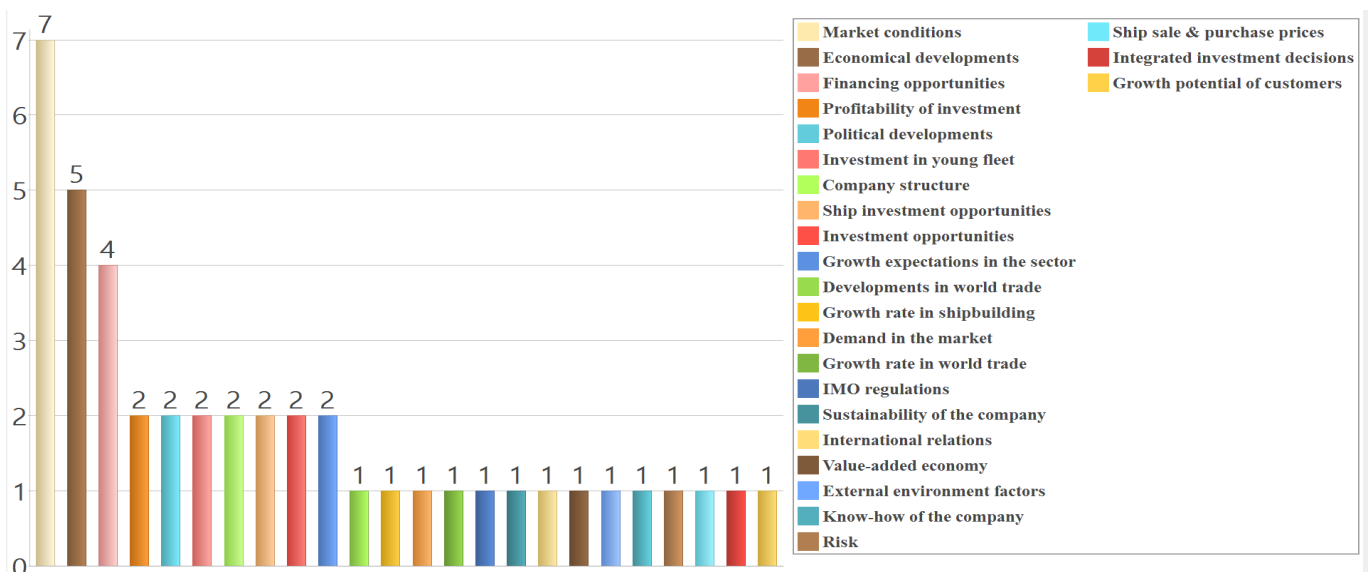


Figure 6. Growth strategy determinants

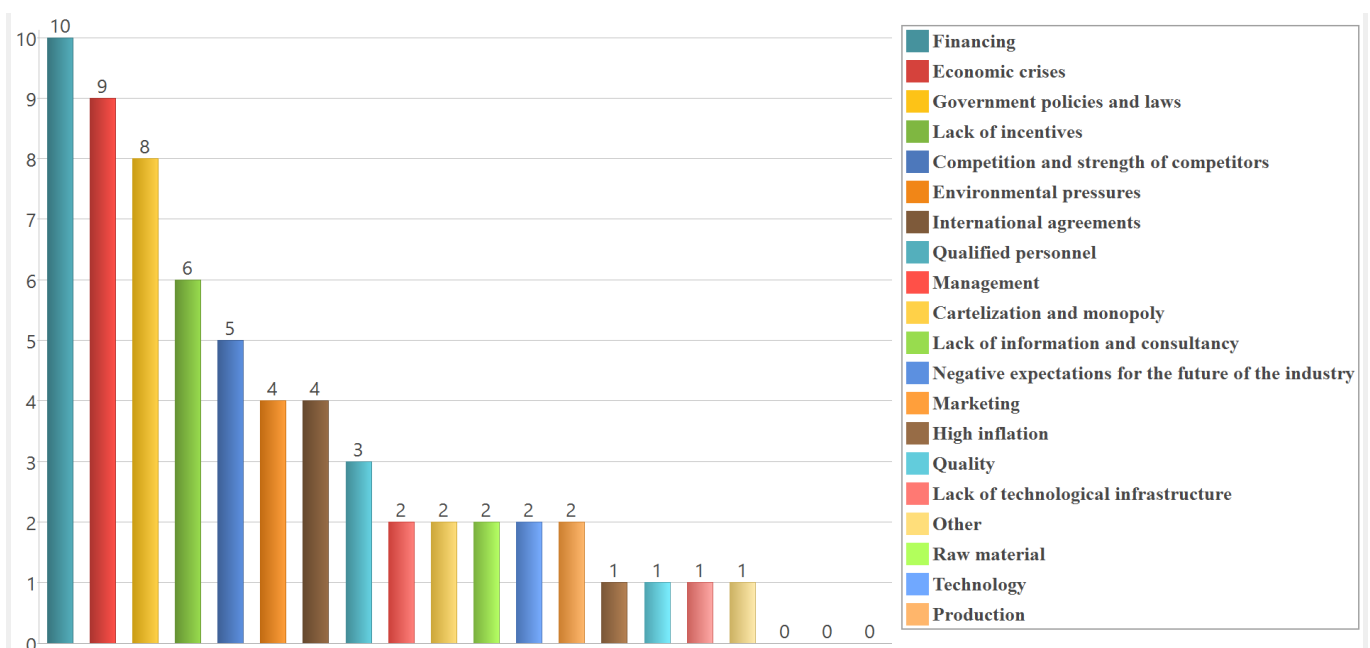


Figure 7. Difficulties in growth process



According to Figure 4, the majority of respondents indicated the qualitative growth of their businesses as becoming a corporate company and gaining a reputation. Providing quality service, self-renewal and development, employing qualified personnel and digitalization are other qualitative growth expressions stated by the participants. It is hardly unexpected from a qualitative standpoint that shipowners prioritize corporation and building a reputation. The transformation of operations into a corporate structure, improvement of service quality, and permanent customer satisfaction and loyalty with the reputation gained as a result are of utmost importance for shipowners operating in a global and competitive industry with so many parties and stakeholders.

In another question, participants were asked to explain the reasons that drive their companies to grow. Responses of the participants are shown in Figure 5.

The results show that increasing the profit and market share are the main reasons that trigger the shipowners to grow. In addition to these, factors such as gaining competitive advantage, increasing quality, providing price/cost advantage, increasing sales revenues, creating synergy, providing advanced technology and reducing risk are among the reasons that encourage growth. These findings led to the conclusion that financial variables account for the majority of the causes of growth. This is hardly unexpected given that the main objective of corporations is to generate a profit. Shipowners go to the path of growth in this highly competitive industry for reasons including being better than their rivals, gaining a bigger market share, and raising the quality of service.

The participants were asked which factors they considered while determining the growth strategy, and the answers given are shown in Figure 6.

According to Figure 6, market conditions, economic developments and financing opportunities are among the factors that shipowners frequently consider while determining their growth strategy. Profitability of investment, political developments in the country, younger fleet and ship investments, company structure, investment opportunities and growth expectations in the sector are among the other growth strategy determinants. Due to the volatility and unpredictability of the tramp shipping sector, shipowners must consider economic and market trends while deciding how to grow. Shipowners must continually monitor changes, detect bad circumstances such as crises, etc., and additionally they must respond appropriately in order to handle such dynamic and unpredictable market structures.

Finally, the participants answered the question of what kind of difficulties their companies faced during the growth process. The answers of the participants regarding the growth barriers are given in Figure 7.

## **Discussion**

Organizations' heightened vulnerability to geopolitical and technical shocks, shifting consumer preferences, and the protracted consequences of the economic slump all result in organizational shocks and disruptions as a result of globalization. In order to survive and grow, the maritime sector must manage issues with both internal and external disruptive occurrences (Akpınar & Özer Çaylan, 2022).

The purpose of this study is to look into the growth strategy preferences of Turkish shipowners engaged in tramp shipping sector. Therefore, it has been attempted to determine the views of Turkish shipowners operating in the tramp shipping sector on issues such as the concept of growth, the factors affecting growth, and the problems encountered while growing.

When asked to explain the concept of growth, the participants tended to emphasize the increase in the number of ships, and it was found that they connected the growth of their businesses with the expansion of the fleet. This situation exemplifies the resource-based approach, which emphasizes the importance of resources in the growth of firms and gaining competitive advantage (Rumelt, 1984; Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). The increase in the number of ships, which is one of the most important assets for shipowners, is an important indicator for the growth of the company.

The majority of the participants stated the quantitative growth of their organisations as the increase in the number of ships. This situation can be given as an example of the change-in-amount perspective. According to this perspective, growth can be measured using a variety of different measures, with sales, employment, assets, physical output, market share, and profits being the most frequently recommended (Delmar, 1997; Weinzimmer, et al., 1998; Wiklund, 1998). More precise measures (Bolton, 1971) such the number of seats in restaurants or theaters, may be taken into account in within-industry studies as in this study. Growth in terms of quality has been associated with corporate business, gaining reputation and improving service quality.

According to the results of the study; the reasons for the growth of the companies were determined as increasing the profit, increasing the market share, gaining competitive advantage and increasing the service quality. These results are not surprising because for all businesses, the basic objective is

to generate a profit in order to maintain their competitive advantage. Some of the findings concur with those reported in the literature. Indicators such as increased number of employees, increased sales, increased profits, increased market share, and continued growth/competitive advantage are examples of findings in the literature (Flamholtz & Randle, 1990; Holmes & Zimmer, 1994; Howard, 2005).

When the participants were asked about which factors they took into account while determining their growth strategy, factors such as the market conditions, economic developments and the availability of financing opportunities were the factors that came to the fore. The dynamic and uncertain market structure of the tramp shipping sector leads shipowners to follow market conditions and economic developments while making growth decisions. At this point, the elements of the dynamic capabilities approach come into play and the effect of environmental conditions manifests itself. Such dynamic and uncertain market structure requires managers to constantly follow developments, to sense negative situations such as crisis etc., and to take precautions to these situations. Moreover, it forces them to look for and seize opportunities and resources such as financing to make the most profitable investment. Lastly, these opportunities and resources are reconfigured according to changing market and environmental conditions (Henderson & Cockburn, 1994; Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Augier & Teece, 2009; Saarni, 2013; Teece, 2016; Hussein & Song, 2022).

Finally, the participants were asked about the barriers they faced during growth. The vast majority of respondents cited financing, economic crises, and government policies and laws as barriers to growth. In the literature, capital availability, provision of external debt and equity capital appear as growth barriers (Orser et al., 2000; Becchetti & Trovato, 2002). In Wilson's study, it is stated that economic crises do not create a growth barrier for small-scale companies; however large-scale companies continue to take defensive actions in times of economic crisis (Wilson & Eilertsen, 2010). Gupta et al. (2013) categorized the growth barriers as institutional and financial. Issues such as the enterprise's interactions with the government, as well as matters of legality, taxation constitute institutional barriers. Financial difficulties will include a shortage of financial resources (Gupta et al., 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The vast majority of maritime traffic is made up of bulk goods, which are transported by tramp shipping. This illustrates that the majority of maritime transport operations

are conducted using the tramp shipping activities. In the tramp shipping sector, which is a dynamic and uncertain sector affected by many environmental variables, it is of great importance for shipowners to survive and grow.

In the light of the interviews, it has been observed that the majority of shipowners' businesses are family businesses and managed by the founding entrepreneur or second-generation family member. Shipowners that engage in tramp shipping sector must make the best use of their resources to thrive, continuously scan the market for opportunities and threats, and take appropriate action in response. Many elements, from economic to political, are at play in determining the growth strategy. Additionally, they should adjust their investment strategies and resources in accordance with the external environment and look for methods to develop a competitive advantage by growing in this competitive sector. In addition to the factors affecting growth, the problems experienced by shipowners while growing are also discussed. While the majority of the shipowners mentioned the difficulty of accessing finance, they also emphasized the external environmental factors. Economic crises and government policies and laws are also among the problems that hinder growth.

The opinions of businesses engaged in tramp shipping sector on growth were investigated as part of this exploratory research. It is anticipated that this study will lead the future researches in this field and contribute to the sector and related literature in these respects. In future studies, it is thought that it will be useful to expand the sample and repeat the studies on shipowner companies in the tramp sector, to compare the results according to variables such as company structure and managerial characteristics and the practices in different sectors of maritime, and to get the opinions of other stakeholders in the sector.

The research has some limitations. Due to the pandemic conditions and the busy schedule and time constraints of the managers in the shipowning companies, there were difficulties in reaching key people, and this led to a limited number of meetings. Again, depending on the increase in the number of samples, quantitative methods can be added for future studies and compared with the results of this study.

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## Compliance With Ethical Standards

### Authors' Contributions

İAD: Conceptualization, Methodology, Collection of the data, Data analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing.

GDS: Supervision, Methodology, Writing – Review and Editing.

Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Approval

Ethical approval received for semi-structured interview from Dokuz Eylül University, Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee, 26.05.2021, E-87347630-640.99-59302.

### Data Availability Statements

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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