



Export Performance Perception by Managers of Family-Owned Agri-Food SMEs in Morocco: An Exploratory Case Study

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SUMMARY : The perception of export performance has been the subject of several studies in the context of developed economies, it is in this sense that we will try to understand this problem in developing countries, in this case, Morocco.

This communication will deal with the concept of export performance and particularly its perception by the managers of family agri-food SMEs in Morocco, in other words this work seeks to provide elements of answers to the following questions: How do the owner-managers of family agri-food SMEs perceive the export performance of their companies? Do the managers of these companies use the same determinants and the same variables for measuring export performance ? To answer this problem, we will undertake an exploratory study with a sample of managers of family agri-food exporting SMEs in Morocco.

Keywords : perception, export performance, SME, family business, agri-food. Keywords : perception, export performance, SME, family business, agri-food.

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Introduction

An organization is a group of actors with different expectations, objectives, and actions, which impact their views on things. Indeed, as stated by Germain C. and Trébucq S. (2004), people belonging to the same organization have values or points of view associated with their professions, their training, or their positions... which can give rise to a differentiation in values and points of view.

Even if many researchers strive to define the concept of performance and its determining factors, many of them have neglected the vision of the stakeholders of the company. In this regard, the vision of the manager appears to us to be essential and of capital importance for the daily life and the future of the SME. It is also about the way in which the manager determines and evaluates the achievements of his company, we are talking about the perception of performance by SME managers.

In our case, we choose to visualize the perception of export performance by the managers of family-owned agri-food SMEs in Morocco. In other words, we will see whether the perceptions of the managers converge or diverge and to what extent?

The subject of the perception of export performance has been the subject of much ink, and it is clear that almost all research has been conducted in a developed country context. This is why we will proceed to explore the perception of export performance of Moroccan owner-managers of family-owned agri-food SMEs in developing countries, in this case, Morocco.

To illustrate this question, we will first present a definition of the key concepts, followed by an exploratory study of family-owned SMEs in Morocco operating in the agri-food sector to detect their perception of export performance.

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

1.1 Definition of the Family Business

Despite their importance, a review of numerous writings reveals a lack of consensus on the definition of the family business; this is due to the fact that the family business cannot be defined either through legal forms or specific sizes; the study of this type of business is complex given the lack of consensus on the definition of the family business at the academic and professional level.

According to the set of definitions listed, we can distinguish between two types of definition: monocriterial definitions and multicriterial definitions.

Monocriterial definitions retain either the ownership criterion, the control criterion, or the family/business interaction criterion to characterize the family or non-family nature of the business; multicriterial definitions generally retain ownership and control, which are jointly retained, with a more or less important degree of precision and the involvement of the family in the business. (Mme Moumou Ouerdia 2015)

What is a family business? According to the report of the group of experts submitted to the European Commission, Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry, in November 2009,

"A family business is a business in which the majority of the voting rights are held by the individual(s) who created the business, or by the individual(s) who acquired the capital of the business, or by their spouses, parents or children or by the direct heirs of their children and in which at least one family representative formally participates in the governance of the business. Listed companies fall within the definition of a family business if the persons who created or acquired the business (capital) or their family or descendants hold 25% of the voting rights arising from their capital".

The distinction between a family business and a heritage business is important from a scientific point of view. These two categories of businesses are certainly based on a common ground: their capital is majority-owned, in the theoretical ideal, by their managers, which is a major distinguishing feature compared to other forms of private organizations, particularly managerial firms, whose capital is dispersed, and controlled firms whose capital is held by another company or group (Charreaux, 1991).

It is true that heritage businesses cover a wider reality than family businesses; the managers of the former are individuals without family ties, while the managers of the latter are necessarily united by family ties and are most often the descendants of the founder of the business. (Thierry Poulain-Rehm 2006).

A family business is defined as an entity whose capital is majority-owned by members of the same family and in which at least two directors are from the same family. In other words, a company is a family business to the extent that the family controls the majority of ownership or voting rights and one or more of its members hold management positions. These are generally composed of the father, the wife, and most often

The heirs in a succession perspective. A company therefore only becomes a family business after the second generation.

1.2 Performance in SMEs

Performance measurement is carried out according to two complementary approaches: an objective approach based on numerical data (profitability ratios, sales growth rates, etc.) and another subjective

approach based on the perception of the organization's stakeholders, particularly the owner-managers of the company (attitudes and achievements, motivation, satisfaction, etc.).

From the above, we can understand performance as the behavior of the organization's stakeholders in relation to environmental references that can be endogenous or exogenous (Bonvoisin, 2011).

SMEs represent more than 95% of the fabric of enterprises, play an important role in the creation of jobs and value added for the economy in general, which requires these entities to have a performance measurement system, in order to face the changes in the international environment and competition (Boutary and Monnoyer, 2014).

(Gilbert and Charpentier, 2004) describe performance as a word with different meanings depending on the context of use and the fields in which it is used; the notion of performance is therefore extremely relative: a system that seems to work for some does not necessarily work for others.

The organization is a group of actors with different expectations, objectives and actions, which impact their views on things. Indeed, as stated by (Germain C., Trébucq S. (2004): "people belonging to the same organization have values or points of view associated with their professions, their training, their positions... have a divergence in the valuation of things".

In our case, we choose to examine the perception of export performance by the managers of family-owned agri-food SMEs in Morocco, otherwise we will see whether the perception of the managers converges or diverges and to what extent.

1.1.1 Definition of Export Performance

Export performance is defined as the composite result of a company's international sales, including three sub-dimensions : export sales, export profitability and export growth (Shoham, 1998 cited by C. Maurel 2010). It therefore reflects the result of a company's export activity.

According to Deshpande et al. (1993) cited by Y. Alami (2013), three considerations for choosing the dimensions of export performance are essential :

Export performance is multidimensional according to theoretical and empirical contributions, this variety gives rise to objective and subjective measurement criteria.

Export performance measures are the result of the strategic behavior of any company, so the subject of export performance measurement remains without consensus.

The structures of export markets affect the conditions of exportation, which in turn affect export performance.

The last decade has seen an abundance of research related to export performance, but no consensual definition of this concept seems to have emerged from the literature; despite the importance and number of research published, the subject is seen as one of the areas of marketing "the most documented and least understood" (Sousa et al.2008).

In general, the definition of export performance is an issue that always arises and is difficult to define, due to the problems related to its determination and measurement.

1.1.2 Measurement of Export Performance

The literature always proposes two classifications for measuring export performance : one determines the nature of the criteria used (qualitative/quantitative) and the other the basis for operationalizing the construct, namely objective and subjective measures.

The evaluation of export performance has also been the subject of several studies. Whether they are literature reviews on evaluation methods (Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000; Sousa 2004), the presentation of an export performance measurement scale (Zou, Taylor and Osland, 1998; Lages and Lages, 2004) or empirical studies.

For companies, export success indicates the extent to which the company's and the manager's objectives are oriented, both economic and non-economic, in an international context at a given time, and reflects the adequacy of the chosen export strategy to successfully meet the objectives of the market, the company's circumstances and the environment.

Since exporting is a strategic choice for a company Objectives may vary depending on the company, the manager's aspirations, the sector of activity, the national context and the time horizon. This gives rise to several export performance indicators, of which the literature has devoted a plethora of export performance indicators, For example Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan (2000), in their analysis of 100 export-related articles, identified 42 different performance indicators, more recently Sousa (2004), in his analysis of articles on export performance published between 1998 and 2004, identified 50 different performance indicators.

The wide range of indicators used in the literature on export performance reflects the difficulties of access

to export performance data, as well as the ongoing search for coherent and comprehensive measures, which makes it very difficult to compare and validate the results of different studies.

An overview of the relevant literature implies that a conceptually reliable measure of export performance must meet the following criteria:

1. It must be composite and multidimensional, including both objective and subjective measures.
2. Have a reference, i.e. be able to be compared to domestic market performance, competitor performance or past performance.
3. Be able to be evaluated over time, i.e. expressed in absolute and relative terms.
4. It must reflect the company's strategic objectives and over an appropriate time horizon (short or long term) (Diamantopoulos and Kakkos, 2007).

The objective/subjective division refers to the type of values used in the evaluation of export performance, i.e. objective indicators are mainly based on absolute values (e.g. export sales volume, export profit margin, export market share, etc.), while subjective indicators are based on perceptual values (e.g. manager's perception of success and satisfaction with export sales).

This work gives rise to several families of indicators:

- **Economic or accounting indicators:** export market share, export profit, percentage of export sales, etc.
- **Non-economic or strategic indicators:** new countries served, new products exported, number of export markets, etc.
- **Generic or subjective indicators:** manager's satisfaction with his success, achievement of objectives, manager's perception of export performance, etc.

In the literature review (Katsikeas, Leonidou and Morgan, 2000; Sousa 2004 cited by C. Maurel (2010) the most used indicators are: the ratio of export sales to total sales (export intensity), the export sales growth rate, export profitability, export market share, satisfaction with overall export performance and perceived export success (qualitative and quantitative indicators).

Many authors emphasize the need to use several indicators for a good representation of the dimensions of export performance (Shoham 2008), which is why export performance measurement scales have emerged.

Table 1 : Export performance measurement scales

<i>Authors</i>	Dimensions considered
Cavusgil et Zou (1994)	Achievement of strategic objectives Annual growth rate over 5 years Overall profitability over 5 years Perceived export project success by the manager
Shoham (1998)	Sales Profits
Zou, Taylor et Osland (1998)	Financial export performance Strategic export performance perceived export performance
Katsikeas, Leonidou et Morgan (2000)	Economic measures Non-economic measures Generic measures
Lages et Lages (2004)	Satisfaction linked to the improvement in export performance at CT Improvement of export intensity at CT Expected improvement in export performance

C.MAUREL (2010) op. Quoted

According to the table, there are three subjective and dynamic scales (integrating the respondent's perception of the evolution of performance).

- The EXPERF-scale measures export performance through three dimensions including quantitative and qualitative measures; the EXPERF-scale was used by Castaldi, Sengupta and Silverman (2003) cited by C.Maurel (2010), while the STEP-scale focuses on three dimensions of perceived export performance, and finally the composite scale of Shoham (1998) integrating the notions of intensity, profitability and change.

1. The perception of export performance by the owner-managers of family SMEs

Performance is an essential theme in organizational management, it is inscribed as a condition for the sustainability of an economic project analyzed as an original organizational assembly, inscribed in a complex competitive environment, serving multiple stakeholders, open to society. It is thus the result of a collective construct made up of individual actions, interrelationships between partners, and integration into a process. It is nourished by the context in which the observation is located and is linked to the object of interest and its evolution. In fact, such a concept presents itself without limit as the meanings overlap within a project and go beyond it. It appears formless because of the relative disproportion of the conceptions for stakeholders with specific logics and interests, often divergent, who associate and are affected by the realization of the same project. (Ch. Cadiou 2008).

The polysemic nature of the word performance in the field of management was very early on noted by Bourguignon (1995, 1997) who identified multiple "meanings" to the same "signifier" that is performance.

This multi-dimensionality is accentuated in the context of SMEs marked by the ubiquity and versatility of the owner-manager, resulting in a strong influence of their personal objectives on their conception of performance. The latter is no longer limited to growth and/or profitability but can extend to more personal meanings such as fulfillment, social recognition, personal satisfaction, improvement of the quality of life, etc. (Jaouen, 2010, ST-Pierre and Cadieux, 2011).

Table 2 : Types of "performance" according to SME owner-managers

Performance type	Indicators used in the literature	Authors
Personal performance	Personal performance Social recognition Personal heritage Quality of life Independence and autonomy	- Gray (2002) - Greenbank (2001) - Le Cornuet al. (1996) - Reijonen et Komppula (2007) - Walker et Brown (2004)
Economic Performance	Growth Size of the company Liquidity to preserve autonomy and ensure business growth Ability of the business to generate sufficient income Financial health Satisfying customer needs Quality of the product or service offered	- Getz et Petersen (2005) - Greenbank (2001) - Gundry et Welsch (2001) - Le Cornuet al. (1996) - Morris et al. (2006) - Székely et Knorsch (2005) - Walker et Brown (2004)
Sustainable performance (Social and environmental)	Maintaining jobs Investment in society Staff quality of life Company reputation Balance between financial health, social involvement and respect for the environment	Getz et Petersen (2005) Greenbank (2001) Gundry et Welsch (2001) Morris et al. (2006) Székely et Knorsch (2005)

Source : St-Pierre and Cadieux (2011), pp : 39-40.

3. Research methodology

This paper aims to present the results of a study conducted among managers of family SMEs in the agri-food sector in Morocco. Our research is fundamentally exploratory and is based on the perception of managers vis-à-vis of the criteria for determining international performance.

Our sample was constituted on the basis of the following criteria :

- The permanent workforce must be less than 250 employees as a size criterion for our SME ;
- For the family business criterion, we rely on the ownership of capital, which must be majority (at least 75%) owned by the owner-manager;
- SMEs must have been on the export market for at least 3 years;
- The respondent to the questionnaire must be the owner-manager himself.

To carry out our exploratory survey, we contacted 21 family SMEs in two regions of the kingdom, namely (Casablanca Settat and Souss-Massa.) by email because of the covid 19, using an interview guide that revolves around three fundamental questions on export performance and its perception as follows:

- Could you give m'a little definition of business performance ?
- What meaning is attached to export performance ?
- What are the objectives pursued for the success of your company abroad?

We received 6 responses from the SMEs solicited by email, and this reduced number of responses led us to opt for a content analysis.

The different characteristics of the SMEs in our sample are summarized in this table :

SME	Sector	Workforce	SME Age	Duration in export
Alpha	Fresh vegetables and fruits	75	15	10
Gama	Citrus fruits	125	8	5
Beta	Processed vegetable products	36	12	7
Delta	Citrus fruits	85	23	11
Sigma	Fresh vegetables and fruits	45	17	9
volta	Seafood	50	10	4

4- Discussion and analysis of results

We will present the results from the interview guides with the six companies mentioned below and then discuss this data.

SME ALPHA : Export performance is perceived by the owner-manager of Alpha as the achievement of objectives set in advance; for him, performance must take into account both measurable quantitative criteria (optimization of production and improvement of turnover, widening of product ranges, etc.) and the respect of the company's commitments to stakeholders, in order to maintain its image and reputation in the market, whether domestic or international. For him, customer satisfaction and loyalty, a clear strategic vision, an optimal organization, and an information and communication system are the signs of a performing organization.

SME BETA : Performance is generally the company's ability to generate revenue to ensure its growth and maintain its position against competitors. For export performance, it is about improving market share and diversifying international markets. But this cannot be achieved only through the granting of a very important relational capital with suppliers and customers to retain them, therefore for me the satisfaction of these customers is a guarantee of the achievement of good services on the world market, adding that

our company strives to carry out training to improve the learning and skills of our human resources, "no wealth without people".

SME GAMA: The owner-manager of Gama states that performance in general, and export performance in particular, is only the profitability of international business, by multiplying turnover and market share.

Performance is the satisfaction of personal expectations as well as those of family members in order to maintain a social climate within the company and minimize malfunctions and family conflicts, the involvement of family members and their empowerment are axes that have positive effects on the performance and results of our company and have a competitive advantage on the market that impacts the export performance of our company.

SME DELTA : As the owner-manager of Delta, the perception of export performance is to have a good reputation on the market, it is the maintenance and improvement of market share. Without forgetting that our satisfaction with the achievement of objectives must be in parallel with the satisfaction of our customers, as well as the motivation of family members through communication, clarity and transparency for the well-being and survival of our company, this directly influences the performance of our company's export, without forgetting that the good relationships we have with our partners, the State and the staff are linked to performance.

SME SIGMA : For us, performance is to achieve a good turnover against the rivals in our sector of activity. While for export performance, in addition to the previously mentioned criteria, it must reflect the objectives of the company and that of the family which can have a positive effect on our competitive advantage over our competitors and improve our results on the export market, therefore for me customer satisfaction and loyalty, conquest of new markets, differentiation by innovation.

SME VOLTA : For SME Volta, the perception of export performance is only the contribution to the well-being of the company and the family. Indeed, the achievement of my objectives, which are those of my family to be socially recognized "self-esteem" is essential, having a quality image of "good boss" and respecting commitments to better meet expectations is necessary, those of our customers and our employees and those of our partners (suppliers, bankers, taxes) are also determining axes of the performance of our company on the export market.

The results of our study show that the majority of owner-managers of family agri-food SMEs in Morocco perceive the export performance of their companies through both quantitative and qualitative indicators.

As a synthesis, we can say that the results of six interview guides show that the different perceptions of

export performance converge towards theoretical and conceptual approaches considering performance as a matter of perception and which depends, among other things, on the individual, cultural and entrepreneurial characteristics of the owner-managers of the family SME (ST-Pierre and Cadieux, 2011).

Conclusion

While performance is an integral part of the short- and long-term objectives of SME managers, its perception is not unanimous in the professional and academic world. It is in this perspective that this paper aims to bring, beyond the criteria already present in the literature, other criteria likely to better reflect the perception of performance by SME managers operating in the Moroccan context and more precisely family SMEs in the agri-food sector.

From the interviews conducted with the managers of family SMEs, it appears that the conception of performance depends on the objectives pursued, the personal purpose, the family objectives, the satisfaction of stakeholders, the importance given to the community and the staff.

This study shows that the perception of performance by managers of family SMEs involves the constant search for a balance between the financial/business aspect and the objectives/family. Indeed, the diversity of behaviors of managers of family SMEs, in terms of perception of export performance and their managerial choices, can be justified by the ubiquity and versatility of SME owner-managers, which has a strong influence on their personal objectives on the conception of export performance. Export performance is no longer limited to growth and/or profitability but can extend to more personal meanings such as fulfillment, social recognition, personal satisfaction, improvement of the quality of life, etc. (Jaouen, 2010, ST-Pierre and Cadieux, 2011).

The relative importance given to financial indicators and the need to value qualitative variables that finely reflect the different actions of the managerial intention of SME managers are also noted.

This study has several limitations, including:

- Our study was conducted during the covid 19 pandemic crisis, which reduced our mobility and our efforts to carry out our research properly, so another study in good conditions is desirable.
- The size of our sample is very small. Generalizing the results is impossible. A quantitative approach can confirm our results.

On the other hand, we consider that the responses of the respondents provide valuable data for research on the perception of export performance. For this purpose, future research on other organizational areas, such as manufacturing and services, can reconfirm our results with greater generalization.

- Conduct a comparative study between family SMEs and non-family SMEs, or a study between Moroccan family SMEs and SMEs in the developed world.

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