



Firm growth in African countries: Do cultural attributes matter?

Evidence from Morocco

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Abstract: In this paper, we provide a discussion on the importance of culture, and its interdependence with individuals motivation for persuading growth. There is a great deal of research on SME growth, but most of it focuses on developed countries (Davidsson and Wiklund, 2008). The controversial role of institutions (Formal and informal) in this process leads us to question the place of informal institutions (Norms, culture, values...etc), and in particular the individual culture of managers, in the analysis of SME growth. By carrying out an exploratory study of Moroccan small and medium-sized enterprise managers and experts, we showcase those cultural aspects such as time orientation, intolerance of uncertainty, fatalism, family background and network can have an impact on SME growth.

Key Words: SME, Growth, Manager, Entrepreneur, Cultural attributes, Morocco.

1.INTRODUCTION

Like many other countries on the African continent, Morocco has embarked on a long process of economic diversification in recent years, through major structuring projects that are having a significant impact on economic growth, export structure and foreign investment. Major reforms have also been implemented to improve the business climate, simplify business start-up procedures and promote entrepreneurship, with the aim of reducing the backwardness accumulated in the area of competitiveness. The aim of these major transformation processes is to improve the country's economic growth, raise it from the position of a developing country, and strengthen its competitiveness in the global marketplace. Morocco, as an African country, has long realized that this cannot happen without the development of its economic fabric, particularly its small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of the Moroccan economy and which will accompany the transition process of the Moroccan economy towards one attracted by efficiency (GEM, 2015).

Morocco is now experiencing a dynamic trend in business start-ups, between 2009 and 2017, the number of business start-ups rose from 25,151 to 36,040, according to Inforisk (Inforisk, 2018), surpassing the number of business start-ups in neighboring Tunisia and Algeria. However, despite this numerical growth in business creations, and the strong participation of SMEs in economic growth combined with the mobilization of public authorities, Moroccan businesses remain relatively small in size (Boumaize, 2016). According to the latest figures from the official website of the Moroccan Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies, of all Moroccan companies registered in the trade register for 2018, 50% are still VSEs (very small enterprises), i.e. they employ fewer than five employees and generate sales of no more than three million dirhams.

The growth of SMEs is therefore a major concern for the Moroccan public authorities, particularly given the rate of business failures (over 5,700 businesses in 2015, followed by over 8,000 businesses in 2017, and 7,941 in 2018 compared with 2,062 businesses in 2009). These rates remain worrying, especially for a country like Morocco, which is experiencing a steadily rising youth unemployment rate (10.6% in Q3 2018 vs. 10.2% in the same period in 2017), strong competitiveness on the part of neighboring countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey, and on the part of sub-Saharan countries, particularly with the renewed interest of industrialized countries in Africa. Moroccan SMEs are obliged to develop and grow in order to meet national and global requirements.

The development of the Moroccan SME depends essentially on the will of its manager, who represents its main nerve center (Ait Oufkir&ouhadi, 2020). Any attempt to understand the reality and constraints of this category of business without including this figure in the equation would be a fruitless endeavor.

Empirical management research has focused extensively on the factors that explain SME growth, linked to the

ontological or praxeological characteristics of the manager, but few have taken the cultural dimension into account (Boubakary, 2015). Yet culture provides a framework for perceiving the action of the individual entrepreneur, resulting in a continuous contingency between the individual with his or her individualistic values, norms and perceptions, enabling him or her to form his or her own representations of entrepreneurial action.

This cultural dimension, which has been insufficiently addressed in research, is open to criticism. The individual's perception of the opportunities available is undeniably influenced by the surrounding society and culture, and conditions his or her actions, attitudes and behavior. Penrose (1958), for example, demonstrated the importance of the cultural value systems held by the managers of growing companies in interpreting their environments and shaping their desire to grow. The research question we ask is: **"To what extent do manager's cultural attributes impact the growth of Moroccan SME?"**

To answer our research question, we carried out a qualitative exploratory study among managers and experts in entrepreneurship and SME growth in Morocco, particularly in the Marrakech-Safi region. In this paper, we first discuss the specific contextual features of Moroccan SMEs and their managerial class features. Next, we present our methodological choices. Finally, we discuss how the cultural aspects of manager-entrepreneurs might be relevant the growth of Moroccan SMEs.

1.1 Specific features of Moroccan SMEs: Moroccan SMEs

In all the world's economies, SMEs play a central role in the economic fabric. As a result, the development of the entire economy depends on the development of the SME fabric. They play a major role in creating wealth and employment in countries at all levels of development.

According to the OECD report, given the weight of the informal sector in the Moroccan economy, it remains very difficult to quantify the exact number of SMEs operating in Morocco. However, the Moroccan context is not very different from that of emerging countries and the MENA region. Considered as an economic lever, Moroccan small and medium-sized enterprises, like most SMEs worldwide, account for more than 97% of all businesses nationwide (Khaddouj, 2014). Indeed, our economy's SMEs employ 50% of the workforce and generate 21% of added value, 31% of exports, 41% of national production and 50% of investment volume. (Khaddouj 2014, Aftiss 2012, Mohallab 2016). However, the current lack of statistical repertory makes visibility on the behavior of SMEs today very limited (El GOUMIRI, 2017).

According to a study carried out by Inforisk (2011) and based on the definition of the SME charter, there were 57,754 companies with sales of less than 75 million dirhams for the period 2008 and 2009. Of these companies, 96% had sales of less than MAD 3 million over the last two years. According to figures from the official website of the Moroccan Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies, half (50%) of all Moroccan companies

registered in the trade register up to 2018 are VSEs (very small enterprises)18. These facts illustrate the predominance of SMEs in the Moroccan economic landscape. In terms of sector repartition, the SME sector activities is made up primarily of trade and repair activities (30%), followed by real estate and business services (22%), and manufacturing industries (15%).

Regarding SME's constraints in the Kingdom of Morocco, Mourji and Ali (2001) point out that Moroccan businessmen in general are constantly confronted with multiple constraints of various kinds, some of which are financial, legislative, administrative and legal in nature, while others are specific to the SME and relate to its competitiveness. In other words, their ability to compete in the marketplace is a major threat to their viability. In fact, the factors hindering SME development can be summarized as follows:

- Internal constraints: fragile structure, under-capitalization, lack of technical resources, limited internal financing, weak human and social skills, etc.

- External constraints: red tape, tax disadvantages, costly financing, information asymmetry, etc.

- Structural constraints: difficulty of access to large and foreign markets, etc.

- Cyclical constraints: the financial crisis, the recession of major European principals, etc.

All these constraints point to a certain vulnerability of these structures. The alarming statistics of Moroccan SMEs disappearing in their early stages of life, even in times of crisis (nearly 142,000 SMEs stopped or permanently suspended their activities during the COVID19 period) draw more concerns and calls for a more serious governmental strategy support and upgrade.

1.2 The Moroccan SME's managerial class features

According to Gourmat (2007), two categories of SME managers belonging to two different generations coexist in Morocco, one illiterate and traditional, the other reputedly literate and modern, in parallel with the distinction made by Smith (1967) who distinguishes between the "Artisan" entrepreneur and the "Opportunist" entrepreneur.

On the one hand, the Moroccan manager of the older generation, despite the fact that he probably didn't have access to schooling, counters the lack of academic training with the expression of a know-how capitalized on all the experiences he lives through on a daily basis. However, he finds a reluctance to share control, a difficulty in recognizing the skills of others. Gourmat (2007) explains that this is due to the socio-cultural environment in which the old-generation manager was brought up, his education, his fear of the power of the State, his entourage and his relationship with those in power, all of which are rooted in his mentality.

On the other hand, and in contrast to the previous profile, the modern, literate manager who symbolizes the new generation of managers is more open-minded, ambitious and risk-taker, has less reluctance towards the unknown

and no fear of uncertainty, adopts a participative style of management, involving all staff in decision-making, overcomes hierarchical rigidities and relies on employee's motivation as a guarantor of good performance (Gourmat, 2007).

Benikkour (2011), studying the profile of Moroccan managers and decision-making, concludes that the Moroccan SME manager is a strategic player who centralizes decision-making and prefers not to involve his colleagues in this process. The author explains this by the Moroccan manager's desire to control all stages of the decision-making process and minimize the risks associated with choosing a solution or a decision.

The divergence in the profiles of Moroccan business leaders may be due to a number of influencing factors, notably their socio-cultural origins. Ali and Wahabi (1995) sought to characterize the profiles of Moroccan managers by analyzing their value systems and their influence on their behavior. Their results reveal the existence of four typical profiles of Moroccan managers: firstly, the manager focused on self-interest and short-term profit, rather authoritarian and unconcerned with the feelings of others; the "manipulative" who has succeeded thanks to his network of relations and/or political maneuvers, and who is primarily materialistic, seeking gain and power; the "citizen" manager who is open to the environment, develops a pleasant working climate and shares the company's profits with employees; and the "tribal" manager, who centralizes decision-making and surrounds himself with his family to manage his business. The authors conclude that the profile of the self-interested manager is dominant. (Benabdejalil,2007).

In short, in Morocco, the profile of the entrepreneurship-manager cannot be reduced to a singular type. A taxonomy of profiles coexists, forged without escape, under the influence of a rich cultural, social and societal heritage. The profile of this central figure is decisive in determining the strategic trajectory of the SME.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: SME GROWTH AND CULTURAL TRAITS

In both theory and practice, growth remains a subject of inexhaustible debate. According to Dobbs and Hamilton (2007), despite the proliferation of work in this field, it is difficult to form a consensus on a comprehensive theory or definition of corporate growth. Some researchers, such as Davidsson and Wiklund (2009), point out that work on growth continues to produce fragmented knowledge and only serves to multiply confusion on the subject. In this sense, researchers are still faced first and foremost with establishing a definition of growth. As for growth determinants, A great deal of empirical research has focused on the explanatory factors of SME growth linked to the ontological or praxeological characteristics of the manager, but few have taken the cultural dimension into account (Boubakary, 2015). In the following we will try to establish the potential relationship between the two concepts based on previous theoretical works.

2.1 The concept of business growth

Going back to the dictionary¹, it defines the term "growth" as "a development, extension, increase of something". This seemingly straightforward definition refers to the multidimensional nature of the conceptualization of growth, which shows that something grows in time (development) and space (expansion), and has a quantitative character that refers to its measurability (increase in something). Several other definitions can be found in works devoted to the study of growth. According to Nègre (1997), "a company's growth corresponds to an increase in its size over time". Growth refers to a change in size or scope from one period to another. For Verna (1994), "growth is both the action of growing and the result of that action". By this word, the author means both the fact that a company becomes larger and the circumstances of this enlargement.

Penrose (1959), for her part, attributes two meanings to the term growth: on the one hand, growth sometimes simply indicates an increase in sales and, on the other, implies an increase in size or an improvement in quality. In her research, she ends up defining corporate growth as "essentially an evolutionary process based on a cumulative increase in collective knowledge", referring to the dynamic and processual aspect of growth. For his part, Starbuck (1965, cited in Sauvé et al) stresses that "growth is not a spontaneous or random phenomenon, but the consequence of a decision, the decision to hire and/or not to lay off, the decision to increase the level of production in response to an increase in demand, or the decision to stimulate demand". In his definition, the author interprets growth as a goal in itself. Janssen (2009) argues that growth essentially results from an increase in demand for a good or service, quoting "...growth is, in principle, the result of an increase in demand for the firm's products or services. Initially, this will enable the firm to invest in additional factors of production, in order to adapt to the new level of demand". Janssen refers to the complex nature of growth, which involves increasing demand and the consequent need to develop the resources required to meet it. For their part, Achtenhagen et al (2010), following an exploratory study, investigated the different conceptions that entrepreneurs attribute to the concept of growth and found that they refer either to an increase in sales, an increase in the number of employees, an increase in the value of the firm or to internal development. Internal development includes the efficient development of organizational skills and practices.

From the field of entrepreneurship, Covin and Slovin (1997) defend the thesis that growth is an essential element of entrepreneurship, indeed the very essence of entrepreneurship, which makes the relationship between growth and entrepreneurship relevant. This link is very important, especially if we consider the theory of the firm, in which entrepreneurship and growth play an important role. For example, Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund (2002) explore this relationship further, identifying which aspects of growth are part of entrepreneurship and which are not. Indeed, it is suggested that if entrepreneurship is defined as the creation of new economic and other activities, then business growth is an aspect of entrepreneurship that can be achieved through the introduction of new products and services. However, if growth is achieved through the

acquisition of activities that were already managed by firms, then growth is understood as a phenomenon distinct from the field of entrepreneurship (Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund 2002). From these elaborations, it is then clear that growth is an aspect of entrepreneurship if the term is understood in a logic of unprecedented creation and innovation. In research works on performance, the notion of growth is often associated with a form of its measurement, of which it constitutes an indicator alongside others such as profitability, market share, satisfaction of those involved, etc. (Janssen 2001, Witmeur 2008). Finally, given the complex nature of growth, it is understandable that there is heterogeneity in the conceptualizations of growth and the descriptions that circulate, resulting in an inability to attribute a universal definition to this phenomenon. It seems to us that the difficulty of providing a sufficiently clear and precise meaning for the concept is one of the major factors hampering the development of knowledge in this field of research. Indeed, the multiplicity of work in this field can only be seen as an asset when it is accompanied by a genuine effort at conceptualization.

2.2 The role of cultural attributes in SME growth

A great deal of empirical research has focused on the explanatory factors of SME growth linked to the ontological or praxeological characteristics of the manager (Ait Oufkir & Ouhadi, 2020), but few have taken the cultural dimension into account (Boubakary, 2015). Penrose had already shown in 1959 that managers of growing firms have a value system largely oriented towards imagination and vision over long-term horizons, naturally favorable to ambitious development projects. The culturalist current in entrepreneurship research (Shapiro and Sokol 1982; Hayton, George and Zahra 2002) had tried to explain differences in entrepreneurial performance by the cultural dimension. They support the hypothesis that culture, through all its manifestations, influences entrepreneurial activity between individuals in the same group. They concluded that socio-cultural factors shape the acceptability of the entrepreneurial act. Individuals' perception of the opportunities available is undeniably influenced by the surrounding society and culture, and conditions their actions, attitudes and behavior. Indeed, in a projection of the business world, the entrepreneurial dynamics of individuals are often characterized as a conflict between the internalized interests of individuals and their cultural value systems (Terrier, 2012). Culture offers a framework for perceiving the action of the individual entrepreneur, hence a continuous contingency between the individual with his or her individualistic values, norms and perceptions, enabling him or her to form his or her own representations of entrepreneurial action, and the social, which dictates societal norms that invite adjustments. The culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity (Idang, 2015). According to Aziza (2001) "*Culture refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and*

¹ The French dictionary "Larousse"

dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs".

A number of authors have argued in favor of integrating a culturalist approach based on managers' value systems, in order to better understand cognitive characteristics and their influence on managers' enrolment in an entrepreneurial growth path (Ivanaj 1989, Campos and Hormiga 2011, Boukar, 2012, Campos 2014). This research emphasis underlines the importance that cultural manifestations occupy in the subjectivation processes of the entrepreneurial phenomenon. Several models of cultural values have been developed and mobilized in the field of management science, in order to capture the place of culture in the behavior of actors in the corporate world. One of the most widely-used models, and one that recurs frequently in the literature, is Hofstede's model (1991). This model enables us to characterize and measure the salient cultural traits of individuals forming a group or nation. Hofstede (1991) developed a four-dimensional analysis grid that characterizes an individual's behaviors or ways of thinking, reacting and acting in a society. These are hierarchical distance, degree of individualism or collectivism, degree of masculinity or femininity, and attitude to uncertainty and risk. Bond (1998) has added a fifth dimension to Hofstede's (1991) four dimensions: attitude to time. This fifth dimension was prompted by work carried out on Eastern societies. According to Hofstede (1987), these five dimensions can also explain an individual's interest or disinterest in entrepreneurship, depending on the cultural values promoted in society. Several Moroccan authors have deployed Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions model to better characterize the cultural traits of Moroccan society and understand the cultural traits shaping the cognitive patterns and perceptions of Moroccan entrepreneurs and managers (Akremi, 2007, Benabdjalil 2011, Balambo 2013, Bourquia, 2015). Others have gone so far as to question the applicability of the Hofstede model in the specific Moroccan context (Allali, 2008). Acha (2014) argues that values prompt individuals to nurture perceptions that can influence their motivations to engage in entrepreneurial activities such as exploring and exploiting opportunities. Similarly, Acha points out that the dynamic capabilities of companies are necessarily affected by cultural values, because of their influence on organizational norms and practices. Liñan (2008), for his part, asserts that when individuals make complex decisions involving the need to draw up development plans (e.g. growth), personal values play an important role. The higher the priority given to a value; the more likely people are to form action plans that can lead to its expression in behavior. The role of values in decision-making has been a source of considerable interest in the fields of psychology (Schwartz and Boehnke, 2004) and cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 2004). Thus, the values one holds influence how one defines situations, considers alternatives and ultimately chooses a course of action (Holland and Shepherd, 2013).

In their model, Busenitz and Lau (1996), which follows on from the work of Shapero and Sokol (1982) on the influence of socio-cultural characteristics on the desirability of the act of creating a company, consider that the personal values associated with the individual profile of managers determine, in a given social context, the cognition at the

origin of entrepreneurial intention. Other authors have studied the relationship between motivations and values. Higgins (2002) supports the idea that values enable individuals to focus regularly on the reasons for their actions. If people have values, they seek internal consistency in their motives and actions, and use their values to guide their actions and motivations. Values are then used to justify the basic motivations underlying attitudes and behaviors. The link between leaders' values and SME performance has been empirically demonstrated by several authors (Guth and Tagiuri 1965, Kotey and Meredith 1997, D. Pushpakumari 2009, Elicel, 2016, Tesse, 2018), according to these authors, leaders' values strongly influence the company's organizational performance. They find that SME leaders with values such as creativity, achievement and integrity outperform those with conservative values. Hormiga et al (2011) link the leader's personal values (desire for independence, desire for enrichment, sacrifice, security, stability and work-centeredness) and knowledge to explain the differences in start-up growth rates in Spain. According to the authors, a manager's degree of commitment and dedication to his work, which they characterize by the value "centrality of work" and his desire to be his own boss and retain control and autonomy have a positive impact on the growth of his company, they conclude that managers who display a high level of the values "centrality of work", "desire for enrichment" and "desire for independence", record high growth rates, in contrast to managers who display high levels of the values "stability", "sacrifice" and "security", and conclude that the latter have a negative effect on start-up growth. Boukar and Tsapi (2009), in studying the impact of values (family, religion, ethnic solidarity and respect for traditions) of 116 Cameroonian micro-business managers on their company's growth, find that belonging to the Muslim religion and the presence of an entrepreneurial role model in the family have a positive impact on company growth. However, the authors conclude that the values "ethnic solidarity" and "respect for traditions" have a negative impact on growth. On the other hand, Boubakary (2015) argues that values such as "desire for autonomy, altruism and finally ethics" can influence managers' growth orientation. The results of his exploratory study among 114 Cameroonian managers in the Yaoundé region show a positive link between the values "desire for autonomy" and "ethics", while he observes no significant link between "altruism" and company growth. Mobilizing Hofstede's (1980) cultural values model, Saffar and Boubakri (2015) investigate the impact of the "individualism/collectivism" dimension on firm growth, concluding that the "individualism" dimension has a direct effect on firm growth. Their result suggests that in an individualistic society, where the focus is on individual goals, well-being, entrepreneurship and innovation, the propensity of companies to invest and therefore grow is higher. They argue that this dimension of culture influences growth through individual decision-making at the individual level.

Finally, on the basis of these theoretical developments, it emerges that when individuals anticipate being exposed to an entrepreneurial action, they engage in a cognitive process driven by their value systems to assess their ability to cope with it by modifying their attitudes and adopting favorable or unfavorable behavior towards the action. It

thus becomes clear that the manager's value system, at individual, organizational or even societal level, guides the manager's decisions and perceptions, and acts as a regulator of his perceptions and consequently on his entrepreneurial actions in terms of business growth.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the singularity of the Moroccan context in terms of its religious, human, cultural, economic and social specificities, which are completely different from literature models (Allali 2008, Louitri and Sahraoui, 2014), taking into account the particularities of this context therefore lead to borrowing with caution the theoretical models and perspectives presented in Western research works. The present research focuses on the entrepreneur-managers and stakeholders of SMEs as the object of study, the idea being to shed more light on the nerve center of this category of enterprise whose complex specificities never fail to arouse so much interest. These companies play an important role in emerging and developing economies, and deserve to be well represented in the vein of academic research. Literature proposes two approaches to this exploratory qualitative study: the interrogative approach using interview guides and questionnaires, and the associative approach. In our case, the interrogative method was based on semi-directive interviews. To achieve this objective, we conducted semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of Moroccan SMEs. Our study focused on the Marrakech-Safi region of Morocco. Expert interviewees operating in different fields (consultancy of SMEs, managers of SMEs, institutionalist and sociologist) were selected on the basis of their participation in academic events and conferences on SME-related topics. We also used the snowball method to select other interviewees. This involved making use of our network of contacts by asking each interviewee to put us in touch with other people who might be able to provide answers and insights to our questions. In all, nine (9) in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of eight months, lasting between forty-five (45) minutes and one hour and twenty (1h30) minutes (Table 1). Several themes were discussed with these experts, focusing on the interviewees' conception of growth and the main factors and determinants favoring SME growth in Morocco, including individual cultural factors, as we wanted to find out whether the reduced Moroccan culture, with its cultural values, was considered an important element by our interviewees (Table 2).

Two fundamental axes formed our interview guide:

- The Moroccan entrepreneur-manager's conceptualization of company growth.
- The cultural values of the Moroccan manager and their relationship with company growth.

The analysis was based on transcripts of all the interviews conducted with the interviewees. A Word file was created for each interview. Once this transcription work was completed, we proceeded to read the verbatim in greater or lesser depth, in order to gain an initial overview of the data to be analyzed, and to synthesize it with a view to conducting analyses relevant to our research question. In

fact, this transcription work generated a large mass of data that needed to be processed and organized in order to arrive at more relevant conclusions on the role of inherent culture in the conception of growth by the entrepreneur-manager of a Moroccan SME.

Table 1. The main characteristics of the interviewees

Interviewee(s)	Characteristics of interviewees	Characteristics of the compagnies
Interviewee 1	Project Manager	SME Division, Maroc PME Agency.
Interviewee 2	Head of SME Division,	Banking sector.
Interviewee 3	Former President	Young CEOs center
Interviewee 4	Consulting/CEO	Consulting firm (SME entrepreneurship)
Interviewee 5	Consulting/CEO	Consulting firm (SME entrepreneurship)
Interviewee 6	CEO business	Building of websites and IT solutions firm
Interviewee 7	CEO Business	Electrical and air-conditioning engineering firm
Interviewee 8	CEO Business	Manufacturing of metal boxes firm
Interviewee 9	University professor	Sociology professor

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We first got interested into demystifying our interviewees' interpretation of the term "corporate growth". Analysis of the interviews with the experts revealed heterogeneity in the conceptualization of growth according to different quantitative and qualitative strands. In the experts' discourse, the meaning of growth goes beyond the traditional economic definition in terms of increased sales and human size, and evokes more qualitative criteria of an individual, organizational and social nature.

- ***Firm growth: towards a heterogeneous range of conceptualizations by Moroccan entrepreneurial stakeholders***

The various conceptualizations of the Moroccan interviewees' discourse were reorganized and organized according to two main quantitative and qualitative

components: **Quantitative aspect of growth:** Sales were cited by some interviewees-experts as the primary criterion by which SME managers measure growth. However, they explain that growth in terms of sales is not always a reliable measure of growth, since sales can be created without any real value being added to the company. "*It's easy for managers to measure growth in terms of sales - in fact, it's the most common measurement indicator - but you have to remember that even with spectacular sales, you can still generate negative results, so it's really a question of performance and added value*". Others understand growth in terms of sales and headcount, and reason growth in economic and social terms, so that company growth in terms of demand implies growth in terms of production and therefore an increase in the workforce, which does not translate into growth in sales volume. "*For me, a growing company is one that manages to increase its sales and its workforce*". Others perceive growth as geographical expansion: "*Growth is the number of industrial or commercial sites that the company develops beyond its territory*", in other words, growth is understood in this sense in terms of increasing the company's assets and expansion.

Qualitative aspect of growth: From an individual perspective, growth is represented as growth of the spirit, reflecting development on a personal level, in the sense that the leader who started out as a young entrepreneur-manager accumulates professional and managerial experience over time, through a continuous learning effect, and develops his or her sense of responsibility through awareness of his or her economic and social role in society. In this sense, one of our experts quotes: "*For me, I link growth to growth of the spirit, because for any self-respecting person, growth is really about learning and contributing to others*". In this sense, company growth is linked to the personal learning and professional maturity of the manager. Still in its individual dimension, growth is represented as a personal achievement "...*the growth of the company is proof of the personal success of its creator*". "For the manager, growth is a goal in itself. When they set up their company, all managers have the intention of growing it. Now, some succeed and others don't". In this sense, growth represents the achievement of the goals set at initial steps of creation and the success of the entrepreneurial adventure of the manager-entrepreneur. From another social perspective, growth is seen as a means of contributing to one's social environment and territory, by helping to create and improve the ecosystem. "*For me, growth is really the number of people that my company extracts from a situation of unemployment and transforms into key skills for the company and for society as a whole, in the hope that some of them can take inspiration from me and manage to create their own companies and do the same*". "*Firm growth means growth in terms of branding, i.e. when a company like mine shows a foreign market, an*

external market, that there is an outbound market in Marrakech or Marrakech Safi, it will be beneficial for my company because it's a whole ecosystem that will develop". In this sense, a company's growth reflects its ability to create value in the society.

On the other hand, another surprising perspective emerged from interviews analysis, it showed that growth can be viewed as a constraint to the survival of the company "...*Now, there are a lot of companies that are victims of their growth, you know very well. That is, they have markets, they have prospects, and then they start recruiting and their credit lines get bigger. And then, all it takes is a breakage, i.e. an overdue debt, for a company that was growing slowly but surely to disappear*"; "...*There are phases when stagnation is excellent growth, all right. So, staying alive is already growth for certain sectors and especially for certain economic conditions*". This negative perception of growth internalized by some entrepreneur-managers is no accident; it reflects a whole system of beliefs and social habits that they hold and that drive their entrepreneurial spirits. It may also be resulted from their previous experiences or influence of their environment.

Finally, it draws from the previous analysis that growth itself is not believed or conceived the same way by individuals which, then, showcases different logic of actions towards it (seeking conventional growth or prioritizing the status quo as a strategy of growth). We suggest that rationality behind each perception of growth beheld by individuals might be affected by their system of beliefs that helps them interpret situations and conceive reactions, that system itself is highly likely formed and impacted by cultural manifestations and social interactions of individuals.

➤ ***Corporate growth: is it a cultural matter?***

questioning the relevance of culture on corporate growth matter, our interviewees insist on the importance of taking contextual factors into account in entrepreneurial activity. The way in which entrepreneurship can be conceived can only be done by integrating the cultural context, and by extension, business growth, understood as entrepreneurial behavior, is no exception to this logic. In fact, our interviewees highlighted a number of cultural traits that they felt shaped the logic of Moroccan entrepreneurial leaders towards the growth of their businesses. Our interviewees insisted on five main values or cultural traits they associated with the personality of managers which they believe have relevant effect on corporate growth.

-Intolerance to uncertainty and fatalism: It is clear from the interviewees' comments that growth is a question of the manager's will, which depends on his or her ability to

manage situations of uncertainty. "Taking the risk of moving into other markets or taking on new debt, in order to invest in the growth of one's business, depends on one's ability to conceive growth as a challenge, one that one can succeed in despite the unforeseen and the ambiguity of the future". "...those who succeed in business are those who refuse to bend to the unexpected". This distrust of the unknown gives rise to two types of entrepreneurial profile. On the one hand, those who see growth as a professional success and a normal, natural step in the realization of their entrepreneurial projects, are not afraid of the environment and what it hides, and take the risk of committing themselves to innovation, market diversification or even internationalization and investment in risky projects, because they rely primarily on their abilities and skills to manage the complexities of growth and the unknown events of the future that this growth could provoke.

A second type of entrepreneur with a high level of fear of the unknown, due to previous unsuccessful entrepreneurial experiences or for other personal reasons, prefers not to engage in complex and risky activities, and prefers instead to maintain their business at a certain size they are more comfortable with. "The problem with SME growth in Morocco is that some managers are risk-averse, and reason that [Better a small but perpetual income than a large, inconstant one]² this fear of the future always makes managers lack vision, which blocks growth. "...There are phases when stagnation is an excellent growth strategy, all right. So, staying alive is already growth for certain sectors and especially for certain economic conditions". Drawing from above, growth isn't always what Moroccan managers want. The interviewees link the resistance of some SME managers to change and their reluctance to take growth risks to a fear of the unknown, a fear of what the future will bring, in terms of changes in legislation, changes in the environment, the fear of losing control, the fear of losing the company as a source of income and social prestige, the fear of failure itself. Then, managers adapt to these situations with a fatalism wrapped up in a logic of submission to the divine order very much in evidence in Moroccan culture. "... whereas unfortunately for many pseudo-entrepreneurs, with their traditional mentality, entrepreneurial activity in its entirety is a question of [on the will of God we count]³ it doesn't work like that, that's not how business grows and succeeds". On the other hand, a passive attitude is developing among some entrepreneurial leaders, who see business growth or success as a matter of luck rather than entrepreneurial effort, and so link entrepreneurial success to religious blessing, as our experts quote: "...And many Moroccan

entrepreneurs seek to rely on God without taking the necessary risk and effort, and they justify themselves with the Moroccan adage [you will only follow the path that God has laid out for you]⁴ yes, but that's not always true in business, you have to act first, you have to expose yourself and go out to seek knowledge and information. [...]. Because God also says [you are a missionary] but people in their culture only consider what suits them and you know why? because they want to sleep easy. That's how they justify and comfort themselves".

-Time orientation: An analysis of the experts' discourse reveals that growth is linked to a time perspective that is deeply rooted in Moroccan culture. Thus, in relation to motivations for growth, time projection influences expectations of growth between the profile of the entrepreneurial leader who favors immediate success and the profile who prepares for future success. Thus, the interviewees emphasize the search for personal fulfillment, which refers to the future perception of the benefits of growth. Growth thus becomes a medium- to long-term objective. Experts argue that managers who seek personal fulfillment and success in their entrepreneurial projects project the growth of their companies into the future, and attribute greater value to success over time, as they believe the chances of success are higher. Indeed, the temporal dimension plays a key role in the interviewees' discourse, as they believe that past and present experiences have an impact on entrepreneurial managers' attitudes and perceptions of growth. The interviewees illustrate this for certain managers who remain prisoners of unsuccessful past experiences and entrepreneurial failures, and are carried away by everyday life. In this sense, they are less interested in growth, more motivated to avoid failure, and less committed to planning practices. "If we're talking down to earth, 90% of SME entrepreneurial managers live their day-to-day lives, with the problems of personnel, collections, administration - add to that their personal lives - and don't see themselves in the mindset of 10 or 20 years from now. These people don't have the time to think about growth. If it's not imposed on them by the environment, they don't plan for it. They live from day to day to meet their daily needs. On the other hand, there are others, such as M. (X) from Company (Y), a large SME in Marrakesh, whom I've had the opportunity to accompany for some time. He only thinks in terms of 20 years and more, and implements actions and strategic plans that will grow, perhaps not in the short term, but certainly in the long term. Entrepreneur-managers with this kind of profile build successful businesses".

² Moroccan adage

³ Moroccan adage

⁴ Moroccan adage

Entrepreneurial family background and networks: Moroccan entrepreneur-managers who have created their businesses either out of necessity or opportunity face a real deficit in access to financing and technical support for growth. In this sense, our interviewees insist on the role played by the Moroccan family and its unconditional support as an informal institution marked by a strong cultural dimension. As a social unit, the family steps in to provide assistance and, to a certain extent, fill the role of formal institutional units. In this way, the relationships developed through family support, particularly in entrepreneurial families, play a key role in the development of entrepreneurial networks. Belonging to an entrepreneurial family facilitates and supports the development of a strong, solid network, especially in Morocco, where over 80% of the economic fabric is made up of well-established family businesses. The interviewees insist that belonging to an entrepreneurial family is a key factor in embodying the ambitions and motivations of becoming an entrepreneur of opportunity, with objectives for the growth and expansion of their business. "*There's no doubt about starting a business after growing up in a family where it was more common to be an entrepreneur than to work for a stranger. And then, the family helps you with its financial means, with its business, with its experience, with its relations, with its weight, with its name...with all these things...so you see, you're better accompanied to succeed". "I grew up in a family of entrepreneurs, at a very young age, my father took me with him to his factory, he had directed me to study business, so you see he was already preparing me to become an entrepreneur and to learn what it is to be an entrepreneur".*" Also, entrepreneurial support is not limited to family and close friends, as our interviewees emphasized the importance of the manager's own relationships. They argue that having a strong personal and professional network can, if not create growth opportunities for the company, at least play the role of facilitator of problems that can hinder the company's growth. The interviewees emphasized the importance of intermediation (or Wasta) in doing business in Morocco, and the need to invest in and capitalize on one's academic and professional network, which could be invaluable to the development and success of one's business. One of our interviewee's quotes "*Since I set up my own consulting firm, I've kept in touch with my university colleagues who have gone on to become notaries, lawyers, civil servants, company directors... this was beneficial for the growth and success of my business".*" The primacy of entrepreneurial support through the manager's personal network reflects an existent logic of trust, proximity, dependence and sociability found behind Moroccan business culture. Thus, the personal network, as how it is embedded in Moroccan culture, can play the role of informal co-partner and co-builder of the entrepreneurial experience

in general and the entrepreneurial firm growth experience in particular. Despite drawing that family relationships as informal institution and support might have a positive effect on SME growth this can't withdraw that lack of support from Moroccan formal institutions remains also as a big missing factor to help managing the complexities of growth (Ait Oufkir, 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Several authors emphasize the importance of SME growth as the primary vector of economic growth and employment generation in Morocco. The literature on the determinants of growth in large companies differs from that on small and medium-sized enterprises. Indeed, researchers are still struggling to agree on a single, specific theory of SME growth (Penrose, 1958). Research into the determinants of SME growth has largely focused on environmental, organizational or individual factors, with little attention paid to contextual factors, notably the study of culture through the prism of managers' value systems, in relation to SME growth (Ait Oufkir, 2020). This is the thrust of our exploratory study. In line with previous research, we were able to establish that managers' individual cultures transcend their beliefs and shape the way they think about the growth or non-growth of their companies. The direct/indirect contingency effect of this relationship and its quantification can only be demonstrated through an empirical statistical study.

The interviews we conducted with the various experts we interviewed enabled us to delve deeper into the specific theme of growth and its cultural determinants, and to put the knowledge gained from the literature back into the specific Moroccan context. From a theoretical standpoint, our results illustrate that not only is the elaboration of a single theory of growth has still a long way off, but it also seems illusory to think that we can arrive to form a single, unified conceptualization of growth that makes consensus. This diversity of conceptualizations is built around cultural, psychological, social and personal differences.

The cultural dimensions noted in the interviewees' discourse to explain attitudes towards certain attributes of entrepreneurial activity in general, and growth in particular, highlights a number of themes. It emerges that the temporal perspective engaged by managers in the long-term perception of their entrepreneurial projects conditions the growth of their companies, and places the emphasis on entrepreneur-managers who inscribe the growth of their companies and their entrepreneurial success in a long-term vision admitting that growth is a long process whose repercussions can be seen in the medium and long term. On the other hand, business growth depends on the predisposition of entrepreneurial managers to accept the unexpected and manage uncertainty. The relationship with environmental uncertainty conditions the attitude that managers can adopt towards growth.

Then there's the fatalism that characterizes certain profiles of entrepreneurial leaders, stemming from the constructs

of our Moroccan culture, and reflecting dependence on divine gift and resignation to the spirit of competitiveness, risk-taking and opportunity-seeking, which translates into a negative attitude towards growth. The importance of networks, and thus the notion of "Wasta", appears as a cultural trait characterizing our business culture and refers to the importance and place of family and professional networking as a facilitator in conducting business in Morocco. The personal network (family, friends, etc.) is very important in matters of financing and the creation of opportunities for business development, and can therefore be a determining factor in the success and growth of Moroccan SMEs. On the other hand, the entrepreneurial family background of the manager provides financial and psychological support, as well as a transfer of experience and market renown to support the manager's motivation for growth.

On a managerial level, it seems essential for Moroccan SME managers to realize the weight and importance of their surrounding culture and its clear influence on their beliefs and representations shaping their strategic decisions, and to learn from it in order to better design their managerial objectives and future strategic projections.

For public authorities and academics, this research sought to take into account the importance of the cultural dimension in the design of training and promotion strategies for entrepreneurship in general and SME growth in particular.

In fine, the results of this study are exploratory in nature, and undoubtedly merit further empirical investigation on a larger scale, in order to enrich and reinforce our knowledge of the current state of growth of Moroccan SMEs. However, it should be stressed that, in addition to culture, there are other aspects that we feel are important to explore in greater depth, notably the analysis of Moroccan formal institutional arrangements for supporting growth.

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Appendix

We present below (Table 2) the main surveyed questions of our interviews:

Table 2. Investigation interview guide

- 1- Could you describe your perception of the current situation of SMEs in Morocco?
- 2- What do you think about the growth of Moroccan SMEs?
- 3- What does growth mean to you?
- 4- What do you think of the role of the entrepreneur in the growth of his business?
- 5- What do you think of the role of Moroccan culture in impacting the willingness of entrepreneurs to take the path of growth?
- 6- What are the Moroccan entrepreneur's cultural values that impact the most his perception of firm growth?
- 7- In your understanding, how do these cultural values promote or inhibit the growth of Moroccan SMEs?
- 7- If you have any other questions that you think are relevant and that I haven't asked you, please feel free to address them.