

OWNER-MANAGERS' VISION AND ITS ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SMES: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF MOROCCAN AND CANADIAN SMES IN THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

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Abstract: More often than not, theories and approaches developed in the context of large businesses fail to explain the internationalization of SMEs mostly because many researchers tend to treat them as small replicas of large companies. One alternative and promising research path is to focus on owner-managers attributes as they play a key role in such internationalization. The present contribution adopts the same perspective and takes as its main objective to study the role owner-manager's vision plays in the internationalization of SMEs. The results obtained from a case study of ten Moroccan and Canadian agri-food SMEs, suggest that clear vision is associated with proactive internationalization, rather planned strategies, and increased international commitment.

Key words: Small and Medium Enterprises, management, entrepreneurship. Globalisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization and fierce competition are causing market imbalances that offer both opportunities and threats for firms of all sizes. The resulting uncertainty generates new entrepreneurial ideas that SMEs must either seize or else find themselves threatened on their own markets (HITT and BARTKUS, 1997). Firms are hence obliged to adapt to this new hostile environment if they hope to survive (JULIEN et al., 1994). Furthermore, classical definitions of the entrepreneur associate them closely with moderate risk-taking in an uncertain environment that they, nevertheless, strive to know and to master (CANTILLON, 1931; KNIGHT, 1921). They also portray them as having a keen eye for opportunities and the ability to exploit them (KIRZNER, 1973; CASSON, 1985). Moreover, Schumpeter (1934) views the penetration of new markets as a form of innovation, a key characteristic of entrepreneurs.

Yet, despite the more and more evident role played by SMEs on foreign markets (COVIELLO and MCAULEY, 1999; NKONGOLO-BAKENDA, 1999), the literature on internationalization² tends to consider large business (LB) as the only unit of analysis. This accent on large business is all the more cause for concern, seeing that SMEs differ

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from large business in terms of their management styles, their independence, the scope of their operations, etc. (SCHOLHAMMER and KURILOFF, 1979; O'FARREL et al., 1988; COVIELLO and MCAULEY, 1999). In fact, as Shuman and Seeger (1986:8) have put it so well: "Smaller businesses are not smaller versions of big businesses [...] smaller businesses deal with unique size-related issues as well and they behave differently in their analysis of, and their interaction with, their environment." With these specific traits in mind, we can expect "[...] that the internationalization of SMEs would be different from that of large firms due to: (1) firm characteristics or (2) behaviors used to overcome size-related challenges." (COVIELLO and MCAULEY, 1999)

Given that the theories and approaches developed in the context of large businesses often fail to explain the internationalization of SMEs, research has, in recent years, focused on the profiles of SME owner-managers. So we witness the emergence of a new field of research—international entrepreneurship—where management of SMEs, international management, and entrepreneurship intersect. The present contribution adopts the perspective of this new field. Its main objective is to study what role the vision of owner-managers plays in the internationalization of their SMEs. Taking this perspective, we shall present a conceptual framework immediately after a succinct review of the literature. The research methodology adopted in this study will then be explained and, finally, the findings of the empirical study will be presented and discussed.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

What do we actually know about the internationalization of SMEs? Opinions are divided on this subject. Nevertheless, many of the authors interested in the internationalization of SMEs have focused on the impact of their size (CALOF, 1993, 1994; CAVUSGIL and NEVIN, 1981; COVIELLO and MCAULEY, 1999; HITT and BARTKUS, 1997; LEONIDOU and KATSIKEAS, 1996; WYER et al., 1998). Though the findings of some of these works hold that the size of firms has no influence on their internationalization, others reach diametrically opposed conclusions. Calof (1993, 1994), for example, has found that small size does not impede the SME's internationalization but does limit the number of markets it can enter. Hirsch and Adar take more or less the same track. Their empirical test failed to show that, given equal resources, size—measured in terms of manpower employed—will have a positive impact on the tendency to export.³ The works of Cavusgil and Nevin (1981) add an important precision by demonstrating that the negative influence of size on the propensity to export is a determining factor only in the case of very small enterprises. They explain that, once a benchmark size is reached, size no longer has any effect either on productivity or on the propensity to export. The conclusions reached by Coviello and McAuley (1999) show that size does seem to have some influence on the internationalization of SMEs. It would also seem that experience abroad, especially in what concerns markets and languages (Mehta, 1995) does prompt SMEs to diversify geographically (HITT and BARTKUS, 1997; JULIEN, 1995).

On the other hand, several studies have shown that many SMEs have entered the international field in reaction to an initiative from abroad (BRUSH, 1993; KAYNAK et al., 1987; THIBODEAU, 1994). Bilkey's findings (1978) also reveal that most exporting SMEs started their export activities in response to an external stimulus⁴. Other studies show that many SMEs, working mainly as subcontractors, follow their clients on to foreign markets

(ERRAMILI and RAO, 1993). Zucchella (2000) observes that the strong presence of SMEs on the international scene in the 1990s took mainly the form of exports. Ramangalahy (2000) also indicates that export is SMEs' most frequently used mode of entry in foreign markets. Actually, it seems that the export mode of entry is better suited to the capacities and resources of SMEs, as it gives them great flexibility and requires only low commitment of resources and limited exposure to risk (WOLFF and PETT, 2000; YOUNG et al., 1989; BOURCIEU, 2000; POISSON and SU, 1996; LEONIDOU and KATSIKEAS, 1996). Therefore, the internationalization process has often been termed asymmetrical, notably because SMEs' strong involvement in international trade cohabits with a tight local organization of their other activities (ZUCHELLA, 2000).

It seems particularly noteworthy that the foremost specificity of SME internationalization resides in the owner-manager's central and crucial role in this process. In our opinion, the owner-manager's role can be considered at two main levels: their attitude towards internationalization, on the one hand, and, on the other, their vision of that internationalization.

First, with regard to attitude: SMEs owner-managers display a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes towards internationalization, ranging from total indifference to complete commitment. Many authors have taken on the task of understanding these attitudes and behaviors, both in the context of entrepreneurship and in that of the internationalization of SMEs. For the sake of simplicity, these attitudes and behaviors can be characterized according to the predisposition to engage in internationalization and classified as follows: a negative attitude, a positive attitude, and a passive attitude. From these three classes of attitudes generally emerge three broad stances the owner-manager may take with regard to internationalization: a defensive stance, a reactive stance (in response to internal or external stimulus or stimuli), and a proactive stance.

Researchers have long been interested in the reactive and proactive stances (BILKEY and TESAR, 1977; BILKEY, 1978; CAVUSGIL, 1976, 1984; CZINKOTA, 1982; BEAMISH et al., 2000; JOYAL, 1996). We find the three phases of internationalization identified by Cavusgil (1984) especially interesting in view of our own research themes. Cavusgil finds that SMEs internationalize according to three different levels of involvement: an experimental involvement, an active involvement, and a committed involvement. The first level of involvement generally belongs to rather indecisive SMEs owner-managers who have often turned to internationalization in response to stimuli (BILKEY, 1978). Active involvement may be attained either directly, if the decision to internationalize is based on an initial positive attitude, or indirectly, when an experimental involvement brings results that the owner-manager deems satisfactory. Committed involvement usually supposes that the first phase(s) has (have) been successful. Rarely do SMEs reach this third phase directly, except those firms said international at inception (OVIATT and MCDUGALL, 1999) or those operating in specific sectors, as in the case of technological SMEs (JULIEN, 1995).

The attitude of owner-managers towards internationalization has been fairly well explored in the literature, and their vision has certainly attracted many researchers, but never in connection with internationalization. So, a good number of researchers in entrepreneurship agree in recognizing the importance of owner-managers' vision (WESTLY and MINTZBERG, 1988). However, it refers to and covers aspects and realities that may vary considerably from one researcher to the next, agreement on a definition of the notion of vision is far from unanimous (MORGAN, 1996; BEAUCHAMP, 2001). Moreover, over the last two decades, many authors have presented their own understanding of this notion, often dictated by their research interests and their background. Some of them have even constructed theoretical models designed to explain how and under what conditions this vision will emerge, develop, and bear fruit (MIREAULT, 2000; BEAUCHAMP, 2001).

Harel-Giasson (1995) rightly points out that the notion of *vision* has long had a negative connotation assimilating it with *hallucinations*, *dreams*, and *fantasy*. The 1986 Larousse dictionary defines *vision* as an “imaginary perception, [a] hallucination.”⁵ Hamel and Prahalad (1989) concede that *vision* can present a strong dreamlike side, especially when there is a very wide gap between the way the present and the future are represented. Filion (1991a; 1991b) points out, on his side, that when the vision is detached from the relational dimension, it tends to merge with dream. Nonetheless, more and more of the research work on SME owner-managers focuses on vision, in search of convincing explanations for the way entrepreneurs think and act. This trend has been fostered, above all, by the failure of economic and behavioral explanations of the entrepreneurial phenomenon. Their failure has motivated the search for alternative theses capable of explaining how successful owner-managers differ from the others. Some researchers then found in vision and its coherence the elements of a new definition of entrepreneurs (BEAUCHAMP, 2001). For Morgan (1996): “In the literature on entrepreneurship, the assumption is often made that everyone “knows” what “vision” is.” However, when one examines definitions given to vision, they quickly realize that those definitions encompass a wide variety of meanings. Thus, for Kao (1989), *vision* —that is one of the three key attributes of the entrepreneur along with leadership and choice and the mobilization of resources—would be a desired future state of things. Robert (1983) takes the same lines, stressing that: “...each person that leads an organization, large or small, has a concept or vision of what the organization should look like sometime in the future.” Bennis and Nanus (1985) define *vision* as being “a mental image of a possible and desired future state of the organization.” For Filion (1991a; 1991b), *vision* is “a future projection of the place you want your products to occupy on the market, as well as the image of the type of organization needed to attain that place.” Using more or less different formulations, many other authors fully agree with this statement. (HICKMAN AND SILVA, 1984; BIRD AND JELINEK, 1988; BANDAROWSKI, 1990).

Despite the divergent definitions of vision (whose meaning thus remains rather ambiguous) and the unfortunately frequent tendency to confuse it with other notions, many virtues are generally associated with the term: motivation of personnel (ROBBINS and DUNCAN, 1988), organizational change (ROBBINS and DUNCAN, 1988; BARTLETT and GOSHAL, 1991); definition of organizational direction (GLUCK, 1984; BIRD and JELINEK, 1988). Hamel and Prahalad (1989) maintain that vision must inspire ambitions that outstrip the firm’s resources and competence, thus becoming a wellspring of creative tension. For Meschi (1997), “the wider this gap the more it will prod the firm to seek bold ways of developing and combining its capacities to bridge the gap.” Messeghem and Varrault (1997), however, warn against the risks inherent in creating a gap so wide that it becomes a source of anxiety and inhibition. Filion (1991b) succeeds in summing up the advantages associated with vision:

[Vision] seems to offer the entrepreneur a guiding framework to help him (or her) get where he (or she) wants to go. This framework seems to attract, stimulate, and motivate the people working with him (or her). their team, the people who form their relations system in the enterprise, seem very highly motivated and eager to work hard to help realize the vision.

The definition adopted in this paper is the one proposed by Filion (1991a; 1991b) who considers *vision* to be “a future-forward image of the niche [the owner-manager’s] products should occupy on the market as well as the image of the type of organization needed to get there.” Its simplicity aside, this definition is also the one closest to our own

conception of *vision* from the perspective of this present discussion. In order to operationalize Filion's definition, we separate it into three components: image of the space to be occupied (Space); image of the means to be used in getting there (Means); and sharing these two images with the firm's partners (Sharing).

Despite the plethora of works on *vision*, none has yet taken on the task of studying the role *vision* plays in the internationalization of the firm—at least not to our knowledge. Our contribution intends to fill that gap.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CORPORATE VISION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SMES CONSTRUCTION OF THE FRAMEWORK

In light of the principal conclusions reached by research done on the internationalization of SMEs as it relates to the profile and vision of their owner-managers and top executives, we construct below the framework from which our research propositions are derived. For the sake of simplicity, the framework presented in figure 1 is based on the three levels of international involvement defined by Cavusgil (1984): experimental involvement, active involvement, and committed involvement. Cavusgil's typology of involvement (1984) has been chosen not only for its simplicity but also because it focuses on the phase after the decision to internationalize. However, we do admit that the international vision may have preceded and even motivated that decision. This is the reason why the framework proposed examines the link between the proactive and reactive (CZINKOTA, 1982; BEAMISH et al., 2000) character of that decision and the clarity or lack of clarity in corporate vision. The framework postulates two types of vision: on the one hand, a clear vision of the market position the owner-manager wants to see their firm, product and/or services occupy and of the means to attain it and, on the other, a fuzzy vision of this position/ and or the means to attain it.

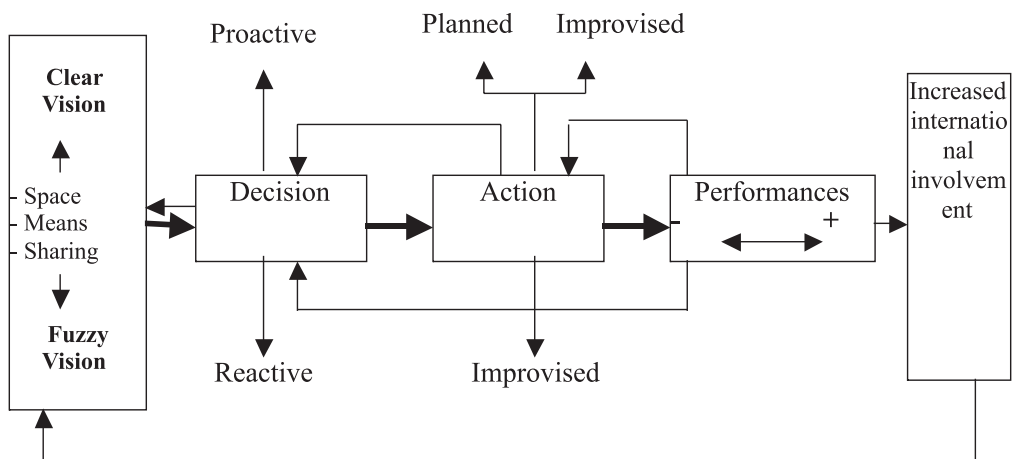


Figure 1: Relation between the owner-manager's vision and the internationalization of the firm

N.B.: Arrows in boldface represent the actions realizing the vision, the arrows in ordinary face represent feed-back or consequences, whereas the arrows with dotted lines refer to the forms that the framework's components may take.

4 RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

4. 1 SHARPNESS OF VISION AND TYPE OF DECISION

Beamish et al. (2000) consider that the decision to internationalize may be motivated by either reactive or proactive reasons. However, many studies have shown that most firms decide to internationalize in reaction to initiatives from abroad (KAYNAK et al., 1987; BRUSH, 1993; THIBODEAU, 1994; JOYAL, 1996). Bilkey's work (1978) on exporting SMEs also corroborates this trend and reveals that most of them became exporters in response to an external stimulus. For Julien (1995), the most dynamic and innovative SMEs have a better chance of succeeding on the international market. Moreover, it is the owner-managers of such SMEs who will decide to internationalize proactively. We postulate that their vision of the internationalization process will be clearer and more coherent than that of SME's owner-managers who decide to internationalize in reaction to a stimulus. Hence, propositions P1a and P1b:

P1a: SMEs' owner-managers who articulate clear and coherent visions of internationalization tend to be proactive in their decision to internationalize.

P1b: SMEs' owner-managers who articulate fuzzy and somewhat or wholly incoherent visions tend to be rather reactive in their decision to internationalize.

4. 2 SHARPNESS OF VISION AND TYPE OF ACTION

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) maintain that when action (or a pattern of actions) is based on a conscious vision, it should be possible to control and adjust it as needed. Beauchamp (2001) also takes the same view, suggesting that visions can never be realized without clear actions. She adds "A critical step in making real the leader's vision is for the leader to support words with actions through policies and programs." The works of Quigley (1993) as well as those of Bennis and Nanus (1985), Sashkin (1988), Beamish et al. (1993) coincide completely with this line of thought. For Gluck (1984), vision is a guide that makes it possible "to act rather than react, to take risks, and to weigh decisions." (MIREAULT, 2000). On this basis, we postulate that, with clarity of vision, implementation of the decision to internationalize will tend to be planned and even formalized, so that it can be controlled, monitored, spelled out, and, if necessary, adjusted. However, when this vision is fuzzy, its implementation would be more improvised. Hence, propositions P2a and P2b:

P2a: When the vision of internationalization is clear, its implementation will tend to be planned and often formalized.

P2b: When the vision of internationalization is fuzzy, its implementation will tend to be improvised according to situations and events.

4.3 PERCEPTION OF PERFORMANCES

Cavusgil's (1984) first two levels of international involvement suppose that some firms will engage incrementally and experimentally in internationalization, whereas others will be more actively engaged. We may suppose that firms that internationalize experimentally will be more inclined to rethink their decision if performance disappoints their expectations— unless other indicators are perceived as positive. Clear-vision SMEs will, we suppose, be more likely to first re-examine the elements of their internationalization strategy before having second thoughts about their decision to internationalize. When their performance on the international stage is deemed satisfactory and durable, clear-vision SMEs will tend to step up their international activities more than those with fuzzy vision would do. Hence, the four propositions P3a, P3b, P3c, and P3d:

P3a: When SMEs' owner-managers with a clear vision perceive international performance as being negative, they tend (all other things being equal) to first review the elements of their firm's internationalization strategy. They would then question the decision to internationalize after adjusting measures taken had failed.

P3b: When SMEs' owner-managers with a fuzzy vision perceive international performance as being negative, they tend (all other things being equal) to question the decision to internationalize.

P3c: When SMEs' owner-managers with a clear vision perceive initial international performance as being positive, they tend to increase substantially their international involvement.

P3d: When SMEs' owner-managers with a fuzzy vision perceive initial international performance as being positive, they tend to maintain their level of international involvement.

5 METHODOLOGY

The research question and the constructs selected for this study have pushed us to opt for a composite qualitative approach based on the multi-case-study method⁶. In fact, we have used four types of data collection tools, separately or combined, depending on the situation: semi-structured interviews; ethnographic procedures; use of informants; and, finally, document analysis. The interview method is, without dispute, the main data collection method used in this study. The three other approaches have been used to prepare the study and to complete it and/or to check its conclusions and define the overall context of the sector or sub-sector of the firm under study. We have prepared our use of this method by consulting the works of Yin (1994, 1997), who recommends starting with the formulation of theoretical hypotheses, as well as those of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who use analytical induction. At least at this level, we have taken sharp leave of Eisenhardt's theory (1989), which calls for starting without any theoretical *a priori*. The different constructs selected for the study have been operationalized and coded⁷. However, though we have introduced very strict contingency elements to define the SMEs covered by the empirical study⁸, the selection of the latter was arbitrary, as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), since the idea is to measure constructs that are strongly linked to the personality of the owner-manager.

In order to purge the study of any biases related to a given socio-economic and cultural environment, we chose to test the validity of the framework in two economically and culturally different countries: Morocco and Canada. However, to ensure some comparability of

conclusions, we had to choose enterprises in a sector of activity occupying somewhat the same position in both the Canadian and Moroccan economies

Fifteen SMEs—eight Moroccan and seven Canadian—were pre-selected with the help of a number of organizations. However, as the methodology chosen has a theoretical saturation threshold⁹, we selected only five Canadian SMEs and five Moroccan SMEs for the final study.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews lasting on average three hours each, we used participatory and non-participatory observations as well as visits and document analysis to obtain the information we needed on selected SMEs.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After data transcription, we used Atlas.ti software for its analysis. Table 1 presents the basic results pertaining to investigated SMEs.

Table 1: Inter-sample comparisons of results compiled

	Moroccan sample					Canadian sample				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
Creation	1999	1945	1946	1999	1995	1930	1993	1995	1992	?
Internationalization.	1999	1987	1987	1999	1997	1987	1993	1995	1996	?
Vision	Clear	Fuzzy	Clear	Fuzzy	Fuzzy	Clear	Clear	Fuzzy	Clear	Fuzzy
Decision	Pro-active	Reactive	Pro-active	Reactive	Reactive	Proactive	Proactive	Proactive	Pro-active	Reactive
Action	Improvised	Improvised	Planned	Planned	Improvised	Planned	Improvised	Improvised	Planned	Improvised
Performance	Positive	Negative	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Negative
Subsequent action	Increase	Increase	Increase	Maintain	Increase	Increase	Increase	Increase	Increase	Maintain

The analysis was carried out in three phases: first, each of the cases was analyzed separately; next, they were compared within each of the two national samples; finally, the two samples were compared to each other.

As the methodology used combines a hypothetical-deductive approach and an inductive approach, the analysis was done at two levels: there was, at one level, verification of the research propositions and, at the other, inductive exploration. For the sake of simplicity, we present and discuss below only the principal hypothetical-deductive findings. The conclusions of the inductive exploration will be the subject of another contribution.

This study gives support¹⁰ to propositions P1a and P1b, for both the Moroccan and the Canadian samples. The five owner-managers in the study who exhibit clear vision all made a proactive decision to internationalize their firms. In contrast, out of the five owner-managers whose vision seemed rather fuzzy, only one Canadian woman owner-manager made a proactive decision to internationalize, thus partially weakening proposition P1b.

Our analysis shows that, though hazy at first, this female owner-manager's vision gained in clarity, as is evident in the coherence of her actions. We therefore maintain that clear-visioned owner-managers, or those who gain in visual clarity, will tend to make a proactive decision to internationalize, whereas the decision made by those with a fuzzy vision will tend to be reactive. We feel that this can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that owner-managers who are attracted to the international market will take the time to think about what they want to achieve on foreign markets. Though often informal, this reflection will lend certain clarity to their international project and guide their internationalization process.

Table 2: Research propositions: inter-sample comparison of results by firm

Vision	Propositions		Moroccan sample					Canadian sample				
			M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
Clear	P1a	Clear vision associated with proactive decision	S		S			S	S		S	
	P2a	Clear vision associated with planned action	W		S			S	W		S	
	P3a	Negative performance and adjustment	S		S							
	P3c	Positive performance and increase	S		S	W	S	S	S	S	S	
Fuzzy	P1b	Fuzzy vision associated with reactive decision		S		S	S			W		S
	P2b	Fuzzy vision associated with improvised action		S		W	S			S		S
	P3b	Negative performance and retreat		W			W					S
	P3d	Positive performance and continued commitment				S	W			W		S

N.B.: S = Supported; W = Weakened

Though we did find that the distinction between proactive and reactive internationalization suitably defined the way in which owner-managers come to internationalize their firms (BEAMISH et al., 2000), the sample chosen weakens the assertion made by so many authors that, for most SMEs, the decision to internationalize is a reactive one. (KAYNAK et al., 1987; BRUSH, 1993; THIBODEAU, 1994; JOYAL, 1996). In fact, of the six owner-managers interviewed, six were rather proactive in their decision to internationalize. Our results also weaken what Bilkey (1968) affirms: SMEs that export spontaneously are two and a half times larger than those that do so reactively. Indeed, in the Moroccan sample, the largest firm in terms of work force size (M2: 210 employees) internationalized rather reactively. In the Canadian sample, it is true that the largest enterprise in terms of work force size (C1: 240 employees) internationalized proactively but the smallest (C4: 8 employees) did so as well.

Proposition P2a was weakened, both in the Moroccan and in the Canadian samples.

What we found is that, though certainly linked to visual acuity, planning and improvisation also depend on the stability or instability of the environment in which the firm is operating. In this respect, we observed that owner-managers operating in a stable environment tend to plan their actions, whereas those managing in rather unstable conditions tend to improvise theirs. We did however find that clear-visioned owner-managers operating in an unstable environment, thanks to their acuity, do manage to plan a general framework for actions even though the latter are improvised. It is precisely within this planned framework that ensures overall coherence and allows the owner-manager to realize their vision that individual actions can take place. Hence, we maintain that the more unstable the environment, the more clarity of vision the owner-manager will need in order to find their way in the turbulence.

In contrast, except for one case in the Moroccan sample, Proposition P2b was supported for all the firms. The exception in question was observed in case M4. In our opinion, it would be explained by the owner-manager's previous training in finance. This result supports and refines those of numerous researchers such as Gluck, 1984; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Sashkin, 1988; Quigley, 1993; Beamish et al., 1993. In fact, researchers who have studied the relationship between acuity of vision and type of implementation all maintain that vision is a guide which makes it possible "...to act rather than react, to take risks and weigh the decisions to be made." (MIREAULT, 2000)

Proposition P3a was globally supported. However, since all the firms whose owner-managers have clear vision, post positive performances, this hypothesis could only be supported by simulation. In other words, owner-managers were asked what they would have done had the performances been rather negative. Moroccan owner-managers expressed themselves more clearly and categorically on this subject, maintaining that they would have reviewed their actions and strategies, but that retreat from the international market would be entirely excluded as an option. Responses from Canadian owner-managers were, in contrast, less trenchant. Two of the three clear-visioned owner-managers maintained that it would all depend on the opportunities in the local market, but that they would probably start by reviewing their actions. The third maintained that, no matter what the performance achieved, he would never turn away from the international market. Analysis of the activities of the above-mentioned firms reveals a very important fact: the two clear-visioned Moroccan owner-managers (M1 and M3) were in the business of producing goods specifically designed for the foreign market. Besides this, the local market is not as well developed and profitable as the foreign market. So, for these firms, turning away from the foreign market would mean purely and simply a change in their activities, since they would have to design new products suitable to the needs of the local market. For the Canadian enterprises (C1 and C4), in contrast, the products sold abroad can just as easily be sold on the Canadian market under almost the same conditions of profitability and satisfaction of needs. The Canadian owner-manager who declared that he would never turn away from international trade (C2), exports a product that is much more in demand abroad than it is in Canada. We thus consider that the support of P3a must be qualified in terms of the type of product or activity in question.

Proposition P3b has been weakened in the Moroccan context, based on the case studies (M2, M4, and M5). However, in the Canadian context, this proposition has been supported in the only case where negative performances were recorded. There again, the explanation is to be found in the preceding qualification linked to the type of product or market involved. Once Moroccan enterprises operating in an extrovert sector have gone international, their only choice is to stay there or completely change their activity. In the contrary, Canadian firms, whose activities involve products that can be marketed domestically without any loss of value, seem to have more choice and could very readily rebuild on the home

market in case of a poor performance abroad. Finally, proposition P3c has been globally supported in both samples. There again, certain qualifications must be introduced. Even if it is true that a positively perceived performance will prompt the owner-manager to increase their international commitment, we nevertheless observe that, despite this general rule, some owner-managers (example M1) did not wait for the first performance before increasing their commitment. Besides this, other owner-managers have maintained their previous level of commitment even in the presence of positive performances (example M4). Some owner-managers who increased their international commitment did so only in a very symbolical manner (as did C2). This can largely be explained by the fact that certain products can only be marketed as exports from the country in question.

These results have numerous implications for managers. We shall here mention only those which seem to us most important. First, these results show that the mere fact of having a vision will facilitate the decision-making process within the firm and provide certain coherence on the implementation of the decisions made. They suggest that conceiving a clear vision will show the right resources and efforts needed to succeed on the international market, thus avoiding both waste and lack. They indicate that international performance should be reviewed and counted as an important element in any decision to expand the firm's international commitment. For the SME owner-manager, they imply that they should make sure their partners make theirs, or at least do not reject the vision and that the latter catalyzes efforts to achieve the SME's objectives. Finally yet importantly, our results imply that the internationalization process is not the same for SMEs as for large firms and that, consequently, the former will need different tools and approaches to succeed in such an endeavor.

7 CONCLUSION

The results drawn from this study first remind us of what has today become a truism in the field of research on SMEs: "...the SME does not exist, there is such a diversity of cases that it is better to speak of SMEs [with an accent on the 's']. The world of SMEs is teeming with varieties.¹¹" (TORRES, 1999). This means that the relationship between owner-manager's vision and the internationalization of SMEs can never be universal in nature. Despite the limited number of cases selected, our study's combination methodology has produced a wealth of information that far exceeds the bounds of this research. It has shown clear vision to be associated with proactive internationalization, whereas fuzzy vision seems to be globally linked to a reactive approach to foreign trade. It has also shown that clear-visioned owner-managers who operate in a rather stable environment tend to plan the thrust and direction of their actions, whereas those operating in a rather unstable environment tend to improvise theirs. However, even in the latter case, we have found that individual improvisations may fit into a global framework inspired by visual clarity that will ensure the needed coherence. In most of the cases studied, owner-managers with fuzzy vision seem to improvise their individual actions. Based on this, we maintain that the unstable environment is where the need for clear vision is greatest, so that some stamp of coherence can be put on individual actions.

Though most owner-managers, whether gifted with clear vision or not, react to positive performance reports by expanding their commitment on foreign markets, their attitude towards negative performance reports seems to differ considerably depending on the extroversion of their sector. Most of the Canadian owner-managers interviewed maintain

that they would consider focusing on the domestic market if international performance reports were negative; their Moroccan counterparts firmly state that their international commitment is irreversible. This can be explained by the fact that the Moroccan agri-food sector is rather extroverted. This is what also explains the fact that even when faced with reports of negative performance, the Moroccan owner-manager will sometimes decide to increase the international commitment of their firm rather than reduce it. In other terms, the extroverted section in this case bars exit from the international market.

Our contribution is intended as a first step to better understanding of the relationship between the owner-manager's vision and the internationalization of their SME. We therefore recommend further research based on a sample containing more cases. The basic model we have developed as part of this study makes this a relatively easy undertaking. In that perspective, it would be possible to combine the qualitative approach used in our study with a quantitative one. We recommend that the research be done on firms operating in the same sub-sectors of the agri-food industry, so that results that are more homogeneous could be obtained. We also advocate the use of longitudinal studies to trace the whole visionary process, from its inception to its concrete realization. Such an approach could also use long stays in the firms studied to refine the research questions. Finally, to improve our understanding of the relationship between the vision of internationalization and its achievement, we recommend that, to the extent possible, SMEs having withdrawn from the international market should also be included in the study,

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APPENDIX 1: OPERATIONALIZATION GRID OF CONSTRUCTS AND VARIABLES

Codes	Operationalization
<i>VISION</i>	Vision of space or horizon to be occupied (<i>VSPACE</i>) + vision of means and actions to be employed (<i>VMEANS</i>) + sharing of vision with collaborators and partners (<i>VSHARE</i>)
<i>VSPACE</i>	Vision of space to be occupied by the firm (<i>VSME</i>), and/or by the products (<i>VPROD</i>), and/or the service(s) (<i>VSCE</i>). This <i>VSPACE</i> is clear if all its components add up to a value <u>between (1) and (3)</u> . A lower value means that the <i>VSPACE</i> is fuzzy.
- <i>VSME</i>	A value of (1) given to this variable means that the vision of the space to be occupied by the firm is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy or irrelevant.
- <i>VPROD</i>	A value of (1) given to this variable means that the vision of the space to be occupied by the product is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy or irrelevant.
- <i>VSCE</i>	A value of (1) given to this variable means that the vision of the space to be occupied by the service is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy or irrelevant.
<i>VMEANS</i>	Vision of organizational actions (<i>VMEANS-C</i>) + vision of resources (<i>VMEANS-R</i>) + vision of training and skill-building actions (<i>VMEANS-T</i>) + vision of marketing and competitive strategies (<i>VMEANS-CS</i>) + vision of various means (<i>VMEANS-M</i>). <i>VMEANS</i> is considered clear if all its components total a value between (3) and (5). It will be considered fuzzy if this total is lower than 3
- <i>VMEANS-C</i>	A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision of organizational actions needed is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy.
- <i>VMEANS-R</i>	A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision of resources needed is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy.
- <i>VMEANS-T</i>	A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision of the training and skill-building actions needed is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy.
- <i>VMEANS-CS</i>	A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision of the marketing strategy needed is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy.
- <i>VMEANS-M</i>	A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision of the various means of implementation needed is clear. A lower value means that this vision is fuzzy.
<i>VSHARE</i>	This value is also triangulated. Collaborators and partners are interviewed to make sure that the vision is shared. A value of (1), given to this variable means that the vision is shared . A lower value means that it is not shared.
<i>VCLEAR</i>	Operationalized based on results from the vision components. We have <i>VCLEAR</i> if and only if the <i>VSPACE</i> value lies between 1 and 3, the <i>VMEANS</i> value falls between 3 and 5 and that if <i>VSHARE</i> is equal to 1 . There is no compensation between the component values. However, a vision is considered clear and not shared if <i>VSPACE</i> and <i>VMEANS</i> are clear while <i>VSHARE</i> = 0
<i>VFUZZY</i>	Operationalized based on results from vision components. We have <i>VFUZZY</i> if <i>VSPACE</i> has a value lower than 1, and/or <i>VMEANS</i> has a value lower than 3, and/or <i>VSHARE</i> = 0
<i>DECISION</i>	Operationalized based on its components <i>DECPROACT</i> (proactive decision) and <i>DECREACT</i> (reactive decision). The decision is considered proactive if the component total is equal or higher than (2). It is reactive if lower than (2) .
<i>DECPROACT (Proactive)</i>	If the decision to internationalize is mainly fueled by one of the motivations in the table of Johnston and Czinkota (1982) or by an equivalent motivation, this construct is given a value of (1). It is otherwise assigned a value of (0). <i>DECPROACT</i> = 1 + 1 = 2
<i>DECREACT (Reactive)</i>	If the decision to internationalize is mainly fueled by one of the motivations in the table constructed by Johnston and Czinkota (1982), this construct is given a value of (1). It is otherwise assigned a value of (0). <i>DECREACT</i> = 0
<i>ACTION</i>	Operationalized based on its components <i>PLAN</i> and <i>NOPLAN</i> . A planned action is one with a value of (1). The action is considered improvised if its value is (0) .
<i>PLAN (Planned)</i>	If the action is not formalized, we search for indications of prior intention validated by checking the respondent's answers. In either case, a value of (1) is given to this construct. <i>PLAN</i> = 1
<i>NOPLAN (improvised)</i>	If the action was not formalized nor based on any clear and validated prior intention, it is assigned a value of (0). <i>NOPLAN</i> = 0
<i>PERFSELF</i>	A positive self-perception of performance or of partial achievements receives a value of (1). A negative perception receives a value of (0)
<i>PERINTENS</i>	Increase in international commitment under any form receives a value of (1). The absence of any such increase receives a value of (0). Reduction of commitment receives a value of (-1).

Footnotes

² Internationalization has been defined in various ways. We cite Dunning's definition (1989) which seems particularly appropriate to our research objective. It states that internationalization is "...the totality of cross-border activities, be they production or trade in assets, goods or services and be they carried on within the same institution or between independent economic agents."

³ Lessard and Denis (1983).

⁴ Johnston and Czinkota (1982) mention several of these stimuli such as: reception of an unsolicited order, overproduction, pressure from competition, etc.

⁵ Personal translation

⁶ This method is meant in its broadest sense, including different approaches to data collection, some of which are used in this work.

⁷ See Appendix 1. Due to space constraints, we explain how those constructs were operationalized and measured in Appendix 1. For example, the concept of vision is made of three main components as indicated in Figure 1: vision of space to be occupied (VSPACE); vision of means to put forward to attain that space (VMEANS); and the sharing of those visions with collaborates and partners of the firm (VSHARE). Depending on answers given by respondents, each component receives a mark ranging between zero and N (N being the number of sub-components of each component). For instance, VSPACE is made of the vision of the space to be occupied by the firm (VSME), by its products (VPROD), and/or by its services (VSCE). If one of those visions is clear it receives a grade of (1); otherwise, it receives zero. Then, VSPACE is clear if its value is at least (1). Many questions are asked to assess that clarity. A sample answer indicating a clear VSPACE is "In three years, I see my company as the market leader for strawberry jam in Chicago". If other data indicate a clear vision also for needed means to attain such a position and if the owner-manager's collaborates share such a vision, the latter is deemed clear. The operationalization method used to measure other variables is indicated in Appendix 1.

⁸ The SMEs selected meet the following criteria: workforce below or equal to 249 employees; plenipotentiary owner-manager holding or representing interests covering at least 51% of the firm's assets; market share less than 10%.

⁹ A theoretical saturation occurred when additional information contributes little in meaning.

¹⁰ Due to the limited number of selected SMEs, we prefer to use "support" (S) rather than "confirm" and "weaken" (W) rather than "infirm".

A VISÃO DO GERENTE PROPRIETÁRIO E SEU PAPEL NA INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO DAS PEQUENAS E MÉDIAS EMPRESAS (PMES): ESTUDO DE MÚLTIPLOS CASOS DE PMES MARROQUINAS E CANADENSES NO SETOR DE AGROALIMENTOS

Resumo: Mais frequentemente que nunca, as teorias e abordagens desenvolvidas no contexto de grandes empresas falharam na explicação da internacionalização das PMEs, em grande medida porque muitos pesquisadores tendem a tratar as PMEs como pequenas

réplicas de grandes empresas. Uma alternativa e um caminho de pesquisa promissor é focar os atributos dos gestores proprietários na medida em que eles desempenham um papel chave em tal processo de internacionalização. A presente contribuição parte da mesma perspectiva e tem como principal objetivo estudar o papel da visão do gestor proprietário na internacionalização das PMEs. Os resultados obtidos de um estudo de múltiplos casos sobre as PMEs do setor de agroalimentos no Marrocos e Canadá sugerem que uma visão clara é associada com uma internacionalização proativa, em vez de estratégias planejadas, e um envolvimento internacional crescente.

Palavras-chave: Pequenas e médias empresas – Administração. Empreurship. Globalização

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