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The success factors and objectives of strategic monitoring practices in Sub-Saharan Africa: a case study of Moroccan exporting SMEs

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to clarify the role of the strategic monitoring in the process of internationalization of the Moroccan SMEs in the Sub-Saharan African market and to identify the determinants and risks that influence the success or the failure of this internationalization. The objective is to assess a roadmap for the practice of strategic monitoring adapted to SMEs in the African context. By conducting a study on 14 Moroccan SMEs, the study's findings confirm that the strategic monitoring practices are influenced by the perceived uncertainties of internationalization relative to six environmental sectors. The management of uncertainty depends on the company's ability and its informational skills to access useful and valid information on the national and international markets. Managing the complexity of a constantly volatile environment requires strategic intelligence stimulated by strategic uncertainty. The results of analysing the collected information enable exporting SMEs to make the right strategic decisions and consequently reduce and/or eliminate perceived uncertainties.

1 Introduction

At the beginning of this third millennium, the African continent is emerging on a continental scale as a catalyst for foreign direct investment and a leading destination for SMEs. The African market's acuity illustrates the opportunities to which rival global players are rushing to explore as they seek to escape saturated markets.

As a result, the phenomenon of companies internationalizing toward Africa has intensified, leading to fierce competitiveness. Engaged in the global market, Moroccan SMEs face several challenges to seize and take advantage of the opportunities offered by this new emerging market. Global competitiveness requires these companies to focus on the search for relevant strategies and to take advantage of multilateral agreements maintained between their countries and those of the African continent. The trade openness, animated by these agreements, has been driven by the development of logistics at the continental level.

The management of uncertainty is therefore a critical challenge for any organization operating in the global market. To address the variable of uncertainty in this context, it must be addressed at the managerial level, taking into consideration the specific environmental conditions in which each organization operates and highlighting approaches designed to rationalize the management of uncertainty.

In this perspective, research into the mechanisms underlying the management of uncertainty in Africa takes center stage, revealing the determinants of strategic intelligence in the African continent and the practices adopted by the Moroccan SMEs exporters, contributing therefore to the monitoring of environmental sectors.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the role of the strategic monitoring in the process of internationalization of the Moroccan SMEs in the Sub-Saharan African market and to identify the determinants and risks that influence the success or the failure of this internationalization. In order to achieve this goal, we carry out a study involving 14 Moroccan SMEs targeting the sub-Saharan African markets. we selected the key determinants from the current state of the art in terms of strategic monitoring intelligence practices and identified the necessary skills required for implementing these practices.

2 Literature review

To frame the theoretical analysis of this problematic, we adopted an eclectic framework composed of three basic theories that qualify the role of information needed by the SME in the decision-making process. These theoretical

contributions highlight the position of the manager in the decision-making process and the central role of the strategic monitoring.

2.1 Organizational learning theory

Organizational learning theory emphasizes the central role of the information. This theoretical approach posits information as an input that serve as a catalyst for organizational learning. The organizational learning is a driving force in the learning process.

McGill and al., (1992) [1] state that the international success of SMEs depends on their ability to learn and to react effectively to a multitude of changes. The initiation of this cognitive approach in the case of exporting SMEs has been attributed to Johanson and Wierdesheim (1975) [2] and Johanson and Vahlne (2017) [3]. Companies are confronted with uncertainties that require more caution and organizational learning to provide solutions.

Advocates of this approach (Johanson and Vahlne, 2017; Johanson and Wierdesheim, 1975; Eriksson and al., 1997) [2-4] recognize the role of information in reducing the psychological distance between home market and host markets during internationalization. This learning process aims to reduce psychological distance, which significantly influences the behavior of companies in their quest to internationalize. Psychological distance is defined as the sum of factors that impede the flow of information from and into the market [3].

In this context, the cognitive approach, initiated by [3], refers to the creation of objective knowledge acquired through the transmission of information [4]. The concept of market knowledge refers to information about markets and market operations that is stored and reasonably retrievable in the minds of individuals. [4] highlight two aspects of objective knowledge: business knowledge (customers, suppliers, competitors, etc.) and institutional knowledge.

Therefore, the company seeks anticipatory information that should be in line with its objectives (Argyris, 1982) [5]. Moreover, it is the processing of information that modifies the organization's potential behavior and, consequently, its learning (Huber, 1991) [6]. By information processing, [6] refers to its acquisition, exploitation, interpretation, and dissemination.

Several studies have confirmed the correlation between environmental uncertainty and the practice of strategic monitoring in different contexts (Zhang and al., 2012; Leaptrott and McDonald, 2015) [7,8] including the Moroccan context (Amine and Hicham, 2017) [9]. Based on the informational approach of learning theory, the authors' thesis suggests that an SME is more exposed to uncertainty as it scrutinizes the sources of change.

2.2 Entrepreneurial theory

Authors of the entrepreneurial approach, who focus on entrepreneurial organizations, share the view that the entrepreneur's ability to obtain and exploit information is decisive in explaining a company's innovative attitudes.

Hayek (1945) [10] was one of the first authors to identify the role of information in enlightening the entrepreneurial project. Hayek's contribution (1945) [10] demonstrated that the difficulties of adjusting to environmental volatility are particularly linked to the fragmented and contradictory dispersion of information. The information is conducive in optimizing resources. This assertion is further corroborated by Kirzner (2009) [11], who claims that the state of perfect knowledge among actors hardly reflects reality.

According to Hayek (1945) [10], economic theory must address essential issues to provide the actors, capable of ensuring optimal rationality, with informational resources. Entrepreneurs are given an advantage over other actors in terms of their ability and capacity to make better use of information.

However, the most appropriate formulation of the link between entrepreneurial activity and information refers to the theory of Kirzner (2009) [11] and Drucker (1985) [12]. Successful entrepreneurs tend to engage in organized and motivated exploration and analysis of sources of change that uncover new perspectives (Drucker, 1985) [12]. The entrepreneur must therefore control, or even master, the sources of change he considers to be sources of innovation, including political, regulatory, and competitive changes.

Kirzner (2009) [11] contends that the uneven dispersion of information, which creates asymmetry, contradicts the assumption of perfect knowledge among actors as proposed by the classical model, allowing the most vigilant/observant entrepreneur to succeed (entrepreneurial alert). Through his vigilance, the entrepreneur detects changes and consequently exploits the resulting opportunities not identified by others.

Supporting Kirzner's thesis, Busenitz (1997) [13] attests that the entrepreneur's behavior is manifested by their state of vigilance. Similarly, Kaish and Gilad (1991) [14] suggest that entrepreneurs analyze and exploit non-traditional sources of information, described by Granovetter (1973) [15] as weak networks. The informational process is attributed to strategic intelligence (Ganzert and al., 2012) [16].

In short, the perspectives drawn from studies that adhere to this approach affirm that the more an entrepreneur is vigilant, the more he monitors sources of change and possesses skills related to their sector of activity, allowing them to target sources of change (sources of information).

2.3 Decision theory

Contributions that fall under the decision-making approach perceive the organization as an entity where decision-making is designed to be the organizational process through which problems are solved. The information constitutes an input in this process of decision-making. Problem management, arising from environmental change, is interpreted regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of decisions.

The contributions of Anderson (2007) [17] and Bendoly (2009) [18] serve as a significant foundation for comprehending decision theory from an informational perspective. Both authors were among the founders to highlight the advantages of strategic monitoring in the decision-making process. Furthermore, Anderson (2007) [17] indicates that decision-making is a process of incorporating these advantages (information). The effectiveness of those advantages/benefits depends on the relevance and reliability of the sources.

Decision-making is essentially a process of distinguishing, analyzing and choosing between alternatives Bendoly (2009) [18]. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the possible choices (in terms of information) and the possible factors (in terms of skills) that may affect the achievement of the desired objective. Problem-solving refers to the effectiveness and efficiency of the decision-making process.

However, several authors who belong to the same theoretical school - Augier and March (2008) [19], Morris and Ozawa (1979) [20], Bower (2017) [21] - indicates that certain organizations are able to adapt quite effectively, even if their use of information does not fully reflect the principles of efficiency.

Feldman and March (1981) [22] explain that the lack of clarity in this relationship is due to several factors. On the one hand, there are skill-related limitations: limited personal and organizational skills and limited analytical capabilities lead to a lack of perception of the validity of the information available to organizations. On the other hand, there is a propensity to collect and manipulate information for monitoring purposes instead of making decisions.

However, the critics of the above-mentioned authors do not deny the role of information as a tool in the decision-making process. The link between information and decision-making is more consolidated when the organization implements measurement instruments and possesses informational skills. These authors reveal the attributes of information, the skills of entrepreneurs, and the instruments required for effective management of the decision-making process.

By emphasizing the importance of entrepreneurship skills, Simon (2015) [23] argues that the key problem for entrepreneurs stems primarily from their ability to extract useful fractions of information, each of which conveys rich information. According to the author's guidelines, decision-making responsibilities must be allocated to each person who possesses the relevant information. Simon (2015) [23] stipulates that an entrepreneur is better informed when organizational mechanisms are established.

In summary, the contributions identified within the framework of decision-making theory suggest that an organization has access to rich information and has the ability to acquire and process this information (information skills).

3 Methodology

3.1 Methodological choice

We chose to conduct a qualitative abductive study, positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, as this study necessitates a significant level of contextualization. The perception of uncertainties arising from different sectors of the international environment (the determinant of intelligence monitoring) by different managers must be examined within the particular context of each exporting SME. Furthermore, the strategic monitoring systems employed by these companies are significantly influenced by the global context and the strategy they adopted.

Our purpose is to understand why and how Moroccan SME exporters practice strategic intelligence monitoring in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, we aim to identify the factors that contribute to its success, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the strategic decision-making process in managing perceived export uncertainties.

This methodological approach aims to contextualize our study by considering the various perceptions of the actors involved (Roussel and Wacheux, 2005) [24], as the practice of monitoring and the identification of strategic issues to monitor are context-dependent. Thus, the roles assigned to directors and/or export managers, along with their experience and the interpretation of their situations, provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the involvement of these diverse actors, considered as sources of information, enables an understanding of the logic and sectoral trend within the cases studied (Assabane and El Imrani, 2022) [25]. This corroborates the objectives of this research since it seeks to understand attitudes and perceptions. Consequently, we believe a qualitative study is essential and imperative, as it requires returning to theory to refine the variables.

3.2 Sampling

We seek to ensure that the sampling parameters used are in line with the predefined criteria: the saturation criterion for the number of cases, directors or at least export managers as interviewees, along with their export experience included.

The sample size was limited once saturation was reached. A total of fourteen exporting SMEs targeting the sub-Saharan African market, selected from the industrial and agricultural sectors, fulfilled this first criterion. We also focused on the export directors and/or managers of these companies, regarded as experts in the sub-sectors selected in terms of exports and considering their experience in exporting to Africa.

For the second and third criteria, the practice of the intelligence monitoring in SMEs is a task assigned according to the literature to decision-makers, and its success is highly related to their information skills. Typically, decision-makers involve the most experienced manager(s) in the group in the decision-making process (Saunders, 2017) [26]. The managers' international experience acquired in terms of practice and extensive knowledge enhances their ability to offer high-quality advice to decision-makers.

Table 1 Characteristics of sampled SME exporters

Code	Sub-sector	City	Number of employees	Export experience to Africa		Countries of export in sub-Saharan Africa	Status interviewed
				company	Interviewee		
P1	Electromechanics	Tangier	14	20 years	14 years	North and West Africa (French-speaking Africa: 16 countries)	Export Director
P2	Food industry	Berrechid	395	18 years	11 years	Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, Gambia, Guinea Conakry, Equatorial Guinea and Bissau, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Togo, Chad, and Cabo Verde.	Export Director
P3	Textile	Tangier	150	8 years	20 years	Togo, Burkina, Mauritania, Guinee, Niger.	Owner Manager
P4	Chemical industry	Meknes	115	5 years	5 years	Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Burkina Faso.	Owner Manager
P5	Food industry	Casablanca	400	9 years	19 years	Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Sierra Leone, Togo, Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Mali.	Export Director
P6	Food industry	Casablanca	35	6 years	10 years	Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, Kenya, Mali, Chad, Niger.	Owner Manager
P7	Food industry	Casablanca	250	19 years	12 years	Cameroon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Senegal.	Export Director
P8	Agriculture	Marrakech	5	10 years	15 years	Senegal, Congo Kinshasa and Brazza-ville, Angola, Gabon, Burkina-Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast.	Owner Manager
P9	Agriculture	Casablanca	9	10 years	14 years	Burkina-Faso, Benin, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gabon, Ghana, Togo.	Owner Manager
P10	Agriculture	Agadir	10	6 years	7 years	Guinea Conakry, Benin.	Owner Manager
P11	Agriculture	Agadir	15	10 years	4 years	Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast.	Export Director
P12	Agriculture	Agadir	25	15 years	15 years	ECOWAS (12 French-speaking countries), Senegal, Benin, Congo.	Owner Manager
P13	Agriculture	Agadir	+ de 200	18 years	8 years	West and Central Africa.	Export Director
P14	Agriculture	Taroudant	20	16 years	12 years	Ivory Coast, Gabon, Senegal.	Export Director

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Data processing and analysis

After the triple coding, which allows us to generate new theme categories and enrich the analysis grid, we will proceed to calculate the frequency of themes in accordance with Guthrie's (2004) [27] guidelines. These guidelines state that the weight of a theme category increases with its frequency of occurrence. The occurrence table above serves as the basis of our summary report.

Table 2 Analysis by frequency of occurrence

Theme categories	Industrial sector							Agricultural sector							Cumulative frequency		
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	Absolute	Relative	Weight
1. Perceived export uncertainties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (3)	Yes	Yes	Yes			14/14= 100%
a. Market	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	0		0	0	0	5	1% (4)	4/14= 28.57%
b. Customers	4	3	0	2	3	3	2	4 (1)	0	2	0	2	2	2	30	6.03%	12/14= 85.71%
c. Competitors	0	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	2	2	20	4.02%	11/14= 78.57%
d. Policy	3	1	3	1	1	2	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	18	3.62%	10/14= 71.43%
e. Regulations	1	2	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	2	11	2.21%	8/14= 57.14%
f. Culture	2	3	2	1	0	2	1	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	16	3.21%	9/14= 64.28%
% Sub-theme inter-case	13.9	22.9	24.2	15.0	31.8	19.6	17.1	38.9 (2)	13.8	23.8	0 28.5	15.8	13.2	17.6	100	20.12%	
2. Strategic monitoring	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			14/14= 100%
a. Frequency	11															11.47%	14/14= 100%
b. Mode	15	3	5	3	2	6	6	2	3	2	2	2	6	4	57	16.29%	14/14= 100%
% intra-case	32.9	12	5	6	4	7	5	3	5	2	2	3	7	5	81	27.76%	
		31 . 2	30.3	27.3	27.2	25.5	26.8	13.9	27.6	19.0	28.6	26.3	34.2	26.5	138		
3. Richness in reliable sources of information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (5)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		2.21%	12/14=85.71% 7/14= 50%
a. Quantity	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	2	2	11	2.21%	6/14= 42.85%
b. Quality	1	3	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	11	7.24%	12/14= 85.71%
c. Reliability	5	3	2	3	0	3	4	1	4	2	0	2	4	3	36	11.67%	
% intra-case	7.6	12.5	09.1	15.0	00 %	5.9	14.6	8.3	24.1	14.3	00.0	15.8	21.0	14.7	58		
4. Richness in selective information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			14/14=100%
a. Usefulness	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	2	13	2.61%	8/14= 57.14%
b. Quality	3	2	0	3	0	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	0	2	19	3.82%	10/14= 71.43%
c. Selectivity	5	4	2	2	2	4	5	1	2	1	1	2	3	3	37	7.44%	14/14= 100%
% intra-case	11.4	16.7	9.1	21.0	9.1	11.7	17.1	13.9	10.3	19.0	14.3	15.8	7. 9	20.6	69	13.88%	
5. Information skills	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			14/14= 100%
a. Techniques																	
b. Relational	14	0	1	2	2	6	5	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	39	7.85%	13/14= 92.85%
% intra-case	6	4	4	2	2	7	0	4	2	2	1	2	3	2	41	8.25%	13/14=92.85%
	25.3	8.3	15.2	12.1	18.2	25.5	12.2	11.1	10.3	14.3	14.3	15.8	13.2	11.8	80	16.1%	
6. Uncertainty management	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			14/14= 100%
a. Reduction	0	0	2	3	2	3	4	4	4	1	2	2	2	3	32	6.43%	12/14= 85.71%
b. Elimination	7	4	2	0	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	20	4.02%	7/14= 50%
% intra-case	8.9	8.3	12.1	9.1	9.1	11.8	12.2	13.9	13.8	14.3	14.3	10.5	10.5	8.8	52	10.46%	
Totals	79 100 %	48 100 %	33 100 %	33 100 %	21 100 %	51 100 %	41 100 %	36 100 %	29 100 %	21 100 %	14 100 %	19 100 %	38 100 %	34 100 %	497	100%	

(1): "4" means that this category was mentioned four times by the interviewee;
(2): 38.9% = (2 + 4 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 3) / 36;
(3): Yes = the category was mentioned at least once by the interviewee;
(4): 1% = 5 / 497
(5): No = the category was not discussed.

In the cross-case analysis, all categories were significant except for cases 5 and 11, which omitted the category "richness of reliable information sources". Indeed, the subcategories " monitoring frequency" and "monitoring mode" emerged as the most prominent, representing total frequencies of 57 and 81, respectively.

For the horizontal analysis, when each category is considered individually and separately (entire), the perceived threats/risks are high for SMEs operating in the industrial sector, with at least 4 sources of uncertainty identified. This observation also applies to case 8, operating in the agricultural sector, where the manager possesses a higher level of export experience in Africa, spanning 15 years. The perceived uncertainties are linked to the lack of information on six environmental sectors due to the inaccessibility of local information sources. For instance, Moroccan companies that currently have access to these markets face challenges due to the lack of government aid for exports, thereby impeding access to anticipatory information. These uncertainties are mainly related to customer recovery, and linguistic and religious variations that exacerbate the cultural differences in destination countries. These differences, intensified by a lack of cultural sensitivity or misinterpretation of behavior, lead to the failure of the internationalization project.

Monitoring methods are both formal, relying on official documents for certain regulations, and informal, using partners in host countries. Nevertheless, companies mainly target non-formal sources, given their reliability, and prefer to monitor sources of change from the reality of the market field. For certain environments characterized by a predominance of state-controlled economies, the use of formal methods and state sources could provide these companies with information relevant to any political and regulatory changes.

Regarding the monitoring process and the validity of information, managers conduct a search (quantity) of information sources and evaluate their reliability and quality. Then, from the evaluated sources, they collect and process raw information, retaining the ones with the highest quality. The parameter of information selectivity, adopted by the interviewees, responds to the quality criterion. In addition to the quality of the information, managers conduct another processing step by comparing this information with the objectives they have designated. This selectivity allows them to retain only the useful information that satisfies their requirements.

Information selectivity is a process that persists throughout the monitoring phase, despite the reliability of the sources from which it is derived. In fact, the parameters required to select information remain independent of those of its sources. For sources, the quantity, quality, and reliability constitute the basis for respondents' choices. These subcategories linked to sources were mentioned 11, 11, and 36 times, respectively. As for information, it must be useful, of high quality, and selective. These criteria related to information were mentioned by 57.14%, 71.43%, and 100% of all respondents, respectively.

However, access to information sources and the processing of information requires information skills, mainly relational skills and business-related (technical) skills. These skills are considered by managers as stimulators of strategic intelligence monitoring because they facilitate access to reliable and high-quality sources.

Respondents agreed that information skills play a crucial role in accessing sources, evaluating the relevance of the resulting information, processing it, interpreting it, and using it. Nearly all interviewees, representing 92.85% of respondents, emphasized the active role of these skills in information behaviors. These skills, primarily related to professional and relational skills, must be reinforced through experience in exporting countries.

As for uncertainty management, managers are alerted to potential threats. They evaluate them and consequently act at the appropriate moment by making a strategic decision. The decisions and actions taken may be either defensive or offensive, depending on the nature of the threat encountered.

Uncertainty management represents the ultimate phase of elimination, mitigation, or reduction. This phase is associated with its nature and its inherent characteristics: political, regulatory, cultural, customer-related, or competitive. Indeed, respondents expressed divergent opinions regarding their decisions: 50% of cases advocated its elimination, while 85.71% of respondents recommended its reduction.

A combination of the two approaches is recommended in five cases in our sample, depending on the nature of the uncertainty: when information points to political non-stability, companies leave the country; if it's competition, they try to manage it. Through uncertainty management, the decision is to move forward or backward in the penetration of the market.

4.2 Discussion of results

Co-occurrence or contingency analysis refines our study by identifying co-frequency indices within the same segment of discourse and between different themes (Guthrie 2004) [27]. We performed relational coding in a contingency matrix, emphasizing the occurrence of two or more significant units in the same segment of discourse. As a result of this study, the contingency numbers allowed us to draw out insights by combining the relationships between the different themes identified in our thematic coding.

- The Determinants and Practices of Strategic Monitoring

According to the relational analysis, executives and/or export managers who perceive greater uncertainty in environmental sectors tend to practice strategic monitoring (for the agricultural sector) and intensify it (for the industrial

sector) in these sectors, which are sources of change. The perceived uncertainties are due to a lack of information on the volatility of these sectors. Martinet A.'s (2010) [28] confirms this approach and attests that the company's environment should be defined by its actors, who are likely to exert a direct influence on this environment.

Based on the information source/uncertainty matrix (actor/theme), a particular monitoring method/mode is practiced or intensified for every sector that generates uncertainty. A variety of strategic monitoring methods had been developed, including political monitoring, competitor monitoring, customer monitoring, etc. To maintain efficiency, exporting SMEs focus on the source of uncertainty according to their information needs, thereby avoiding drowning in an abundance of useless information.

The monitoring method is dictated by the source of uncertainty and the company's ability to establish contacts. But the majority of targeted information sources are informal, considered by the company's actors to be the most reliable, and provide access to rich and valuable signals. In contrast, Formal sources of information, such as the media, the Internet, and reports, are of little importance since they only convey information that stakeholders would like to know.

Information extracted from formal sources should be compared with other sources to ensure its reliability (especially for policy-related and regulatory uncertainty). The reliability and veracity of such information need to be validated by fieldwork. Indeed, the existing literature regarding the characteristics of an information source highlights three attributes: reliability, quantity, and quality (Ivan and al., 2021) [29].

- Key factors for successful monitoring practice

Four findings are identified, highlighting the success factors associated with the practice of strategic monitoring: the manager's involvement in the information process, his relational skills (his ability to establish lasting contacts), his technical expertise (in terms of his business), and his export experience in Africa.

Through their involvement, managers play a decisive role in the strategic monitoring process; they frequently visit markets to collect and process information. They have three information-related roles: firstly, they are active observers of the flow of information concerning the development of international operations and external events affecting these operations (information on customers, competitors, suppliers, the political situation in a country, etc.). Secondly, they are disseminators of information within the company. Finally, they are the organization's representative to the external world.

Managers' relational skills facilitate access to reliable sources and the transfer of information. The sources are more accessible when managers have strong relational skills. Such skills enable them to develop their network of contacts, thereby enriching their sources of information. The reliability, quality, and quantity of these sources are the most important determinants for exporters.

Similarly, professional and technical skills give them the ability to select and interpret information by comparing information gathered from multiple sources. In the existing literature, misinterpretation of stakeholders' behavior leads to the failure of numerous internationalization projects (Ghemawat, 2008; Irrmann, 2010) [30,31].

The experience gained by export managers in Sub-Saharan Africa has provided them with solid business skills, primarily information processing skills, and has enabled them to develop a dense and lasting network of contacts. The literature accords information processing skills a moderating role in the context of exporting SMEs; it is export skills that significantly influence the ability of companies to analyze and exploit information appropriately.

Exporting SMEs are more informed about the volatility of their international environment when their managers are involved in the monitoring process and have solid information skills in their field. By employing both proactive and reactive intelligence monitoring and depending on the sector of activity, managers can access reliable and rich sources of information and also obtain selective, useful, and high-quality information.

- The aims of strategic monitoring

According to the interviewees, decision-making in the face of perceived uncertainties is not accidental; rather, it is an intelligent and deliberate action. Decision-making is a process through which the decision-makers extract the succinct fractions from the informational capital that provide valuable information about the threats they may encounter in the markets. Through this strategic information, uncertainties are analyzed and assessed according to their severity in relation to their uncertainty/information sources matrix.

In the literature, having sufficient information enables a detailed analysis of threats and opportunities (Tepeli and al., 2019) [32]. The more information an entrepreneur has about the international environment, the more likely he is to take risks (Tarek and al., 2019) [33].

Uncertainty management is a sequential process in the SMEs of the sample, which matures with the enrichment of information. The information gathered and processed during the strategic intelligence monitoring process is used as resources that SMEs utilize to strategically respond to threats. For this reason, the more advanced the intelligence process, the more mature the information resources of managers become, allowing them to reduce perceived uncertainties.

This informational capital is a toolbox to which managers refer for any rational decision. Uncertainty management is defined in terms of anticipation. Through this, certain threats must be avoided (such as those related to politics), while others must be reduced (such as those related to the market, competitors, and customers). However, the analysis of threats

must consider their level of seriousness (criticality) and the opportunities that exporting SMEs can derive from environmental sectors. Consequently, exporting SMEs are less exposed to uncertainties if they have selective information from reliable sources.

5 Conclusion

Two sectors of activity in the Moroccan context are studied: the industrial sector and the agricultural sector, each of which has its particularities and specific characteristics. We, therefore, interviewed the managers of exporting SMEs or at least the export directors. The manager's export experience in sub-Saharan Africa is considered a determining factor as it enhances their "information skills."

The experience of the export directors and that of the companies are relatively high among SMEs in the industrial sector compared to those in the agricultural sector. This disparity is attributed to the nature of their activity.

Indeed, the practice of monitoring is relatively structured in the industrial sector, while it is intentional among managers in the agricultural sector. The responses of the managers in the agricultural sector show that the concept of "strategic monitoring" remains poorly understood, except in two cases where they simply refer to "the search for information" in their remarks. They are mainly concerned with uncertainties linked to customers and competitors.

Furthermore, the perception of uncertainty and the frequency of monitoring are quite high among industrial sector managers. They attach importance to all sources of uncertainty. The frequency of different categories of themes is relatively higher compared to the agricultural sector. These particularities are linked to the difference in managers' skills and management of information and the nature of their activity. The main themes mentioned (uncertainty, strategic monitoring, and uncertainty management) by managers in both sectors confirm these results.

The originality of this paper lies in its contribution to the development of a roadmap outlining the process through which Moroccan SMEs are gaining access to the African market by managing risks through the practice of strategic monitoring. Consequently, setting an example for SMEs of other countries with similar characteristics to those of the Moroccan economy.

However, the limitation of this study lies in the fact that "export experience" is too significant. It deserves to be classified in the analytical grid as the third subcategory of the "information skills" theme for higher representativeness. This suggests further perspectives regarding the conceptualization of a framework of information skills specific to Moroccan exporting SMEs.

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