

The contribution of CEO profile to enhancing SME performance: Evidence from an empirical study using SEM

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Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of key concepts shaping the organizational landscape, including human capital, competencies, organizational culture, and business performance. A precise and rigorous definition of each element is provided to establish a solid theoretical foundation. Subsequently, an extensive review of the scientific literature is conducted, highlighting both theoretical and empirical studies that have examined the influence of executives' characteristics and competencies, as well as organizational culture, on overall business performance. This review aims to shed light on the various perspectives adopted by researchers in this critical area. From a methodological standpoint, we adopted a quantitative approach by developing a questionnaire distributed to 250 service SMEs located in Marrakech. Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test and validate our research hypotheses and model. The results of our study demonstrate that the characteristics of the executives' profiles have a positive impact on the performance of service SMEs in Marrakech, Morocco.

Keywords: *Competencies, Executive profile, Human capital, Organizational culture, SME performance, Structural equation modeling (SEM).*

1. Introduction

In an economic environment characterized by rapid changes and increasing competition, the performance of companies heavily depends on the quality of their human capital, the skills of their leaders, and their organizational culture. These dimensions, often studied independently, interact closely to influence the growth trajectory and success of organizations. Human capital, as a reservoir of knowledge, skills, and experience, serves as a strategic lever for any company seeking to strengthen its competitiveness [1]. The skills of the leader, particularly in leadership, decision-making, and strategic direction, play a central role in guiding and driving the performance of companies, especially SMEs [1]. Similarly, organizational culture, by shaping behaviors, values, and internal practices, influences the organization's ability to effectively mobilize its human resources [2].

This article aims to analyze these complex relationships by first providing a rigorous definition of the key concepts, followed by a critical review of the existing theoretical and empirical literature. This approach will help in better understanding how the characteristics of the leader's profile and organizational culture impact overall business performance. Drawing on a quantitative approach, this research also proposes a conceptual model that will be tested through an empirical study conducted with 250 service SMEs in Marrakech, Morocco, using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). By combining theory and empirical results, this article aims to contribute both scientifically and practically by identifying action levers for improving SME performance in a dynamic and uncertain context.

Despite the growing interest in the determinants of SME performance, few studies have simultaneously analyzed the combined influence of the leader's profile and organizational culture on their

success. Moreover, in the context of Moroccan SMEs, especially those in the service sector, empirical research integrating these dimensions remains limited. Therefore, a central question arises:

To what extent do the characteristics of the leader and organizational culture contribute to improving the performance of service SMEs in Marrakech?

To address this issue, the article is structured coherently. First, we define the fundamental concepts, namely human capital, leader's skills, organizational culture, and business performance. Next, a review of the scientific literature is presented to showcase the main theoretical and empirical contributions related to the impact of the leader's profile and organizational culture on organizational performance. We then develop our conceptual research model along with the hypotheses that emerge from it. The adopted methodology is then detailed, emphasizing the quantitative approach, the development of the questionnaire, and the application of Structural Equation Modeling for data analysis. The empirical results are then presented and discussed in-depth. Finally, the article concludes with a synthesis of the main contributions, a reflection on the study's limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Littérature Review

In management sciences, numerous studies have sought to understand how the individual characteristics, competencies, and cultural background of business leaders impact the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This section explores these relationships by reviewing major theories and empirical findings concerning (i) the demographic characteristics of leaders, (ii) their competencies, and (iii) the influence of national culture, while highlighting the nuances and contradictions reported in the literature.

2.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Leader and SME Performance

Human capital, as a fundamental factor of organizational success, plays a central role in shaping the trajectory of individual and organizational performance. Heckman [3] acknowledges that non-cognitive skills, encompassing personal characteristics not measured by subject-specific knowledge tests, are crucial to success in life. In this regard, Anikin [4] defines human capital as "a system of rent-generating assets reflecting various facets of human personality, with the effective formation of such capital occurring during the early stages of individual development." Expanding on this idea, [5] view human capital as encompassing a broad range of human qualities related to performance and productivity, including personal traits, values, and work attitudes. This perspective is further supported by Kuzminov, et al. [6] who highlight the significance of psychological and socio-psychological aspects in the development of human capital. Focusing on a specific dimension, Limbach, et al. [7] explore elements of human capital directly linked to understanding the desires and motivations of recruitment managers in contributing to innovation within organizations. Together, these various perspectives underline the growing recognition of the diversity and significance of human capital components within the context of both personal and organizational development.

The performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can be defined as their ability to effectively and efficiently achieve their objectives and missions. Likert [8] in a study on American businesses, suggests that companies managed in an authoritarian manner tend to perform better in the long term compared to those managed democratically. However, decentralization practices and decision-making participation, which promote accountability and information flow, are identified as contributors to better outcomes [9].

The separation of ownership and management, highlighted by Barney [1] affects the financial performance of companies. Ngotta and Becho [10] argues that the combination of management and control functions provides the managing director with significant influence over financial performance. However, Omri [11] points out that the leader's control mechanisms do not always have a significant effect on performance, emphasizing a statistically significant relationship between governance modes and performance.

The Upper Echelons Theory, proposed by Hambrick and Mason [12] and later updated by Hambrick [13] emphasizes the critical influence of executives' sociodemographic attributes on organizational outcomes. According to this framework, factors such as age, professional experience, and social background of leaders are closely linked to SME growth dynamics. Research by Hambrick and Fukutomi [14] and Schultz [15] supports the idea that these characteristics significantly shape business performance, with a particular emphasis on the positive impact of managerial experience in adapting to market fluctuations.

Additional studies by Kor [16] and Ngotta and Becho [10] confirm that leadership experience is crucial for identifying and seizing strategic growth opportunities. Similarly, Morin [5] emphasizes that age, experience, and educational background are key determinants of managerial skills and the ability to drive company development.

Regarding young executives, the Upper Echelons Theory suggests that lower risk aversion fosters innovation [12]. Research from the University of Pennsylvania shows that companies led by younger leaders file more patents and tend to recruit young inventors, thereby reinforcing the positive relationship between leadership youth and innovation. Likert [8] finds that firms headed by younger CEOs tend to invest more and demonstrate stronger growth prospects.

Leadership ownership also emerges as a significant source of power. Studies by Finkelstein [17]; Onali, et al. [18] and Wu, et al. [19] argue that ownership concentration strengthens managerial control. According to agency theory, ownership aligns the interests of the principal and the agent. Zhang, et al. [20] show that CEO ownership influences major board decisions. However, findings are mixed: Adams, et al. [21] report a positive impact of CEO power on performance, while Kaczmarek, et al. [22] and Limbach, et al. [7] observe respectively a negative and a U-shaped relationship between CEO power and firm performance, highlighting the need to account for sectoral and cultural differences.

The path to leadership, whether through internal promotion or external recruitment, also plays an important role. Internal promotions are said to enhance CEO power through stronger organizational control [20] reducing specific risks [19]. However, Adams, et al. [21] note that increased CEO power may also lead to greater stock price volatility.

Executive education is another essential factor, grounded in human capital theory [9]. Formal education, internships, and prior work experience build human capital, enhancing decision-making capabilities [19]. Many studies [10] suggest that leadership skills derived from education and experience are critical predictors of SME performance. Nevertheless, the findings are mixed: while some [1] associate higher education with increased innovation, others [23] find no direct link to financial performance.

Finally, specialized education in operational disciplines appears to foster better performance [16] although the relationship between education and performance remains strongly context- and sector-dependent.

H: The demographic characteristics of the leader positively impact SME performance.

2.2. Managerial Competencies and SME Performance

The term "competence" has a long history, initially associated with the powers and duties officially recognized by a public authority, as early as the Code of Hambrick and Fukutomi [14]. Over time, its meaning has expanded, moving from institutional legitimacy to individual capability derived from knowledge and experience, an evolution that has been evident since the late 17th century. Nigussie, et al. [24] points out that Heckman [3] introduced the term "linguistic competence," clearly distinguishing competence from skill, emphasizing that competence does not necessarily guarantee corresponding performance due to the multiple factors that may interfere. According to Heckman [3] competence results from an abstraction of observable linguistic data, depending on various parameters such as the situation, context, and psychological dispositions. This cognitive perspective is counterbalanced by the constructivist approach, which emphasizes an individual's values, motivations, and beliefs in the

development of skills, suggesting their transferability across different contexts, including professional ones.

In management since the 1970s, the concept of competence has gained central importance in response to major changes in the organization of work. Automation, computerization, product diversification, and customer demands have reshaped human resource management practices, with competence becoming a crucial benchmark. Zarifian [25] emphasizes that the current instability heightens the importance of a competence-based approach, explored both at the managerial and strategic levels to ensure the survival and success of organizations. However, the definition of competence remains complex, influenced by various logics and origins, sometimes associated with performance. In light of this diversity, this article aims to provide an overview of the different contributions that have marked the evolution of the concept of competence, offering a comprehensive perspective on its main characteristics, thereby becoming one of the most debated themes in education and human resource management.

The competencies of business leaders are a critical driver for enabling SMEs to respond to environmental challenges and manage their operations effectively. According to the resource-based view (RBV), the success of SMEs is linked to the possession of rare, valuable, and inimitable resources, among which managerial competencies figure prominently [1]. Efficient resource management is considered a source of competitive advantage, often tied to the leader's unique skills, as highlighted by Schein [2].

Empirical research, including the study by Nigussie, et al. [24] conducted in Gabon, confirms the significant impact of managerial competencies on SME performance, aligning with findings by Barney [1].

Management science literature consistently emphasizes the critical role of managerial skills in SME success. Kaczmarek, et al. [22] cited by Morin [5] argue that exceptional business growth is often linked to founders who recognize their own management abilities and proactively seek growth opportunities. Managerial competencies are multidimensional, encompassing personality traits, technical skills, specific knowledge areas, and context-driven motivations [24].

Subsequent studies, such as those by Lenihan, et al. [26] demonstrate the direct positive impact of competencies like banking management, while Omri [11] highlight how leadership and team-building skills foster innovation and enhance SME performance.

Moreover, the resource-based performance theory asserts that managerial competencies are fundamental to building and sustaining a lasting competitive advantage [3]. Whether related to marketing, finance, legal, or administrative domains, these skills strengthen organizational efficiency [27]. Their continuous and strategic deployment promotes sustainable growth and profitability [2]. Conversely, the absence or underdevelopment of these skills is frequently cited as a major cause of SME failure [2].

Behavioral anchors, such as effective communication, serve as performance benchmarks for assessing managerial competencies [6]. Consequently, managerial skills provide a crucial framework for evaluating and understanding both individual and organizational performance levels [10].

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Business leaders' competencies positively influence SME performance.

2.3. National Culture and SME Performance

The term "culture" derives from the Latin word "colere," meaning "to tend to the land and make it grow." It encompasses the lifestyle of a group, including behaviors, beliefs, norms, ways of thinking, feelings, and interactions [23]. Culture is often seen as global, typically shared within a common geographic area, and learned through interaction [13]. In the organizational context, culture, according to Schein [2] is a declaration of beliefs and ideals that shape identity and define the execution of tasks through norms, beliefs, rituals, heroes, and ideals. Armstrong [27] describes it as unwritten ideals that determine how things are done and behaviors within the organization. Nigussie, et al. [24] assert that organizational culture influences both internal and external relationships, encompassing structure, leadership, objectives, rewards, motivation, and the approach to risk. According to Nigussie, et al. [24] culture provides an identity for the entity, determined by rituals, heroes, beliefs, language, morals, and

norms, offering benefits such as social cohesion and an understanding of opportunities. A strong culture, according to Falola, et al. [28] dictates decisions, ensures social cohesion, and promotes effective collaboration, facilitating the recruitment and retention of high-performing staff. It also guides interactions and encourages healthy competition while uniting staff members despite their diverse backgrounds [24].

Since the 1980s, the relationship between organizational culture and business performance has attracted considerable scholarly attention, notably through the works of Nlemvo [29]; Schein [2] and Barney [1]. Two main research perspectives have emerged in this area. The first, known as the cultural strength approach, focuses on cultural homogeneity within organizations to assess its impact on performance. The second, based on cultural traits, proposes that certain types of organizational culture are more closely associated with superior financial outcomes and seeks to identify the distinguishing features of high-performing companies.

While a strong organizational culture appears to correlate positively with short-term financial results, research such as Schultz [15] suggests that, over the long run, an overly rigid culture may hinder adaptability to changing environments. Schein [2] attempted to bridge these perspectives by defining the cultural type as the dominant trait and cultural strength as the alignment between shared beliefs and management practices. Their findings indicate that strong cultures emphasizing specific traits can have a significant impact on organizational performance.

Further research by Schein [2] revealed that strong cultures emphasizing human-centric values outperform those based on strict control mechanisms. In higher education institutions, "clan" and "benevolent autocracy" models were found to be more effective than bureaucratic or market-driven structures. Hence, the coexistence of diverse cultural traits within an organization is closely linked to its overall effectiveness and success across multiple dimensions of performance.

Organizational culture, therefore, stands out as a critical driver of performance, shaping leadership behaviors and contributing to the broader success of enterprises [19]. Moreover, studies such as those by Hambrick and Fukutomi [14] highlight that action-oriented cultures, as well as those fostering innovation and risk-taking, are strong predictors of short-term success and long-term sustainability. A growing body of empirical evidence thus reinforces the strong connection between organizational culture and performance.

H₃: National culture positively impacts SME performance.

Our proposed conceptual model, incorporating all previously discussed variables, is illustrated as follows:

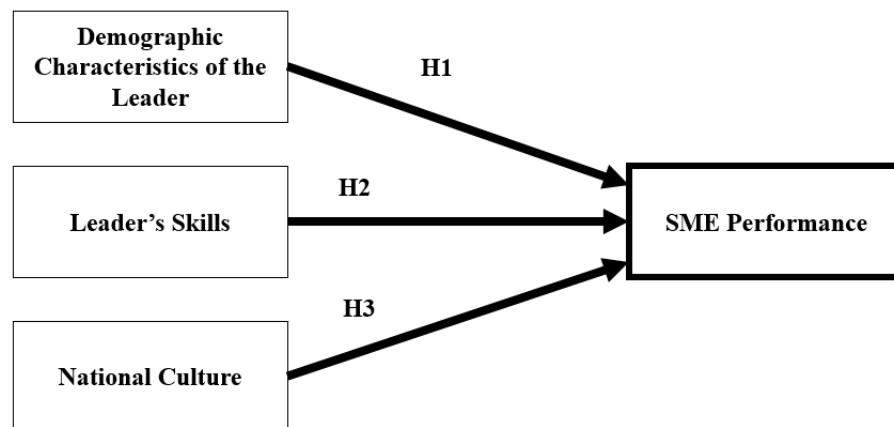


Figure 1.
Conceptual research model.

3. Methodology

Our sample focuses on SMEs in the Marrakech-Safi region operating in various service sectors, including healthcare, construction, real estate, logistics, finance, consulting, training, ICT and services, as well as tourism and leisure. These sectors play a strategic role in the local economic development. SMEs in these fields contribute significantly to job creation, innovation, and the adoption of technology within the region. The diversity of the chosen sectors allows for an exploration of the impact of the leader's profile on SME performance across a wide range of key economic activities crucial to the Marrakech-Safi region.

In our study, a total of 362 questionnaires were distributed, of which 103 were returned completed, yielding an initial response rate of 28.45%. However, 3 of these responses were unusable due to missing data, bringing the actual response rate to 27.62%. Ultimately, data from 100 SMEs were deemed valid for analysis.

3.1. Measurement Instruments

In order to address our research questions, we chose to use two types of scales in our questionnaire. On the one hand, we included closed-ended single-choice questions, allowing respondents to select one answer from several options, thus facilitating the collection of clear and comparable quantitative data. On the other hand, we opted for attitude scale questions, specifically by using the Likert scale.

Indeed, the Likert scale, developed by the American psychologist Rensis Likert, is a psychometric tool commonly used to measure individuals' attitudes. This instrument enables participants to express their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. In our study, we employed a 5-point Likert scale to assess both the characteristics of the leader's profile and the national culture, with responses ranging from 5 ("Strongly agree") to 1 ("Strongly disagree"). Furthermore, regarding the performance variable of SMEs, we also used a 5-point Likert scale, but with categories ranging from 5 ("Very high") to 1 ("Very low").

Regarding the measured dimensions, we relied on well-established academic references. Specifically, the demographic characteristics of the leader (age, experience, and education) were based on the works of Barney [1]. The measurement of managerial competencies was inspired by the contributions of Barraud-Didier, et al. [9]. Lastly, the performance of SMEs was assessed following the studies of Omri [11].

3.2. Data Analysis Tools

For data analysis, we chose to use the software SmartPLS (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling - PLS-SEM). This tool is particularly suitable for our research, as it allows us to simultaneously test and validate the proposed conceptual model and research hypotheses. Given the nature of our study, which involves measuring latent variables through multiple indicators (using Likert scales), SmartPLS offers a robust approach to assess both the measurement model (validity and reliability of the constructs) and the structural model (relationships between constructs). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is especially appropriate when the primary objective is predictive research and when the research model is complex, as is the case in our study. Thus, SmartPLS will enable us to perform an exploratory analysis, validate our measurement scales, and test the direct and mediating effects hypothesized in our theoretical framework.

4. Results

4.1. Sample

The sample for the empirical study consists of 100 SMEs located in the Marrakech-Safi region (Table 1), with a predominance of limited liability companies (SARL) (86%), followed by public limited companies (SA) (11%) and general partnerships (SNC) (3%). The most represented sectors are finance, consulting, and training (28%), healthcare (19%), and tourism and leisure (15%), while ICT,

construction, real estate, and logistics complete the range. Regarding company size, 45% of the firms employ between 201 and 250 people.

Table 1.

The characteristics of the surveyed companies.

Characteristics of the companies		Frequency	Percentage
Legal form	Public limited company (PLC)	11	11%
	Limited liability company (LLC)	86	86%
	General partnership (GP)	3	3%
Business sector	Healthcare	19	19%
	Construction	14	14%
	Real Estate	7	7%
	Logistics	4	4%
	Finance, consulting, and training	28	28%
	ICT and services	13	13%
	Tourism and leisure	15	15%
Number of employees	From 1 to 10	14	14%
	From 11 to 50	16	16%
	From 51 to 100	14	14%
	From 101 to 200	11	11%
	From 201 to 250	45	45%

The SME leaders show diversity in terms of age, experience, and education: 48% are between 35 and 50 years old, 29% are under 35 years old, and 19% are between 51 and 60 years old. More than 55% have over 10 years of professional experience, and 84% hold a higher education degree, highlighting the importance of expertise and qualifications in SME management (Table 2).

Table 2.

The characteristics of the surveyed respondents.

Respondent characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Age of the leader	Under 35 years old	29	29%
	From 35 to 50 years old	48	48%
	From 51 to 60 years old	19	19%
	Over 60 years old	4	4%
Years of experience of the leader	Less than 2 years	5	5%
	Between 2 and 5 years	11	11%
	Between 5 and 10 years	29	29%
	More than 10 years	55	55%
Education of the leader	Middle school	4	4%
	High school	12	12%
	Higher education	84	84%

4.2. Model Validation

The results summarized in Table 3 indicate that Cronbach's Alpha, Rho_A, and Composite Reliability (Rho_C) all exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) surpasses 0.5. These indicators confirm the convergent validity of the measured constructs, ensuring both satisfactory internal consistency and strong alignment between the items and their corresponding constructs. Additionally, the R-square value for the variable 'Firm Performance' is 0.661, and the adjusted R-square is 0.651 (Table 4), demonstrating a substantial proportion of the variance explained by the model. This validation phase meets the methodological standards commonly accepted in management sciences, in line with the recommendations of Heckman [3].

Table 3.
Convergent validity results.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Conceptual skills	0.940	1.010	0.970	0.942
Demographic characteristics of the leader	0.792	0.793	0.906	0.828
Firm Performance	0.947	0.948	0.954	0.676
Human skills	0.815	0.829	0.890	0.729
Individualism vs. Collectivism	0.895	0.897	0.927	0.761
Leadership competencies	0.896	0.903	0.919	0.621
Masculinity vs. Femininity	0.872	0.873	0.922	0.798
National Culture	0.945	0.948	0.951	0.535
Power distance	0.891	0.900	0.921	0.700
Technical skills	0.874	0.878	0.914	0.726
Uncertainty Avoidance	0.889	0.893	0.918	0.692

Table 4.
R² Values.

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Firm Performance	0.661	0.651

4.3. Hypothesis Validation

Firstly, although it was hypothesized that the demographic characteristics of the leader would have a positive impact on the performance of SMEs in the Marrakech-Safi region, this assumption is indeed confirmed. The T-statistic, which equals 1.965, and the p-value, which is below the 0.05 threshold, indicate a statistically significant relationship. This finding suggests that the leader's characteristics exert a measurable influence on the performance of SMEs in this region.

Table 5.
Results of the First Hypothesis.

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H1 Demographic Characteristics of the Manager -> Firm Performance	-0.129	-0.103	0.066	1.965	0.049

On the other hand, the hypothesis that the leader's competencies would have a direct impact on the performance of SMEs in the Marrakech-Safi region is rejected. The obtained T-statistic, which is 0.423, is well below the threshold value of 1.986, and the p-value, which is 0.672, significantly exceeds the significance threshold of 0.050. This indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the leader's competencies and the performance of SMEs in this context.

Table 6.
Results of the Second Hypothesis.

Hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H2 Managerial Skills -> Firm Performance	-0.046	-0.044	0.11	0.423	0.672
H2.1 Conceptual Skills -> Firm Performance	0.001	0.002	0.056	0.021	0.984
H2.2 Human Capacity -> Firm Performance	0.069	0.067	0.087	0.791	0.429
H2.3 Technical Skills -> Firm Performance	-0.108	-0.096	0.124	0.868	0.385

Finally, the analysis confirms that national culture has a positive influence on the performance of SMEs in the Marrakech-Safi region. This hypothesis is convincingly validated, with a T-statistic of 8.953 and a p-value below 0.000, indicating a strong correlation between the variables. This reinforces the idea that cultural factors play a key role in business performance in Morocco.

Table 7.
Results of the Third Hypothesis.

Hypothesis		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H3	National Culture -> Firm Performance	0.838	0.844	0.094	8.953	0.000
H3.1	<i>Power Distance -> Firm Performance</i>	0.242	0.233	0.156	1.552	0.121
H3.2	<i>Masculinity vs. Femininity -> Firm Performance</i>	0.353	0.342	0.121	2.920	0.004
H3.3	<i>Individualism vs. Collectivism -> Firm Performance</i>	0.114	0.116	0.098	1.162	0.245
H3.4	<i>Uncertainty Avoidance -> Firm Performance</i>	0.281	0.294	0.112	2.516	0.012

The empirical data analysis of this study led to significant conclusions, allowing for the confirmation and rigorous validation of two hypotheses (H1 and H3). These hypotheses are supported by solid and relevant empirical evidence in the Moroccan context. However, hypothesis H2 was disconfirmed, as it did not meet the required statistical validation criteria.

5. Discussion

The study conducted in the context of Moroccan SMEs tested three hypotheses related to business performance. Two of them were validated: the influence of the demographic characteristics of the manager (Hypothesis 1) and that of national culture (Hypothesis 3). However, the impact of managerial competencies (Hypothesis 2) was not empirically confirmed. These results, although partly consistent with the existing literature, highlight specificities of the Moroccan context, which modulate the effects observed in other countries and in previous studies.

Hypothesis 1, which was validated in this research, is in line with the findings of several studies, notably those by Zarifian [25]. These authors emphasized that age, education level, professional experience, and socio-economic background of managers significantly influence company performance. In Morocco, where SME managers often come from traditional entrepreneurial backgrounds, these demographic traits appear to support strategic decision-making and pragmatic management, thereby enhancing business performance.

Contrary to several previous studies — notably those by Armstrong [27] — Hypothesis 2 was not validated in this research. While these authors reported a positive correlation between managerial or technical skills and business performance, our study in the Moroccan context suggests a different reality. Several factors may explain this divergence, including the persistence of family-run management models, the limited integration of formal competencies into daily business operations, and structural or cultural constraints that reduce the direct impact of managerial skills on SME performance.

The validation of Hypothesis 3 aligns with the conclusions of studies by Barraud-Didier, et al. [9] who demonstrated the significant influence of national culture on organizational performance. In Morocco, cultural values such as solidarity, loyalty, and the importance of family and social relationships influence management practices and strengthen employee commitment. This alignment between cultural norms and managerial practices creates an atmosphere of trust and cohesion conducive to performance. Moreover, the country's gradual openness to international practices encourages a hybrid management model that benefits the competitiveness of SMEs.

6. Conclusion

This research examined the impact of managerial profiles on the performance of service-oriented SMEs in the Marrakech-Safi region, using a quantitative approach based on a sample of 100 companies. The findings confirmed two main hypotheses: demographic characteristics of managers (such as age, education, and experience) positively influence firm performance, and national culture significantly shapes managerial decisions and organizational dynamics. However, formal managerial skills did not show a significant effect in this specific context.

The study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a purely quantitative methodology. In addition, key variables such as innovation, digitalization, and CSR were not included, although they could significantly enrich the analysis. A mixed-method or qualitative approach, along with broader geographic and sectoral coverage, would help deepen understanding of the performance drivers of Moroccan SMEs.

From both theoretical and managerial perspectives, this research enhances the understanding of how leadership profiles affect SME performance. It also offers practical insights for policymakers and support institutions to help SME leaders grow and adapt. Lastly, the study opens several promising avenues for future research, such as incorporating new variables and exploring digital transformation as a performance lever.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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