

# The Exporting SME, Definitions and Incentive Specificities for Approaches by Resources and Customer Relations

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**ABSTRACT:** *The SME is a vague concept whose definitions vary (Julien et al., 2004). Economic and legal diversity is a first characteristic of the definition of SMEs. It is not surprising that researchers, scientists and governments around the world have repeatedly attempted to define SMEs without reaching a comprehensive definition that takes into account both legal and economic aspects. The difficulty arises from the fact that the definition should satisfy the (sometimes conflicting) objectives of a diverse panel of stakeholders. For example, while researchers and scientists try to give a theoretical definition of the different characteristics of SMEs in order to follow their reality, politicians and public authorities prefer to have a practical and operational definition to implement various government programs. However, the lack of a unified definition may result from the circumstances of differentiating between SMEs using two broadly distinct approaches: the qualitative approach and the quantitative approach. Actually, the definitions using the qualitative criteria are also known as theoretical, sociological or analytical criteria while the approach using quantitative criteria is also called descriptive. In this sense, our objective in this paper is to provide some insights that we deem necessary about exporting SMEs.*

**KEY WORD:** *SME, customer relations, exporting SME*

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## I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the legitimacy of the adoption of the approach by resources and that of inter-organizational relations as relevant analytical frameworks for understanding the export performance of SMEs. In this context, our argument is based on two central premises. The first relates to the state of the art itself, which is undergoing two profound changes, namely the exhaustion of the SCP paradigm (*structure-conduct-performance*) in favor of the resource-based approach (RBV), and the advent of relational approaches faced with the limits of neoclassical transactional approaches. The second premise is due to the particularities of the SME context whose management is marked by the strong presence of the person of its leader. We assume that such a profile would be more conducive to capability approaches, particularly those related to the management of inter-organizational relationships.

Since it has a conceptual essence, the objective of our research is to appeal to the theoretical foundations available in the literature as well as to the evolution of the concepts affecting the environmental reality to see to what point we can extend the concept of the environment. We proceed by reading this reality through the different paradigms of entrepreneurship. Then we will try to identify the main determinants that can intervene to promote an entrepreneurial reading of the environment and explain the different levels of environmental integration.

### 1. THE EXPORTING SME, ELEMENTS OF DEFINITION AND SPECIFIC INCENTIVES FOR APPROACHES BASED ON RESOURCES AND CUSTOMER RELATIONS

Traditionally, the SME is defined on the basis of quantitative criteria. However, it is clear that SMEs cannot be structured in a manner homothetic to large companies. Other criteria of a qualitative nature should, therefore, be used to identify the specificity of this type of company.

#### 1.1. A few benchmarks for the definition of the object "exporting SME"

##### 1.1.1. General quantitative definition of the SME-object

Regardless of the level of development of economies, SMEs occupy a preponderant place. To define this category of enterprises, several criteria are used by economists and statistical organizations. These criteria are generally

quantitative in nature; it refers to variables such as capital, number of employees, turnover and balance sheet total. However, the thresholds accepted are different from one country to another. For example, the SME is defined in Japan and the United States as being the company which employs less than 500 people. In Switzerland, companies employing less than 100 people are considered small and medium-sized companies.

In Morocco, SMEs represent the sinews of economic activity- they employ more than 95% of the population of companies forming the national industrial fabric and more than 50% of employees in the private sector. This growing role prompted the proposal of a unified definition of the SME since there was none until July 2002. Indeed, the first article of Law 53-00 establishing the charter of the SME defines it as "a company managed and/or administered directly by the persons who are the owners, co-owners or shareholders and which is not held at more than 25% of the capital or voting rights by a company or jointly by several companies". Two other quantitative criteria complete the definition suggested by the charter, namely:

- The SME must have a permanent workforce not exceeding 200 people.
- The SME must have achieved, during the last two financial years, either a turnover excluding tax of less than 75 million DH, or a balance sheet total of less than 50 million DH (see table 1).

**Table 1: Business classification criteria in Morocco<sup>1</sup>**

Type of company	Permanent staff	Turnover or balance sheet total	
Big business	more than 250 employees	more than 75 million DH	more than 90 million DH
SME	- 250 employees	- 75 million DH	- 90 million DH
Microbusiness	- 10 employees	- 10 million DH	- 15 million DH

It should be noted that alongside this official typology adopted by the ANPME, other institutions had implemented their own definitions. Thus, for banks, SMEs are companies that achieve a turnover of around 200 million DH. For the Department of Foreign Trade and SMAEX, exporting SMEs are companies whose export turnover exceeds 10 million DH <sup>2</sup>.

### 1.1.2. The exporting SME and the issue of identification

Different terminologies are used in the literature to refer to companies that have extended their production and/or sales activities beyond national borders. In particular, studies on new so-called world-class SMEs (McDougall et al. 1994 <sup>3</sup>; Knight & Cavusgil , 1996 <sup>4</sup>) and those on exporting SMEs show that these companies are involved in various forms of activities abroad. Nevertheless, export constitutes the essential form of their involvement in this field. Some definitions put forward by some authors make it possible to clarify what we mean by exporting SMEs. For example, Miesenbock (1988) <sup>5</sup>, who was one of the pioneering authors of internationalization, specifies that exporting refers to the sale of products/services beyond national borders and that it can take place under two main forms, namely indirect and direct. The indirect form of export involves the use of an intermediary who ensures the entire marketing. On the other hand, the direct form requires a greater commitment of resources that are not necessarily within the reach of the SME. It is characterized by whether intermediaries such as agents, representatives and distributors are used as a means of serving the targeted clientele. For the purposes of this research, we mean by exporting SME the following: "an independently owned and managed, small or medium-sized enterprise that has extended beyond national borders, through intermediaries or not, the sale of its products ". We have chosen to study only export activity because it is the mode of internationalization still favored by SMEs ( Dhanaraj and Beamish , 2003) <sup>6</sup>.

With regard to the particular question of typology, Cavusgil (1984) <sup>7</sup> considers that exporting companies are often wrongly considered as forming a homogeneous group, and that it is necessary to establish a

<sup>1</sup>This table was drawn up by a mixed commission, made up of representatives of Bank Al-Maghrib and the Professional Group of Moroccan Banks. The objective of this commission was to draw up new European standards resulting from the Basel II agreements.

<sup>2</sup> LECONOMISTE, "SME: the new definition in the process of being validated" Edition N° 3456 of 2011/01/31 available online at: <http://www.leconomiste.com/article/pme-la-nouvelle-definition-en-validation-course>

<sup>3</sup>McDougall PP, Shane S, Oviatt BM. (1994): " *Explaining the formation of international new ventures - the limits of theories from international-business research* ". Journal of Business Ventures **9** (6): 469-487

<sup>4</sup>Knight, G., & Cavusgil , ST (1996): " *The Born Global Firm: A Challenge to Traditional Internationalization Theory* " Advances in International Marketing, Volume 8, pp 11-26.

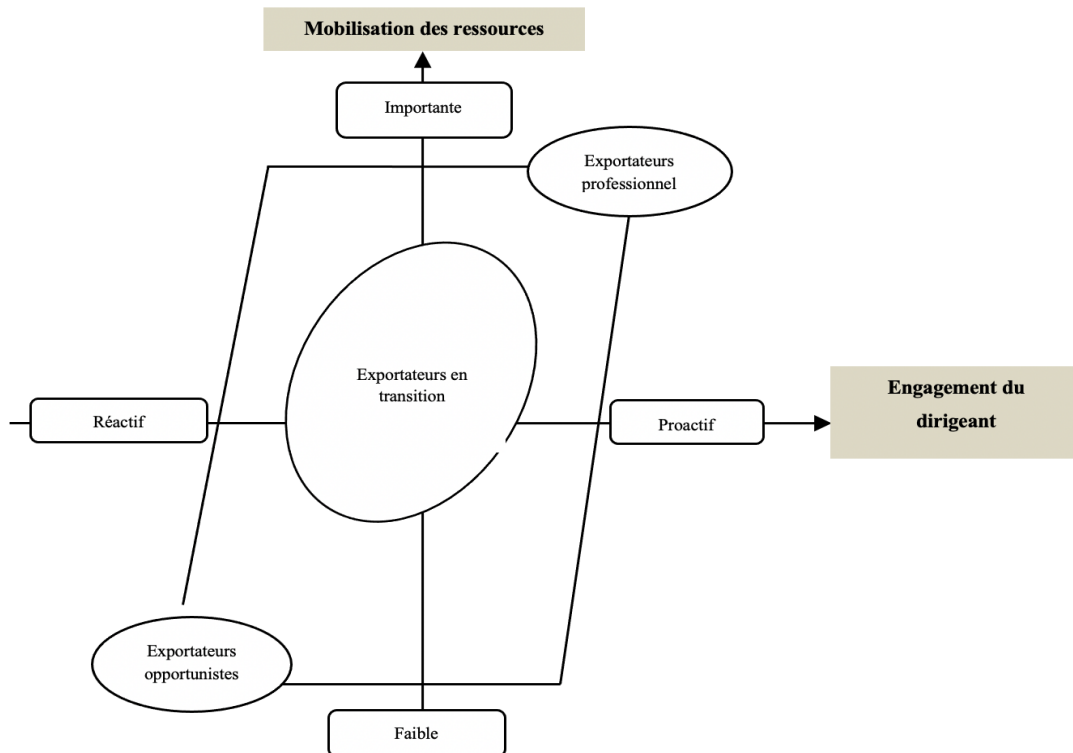
<sup>5</sup> Miesenbock , KJ (1988): " *Small businesses and exporting: a literature review* ", International Small Business Management , vol. 16, p. 42-61.

<sup>6</sup> Dhanaraj , CA and PW Beamish (2003): " *Resource-based approach to the study of export performance* ", Journal of Small Business Management , 41, 3, 242-261.

<sup>7</sup> Cavusgil S Tamer (1984): " *Differences Among Exporting Firms Based on Their Degree of Internationalization* ." Journal of Business Research . 12(2), 195-208.

categorization of these companies. Indeed, a study by Joyal et al (1996)<sup>8</sup> highlights three types of exporting SMEs, namely professionals, those in transition and opportunists. These three types of companies differ from each other in terms of strategy, management commitment, resources mobilized, marketing practices and export performance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A typology of exporting SMEs (from Joyal et al. 1996, page 103)



### 1.2. The qualitative specificities of SMEs

The economic definition of the SME, based on purely quantitative criteria, is not enough to identify the nature of the demarcation between it and large companies, insofar as it does not reflect the true nature of this category of company. Indeed, purely quantitative criteria could suggest that the SME is a miniature version of the large enterprise. This contiguous vision of the SME devotes to it a form of inferiority which recalls the Schumpeterian conception of the small size incapable of internalizing the technological dynamics and the realization of economies of scale, synonymous with economic efficiency (Kobaa, 2011)<sup>9</sup>.

The shortcomings of quantitative definitions of SMEs have led researchers to break with this traditional view. For these researchers, if the difference between large and small companies is size, it is also and above all nature. In other words, small businesses are characterized by traits that are specific to them. These characteristics make it possible to give conceptual foundations to the SME and to make it an object of analysis in its own right.

This is how a community of researchers called “PMists<sup>10</sup>” got involved in researching the specificities of the SME and in developing managerial definitions outside purely and exclusively quantitative criteria. Olivier Torrès, famous French PMiste, speaks in this context of the paradigm of specificity of the SME. He considers this specificity in relation to four dimensions, which we report, with some modifications<sup>11</sup>, in the following table:

<sup>8</sup> Joyal, A., P.A. Julien, L. Deshaies, et C. Ramangalahy (1996) : « *Typologie des comportements stratégiques des PME exportatrices* », Revue Internationale de Gestion, vol. 21, n. 1

<sup>9</sup> Salah Koubaa (2011) : « *La coopération inter organisationnelle et l'innovation en PME: Capacité d'absorption, partage de connaissances et communautés de pratique* », Editions universitaires Européennes.

<sup>10</sup>This scientific community is structured around several international research associations, the main ones being ISCB (*International Council of Small Business*) and AIREPME (*International Association for Research in SMEs*).

<sup>11</sup>In fact, the author speaks of four dimensions of specificity: psychological specificity being considered as a dimension in its own right. We have chosen to put it in the same register as that of decision-making specificity because we consider that the two dimensions refer to the central role of the leader.

**Table 2: The dimensions of the specificity of the SME, inspired by Torrès.O (1998), “New approaches to understanding SMEs”, Economica.**

<b>Specificities environmental</b>	dependence on competitors, customers and suppliers and submission to the environment.
<b>Specificities organizational</b>	Informal and centralized structure with low specialization and little differentiation.
<b>Specificities decision-making and psychological</b>	centralization of decision-making, strong short-term orientation and reactive behavior.

We analyze below the characteristics cited in Table 2, and their implications in relation to the continuation of this research. It is particularly about specificities which make that the framework of analysis by the capacities and the inter-organizational relations would be appropriate to apprehend the performance of the SME, in particular its export performance.

### 1.2.1. Environmental specificity: the dependence of the SME on its environment

In its relationship with its environment, the SME has practically no capacity for influential action- it can only suffer its effects and respond with adaptive strategies. This relative submission reflects the high vulnerability of small businesses. Marchesnay and Messeghem (2001, page 54)<sup>12</sup> define this vulnerability as being “ *the reduction in the degree of strategic freedom linked to the decisive influence of the conditions specific to the technico-economic environment* ”. Such a reduction in freedom leads to a structural dependence of the SME vis-à-vis its environment. To underline the extent of this phenomenon, O. Torres (1999)<sup>13</sup> uses the metaphor of “The butterfly effect”, initially proposed by Mahé de Boislandelle (1988)<sup>14</sup>. This principle, well known in chaos theory, means that an apparently minor event (eg flapping of the wings of a butterfly in Australia) could have major repercussions in contexts that are a priori distant (e.g. cyclone in North America ). Thus, an economic crisis in Europe could, through a chain reaction effect, have a dramatic effect on Moroccan exporting companies. The risk of catastrophe is all the greater when the size of the company is reduced, when its resources are limited (O. Torres, 1999).

O. Torres (1999) also argues that the fragility of the SME is measured by the degree of dependence of the latter vis-à-vis its customers, in the sense that “the more the share of turnover achieved with a customer, the more the company settles in a situation of dependence ”. The extreme situation is presented by the case of the company which works with a single major client. It is obvious in this case that the loss of this customer can prove fatal. The mechanism of subcontracting offers a good illustration of this phenomenon .i.e. a minor drop in the turnover of a principal can be accompanied by a vertiginous drop in that of his subcontractors .

The phenomenon of vulnerability is more evident among exporting companies. The export of manufactured goods generally takes place in a “ *Business to Business* ” market with local distributors and intermediaries. The expression of Mahé de Boislandelle (1998), “ *everything is strategic in SMEs* ” takes on its full meaning when it comes to the relationship between exporting SMEs and their customers in developed countries. In such a context, the exporting company depends on a limited number of customers who fundamentally have more alternatives. In such a configuration of structural dependence, knowing how to create and develop successful relationships with its customers would be a vital factor of competitiveness.

### 1.2.2. The organizational specificities of the SME: flexibility

If the small size reduces the capacity of the SME to act on its environment, the fact remains that it is at the origin of a major advantage: flexibility. Indeed, SMEs are known to be more flexible compared to large companies. The notion of flexibility is assessed with regard to the choices available in terms of decision-making. Julien and Marchesnay (1988)<sup>15</sup> note the existence of three forms of flexibility that characterize small businesses, namely:

- **Operational flexibility:** which concerns the diversity of possible arrangements of resources. In SMEs, operational flexibility is high because resources and activities are less specialized, employees and managers are versatile, etc.
- **Organizational flexibility:** which translates into the adaptability of the organization.
- **Strategic flexibility:** which expresses the number of degrees of freedom available to the company to set (the potential) and accomplish (the workforce) its goals translated into objectives, taking into account the

<sup>12</sup> Ma Marchesnay.M et Messeghem.K (2001) : « *Cas de stratégie de PME* », Editions EMS.

<sup>13</sup>Olivier Torres, (1999) : « *Les PME* », Editions Flammarion, Collection DOMINOS, page 15.

<sup>14</sup>Mahé De Boislandelle H. (1998) : « *Gestion des ressources humaines dans les PME* », 2<sup>ème</sup> édition, Paris, Economica.

<sup>15</sup> Julien P.-A., Marchesnay M (1988) : « *La Petite Entreprise* », Paris, Vuibert.

environment. Bureaucratic structures imply a highly formalized information system for strategic decision-making, reducing the variety of possible solutions and ultimately impacting strategic flexibility.

### **1.2.3. The decision-making specificity of the SME : the " egotrophy " of the manager**

The SME is characterized by a strong personalization of its mode of management. To underline this omnipresence of the person of the leader, certain authors<sup>16</sup> speak of " *Egotrophy* "; " *it is increasingly recognized that if the SME cannot be approached as a large company in miniature, it is precisely because of the omnipresence, omnipotence and egotrophy of the said leader* " ( Allali , 2002, page 4)<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, the management of the SME is centralized around the personality of its leader. The latter is often himself the owner or the main shareholder of the company. The functions of management and ownership are thus confused; the boundaries between strategic, operational and tactical decisions are blurred. The company's strategy is rather informal and intuitive. It reflects the goals of leaders. Therefore, the role of the owner-manager is central. This is all the more true since the leader represents the anchor point between the internal and the external, and makes his personal contacts and his local environment his means of achieving the objectives of his company.

The leader's personality and skills are expressed through the various facets of the daily operation of the SME. While managers are relatively interchangeable within and between large companies, this phenomenon is less evident in the SME context. It is not uncommon for the manager of an SME, because of his competence and his legitimacy, to be the only one capable of solving certain problems, playing the role of interface with the key players in the environment. Julien (1997)<sup>18</sup> emphasizes that the omnipresence of the manager coupled with the low degree of specialization within the SME leads the manager to take part in (and even be in control of) all strategic and operational decisions. It is he, for example, who will decide to approach a market, or will travel to meet the clients. The central role of the manager is all the more visible when it comes to SMEs involved in internationalization projects, in the sense that " *knowledge of the market and the preferences of the decision-maker play a decisive role in this decision Whatever the type of factor favoring the appearance of export stimuli, their recognition and influence on the export decision depend on knowledge, attitudes and managerial motivations* " ( Allali , 2002, page 3)<sup>19</sup>. Some researchers even go so far as to consider the internationalization of SMEs as a form of accomplishment entrepreneurial spirit of its leader ( Boutary et al, 2007)<sup>20</sup>.

### **1.2.4. Local management of SMEs and the importance of the relational dimension**

It would not be surprising, in a context marked by a strong presence of the manager- a flexible and intuitive mode of decision-making, that the role of social relations is decisive in facilitating the operation of the SME. This feature is so important that we could speak of relational assets ( O.Toress , 1999) . The relational dimension is more important in small organizations than the organizational dimension. In this type of structure, the relational dimension intervenes at all levels and constitutes the notion that embodies the managerial specificities of small organizations. Indeed, to underline the importance of relational assets, two notions are put forward in the literature: interactivity (Julien & Marchesnay , 1988) and proximity (O. Toress , 1999).

According to Julien and Marchesnay (1988), interactivity refers to " *the negotiation of more sustained exchange relations relating to the cost, nature, quality and extent of the transaction* ". The authors above consider interactivity as a strategic path resulting from a specialization of the value chain for the company deciding its positioning in the productive space. They distinguish two forms of interactivity, one being organizational, the second being strategic. Organizational interactivity **corresponds** to the intensity of the exchanges and the degree of complicity that is established between the members of the organization- basically an "adhocratic" structure in the sense of Mintzberg. As for strategic interactivity , it is defined by the density and permanence of the links woven with the company's external partners.

In the same vein, O.Toress (1999) introduces the notion of proximity, which he considers to be " *the internal principle that federates all the economic, organizational and psychological specificities of the SME* " ( O. Toress, 1999, page , 30). In this context, he distinguishes between several forms of proximity. We particularly

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<sup>16</sup>Notably Mahé de Boislandelle , quoted by O. Torres, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Allali B. (2002) : « *Vision des dirigeants et internationalisation des PME : ébauche d'un cadre conceptuel* », 6ième Congrès International francophone sur la PME.

<sup>18</sup>Julien P.-A. (1997) : « *Les PME : bilan et perspectives, 2ème édition* », Edition Economica Paris, Les Presses Inter-Universitaires, Québec Canada.

<sup>19</sup>Previously cited

<sup>20</sup> Boutary, Martine (2008) : « *Les groupements de PME : changement organisationnel pour le développement de l'activité internationale* », 9ème Congrès International francophone en entrepreneuriat et PME, Louvain la Neuve,. Accessible through the following link <http://web.hec.ca/airepme/images/File/2008/C35.pdf>

mention the proximity of the leader with the main players in the environment. O. Torres considers that " *for the SME manager, a behavior based on proximity reduces the level of uncertainty, and facilitates action in a personalized organization with limited resources.*" <sup>21</sup>. In the name of the principle of proximity, the manager is the key actor, at the hinge of the company and its various partners. It symbolizes the company with other players in the environment, which allows it to build direct and close relationships and therefore generate a high level of interpersonal trust. According to O. Toress (1999), the commitment of the SME to export does not escape this principle of proximity; in carrying out the export activity, the manager is the first "salesman" of his company to foreign customers. This idea is also corroborated by the contributions of sequentialist models <sup>22</sup>of internationalization.

## II. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Defining the concept of SME, and more specifically exporting SME, is a major academic and political challenge. The term SME, on its own, encompasses a diversity of entities that differ not only in terms of size, but also in structure, market and strategy. This diversity is both a richness and a challenge for researchers, policy makers and practitioners, who seek to define, understand and support these enterprises.

Quantitative approaches, widely used for their simplicity and objectivity, offer a first entry point for defining SMEs. However, as our study underlines, these criteria remain insufficient to understand the complexity of SMEs. They tend to reduce SMEs to miniaturized versions of large companies, thus neglecting their specificities.

In addition, our research has highlighted the importance of qualitative criteria to grasp the particularities of SMEs. Four main dimensions have been identified: environmental, organizational, decisional and relational.

Environmental specificity highlights the vulnerability of SMEs to their environment, due to their lesser ability to influence market conditions. This leads SMEs to develop adaptive strategies, which can however be sources of innovation and flexibility.

Organizational specificity reveals the competitive advantage that small size can represent. Indeed, operational, organizational and strategic flexibility, although constrained by limited resources, allows SMEs to innovate, adapt quickly to changes and personalize their offer.

The decision-making specificity, for its part, underlines the preponderant role of the manager in the management of the SME. The omnipresence of the leader, characterized by the notion of "egotrophy", can certainly generate risks, particularly in terms of succession and excessive dependence on a single person. However, it can also be a source of responsiveness and internal cohesion.

Finally, the relational specificity highlights the importance of social relations in the functioning of SMEs. Proximity to employees, customers and suppliers can allow SMEs to develop a better knowledge of their market, build relationships of trust and benefit from support networks.

Despite these advances, the definition of SMEs, and more particularly of exporting SMEs, remains a field of research in full effervescence. Many challenges remain, particularly in terms of generalizing the results and linking the different dimensions. In addition, taking into account the temporal dynamics, in particular the growth trajectory of SMEs, could enrich our understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, exploring new avenues, such as the impact of digital technologies or corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, could also shed new light on SMEs.

With regard to exporting SMEs, the need to deepen our knowledge is even more crucial. Indeed, the act of exporting involves a series of additional challenges for SMEs, such as managing geographic and cultural distance, adapting to foreign regulations or managing international networks. The issue of identifying exporting SMEs also remains a sticking point, as demonstrated by the different terminologies used in the literature.

Thus, our research highlights the need to continue to explore and refine our understanding of exporting SMEs, taking into account their specificities, both quantitative and qualitative. The objective is twofold. On the one hand, to provide robust theoretical tools for researchers, and on the other hand, to propose concrete recommendations for policy makers and practitioners, in order to effectively support these companies in their internationalization process. .

Furthermore, it is important to note that SMEs, in their diversity, play a crucial role in the dynamism of economies around the world. Their contribution to employment, innovation and social cohesion is widely recognised. In this context, the issue of exporting is of particular importance, as it represents a major opportunity for SMEs to diversify their markets, increase their competitiveness and contribute to economic growth.

In conclusion, this study constitutes an important advance in the understanding of exporting SMEs. However, it also highlights the complexity of the subject and the need for continued research efforts in this area.

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<sup>21</sup> Toress (1999), page, 30

<sup>22</sup>Sequentialist model : developed by Swedish researchers from the Uppsala School . This model postulates that exporting SMEs favor first the geographically closest countries and then the psychologically closest ones.

We hope that this research will encourage other researchers to look into this essential question and contribute to enriching our knowledge of exporting SMEs.

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