

## **EXPORT STIMULI PERCEIVED BY THE MANAGERS OF INDUSTRIAL COMPANIES: THE CASE OF THE TUNISIAN SME**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The perception of export stimuli is particularly important and was identified by several studies as essential factor of the export success of the SME. An exploratory survey with Tunisian exporters SME allowed to identify which stimuli exports are perceived by the managers.*

**KEYWORDS:** Managers, Export Stimuli, SME, Tunisia.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During the last decades and after the remarkable increase of international transactions, a large number of researchers in international marketing particularly studied the concept of the export performance of the company. In this perspective, the authors consider that the export is a very advantageous activity for the financial situation of the company, its competitive position and its growth (Kuppusamy and Anantharaman, 2008).

According to researchers in international marketing, the importance of the role played by the leader appears as a determining factor of the export performance of SME. According to several studies (Aaby and Slater, 1989; Walters and Samiee, 1990; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Boyer, 1994; Zou and Stan, 1998), the perception of the manager of international markets is identified as an essential success factor of the export. Most previous researches were however realized in the developed countries. The objective of our research is to identify the success keys perceived by the leader of the company in a particular context, that of the country in transition. Another objective covered by this research which is the analysis of the existing links between the perception of the various export stimuli.

To achieve these goals, we use the example of Tunisian industrial companies. In fact, in the past researches, we notice that the number of the works realized in developed countries is highly significant. Our study was conducted in a very distinctive framework: Tunisia, an emerging country in a transition phase. Within the framework of this study, we present in the first part the conceptual framework of research. In a second part, we will present and discuss the results of our empirical study to finally conclude the managerial implications which ensue from it.

### **Stimuli determining the export decision**

In this part, it is advisable to present the research works which were conducted on the perception of export stimuli. The export stimuli are defined as "the factors that promote the company's decision to initiate and develop export activities" (Wiedersheim-Paul and al., 1978). The study of the export stimuli consists in analyzing the motivation of the directors of the SME to engage in export. "Exporter" is a very important decision for the leaders of SMEs. The latter are more vulnerable

on the overseas market than on their domestic market. Thus it is necessary to wonder about the motivations which encourage SMEs to export and to accept this risk. We then adopted the same approach followed by the other researchers by identifying at first these stimuli, and then finding the logic of grouping.

The motives are numerous and diversified. The majority of researchers chose SME as field of study. Bilkey (1978) researches confirm that the short-term profit is not the triggering factor for the export but rather the avoidance of losses facing a saturated domestic market. In their works on export stimuli, Wiedersheim-Paul and al. (1978) Identified six motives evoked by surveyed Swedish SMEs: the provision of exclusive competence, the fortuitous arrival of a command emanating from a foreign customer, a too strong competition on the internal market, the underutilization of the production capacity, the opportunity on an overseas market and policies of Government export assistance.

A few years later, an investigation was realized by Brooks and Rosson (1982) on Canadian SME and finds fourteen motivations which urge companies to export. According to these researchers, the main triggering factor for the export decision is the existence of an unused production capacity, well before the arrival of an unsolicited foreign command. As for Keynak and Stevenson (1982), the most important motives are: domestic market saturation, the intensity of the local competition, the unfavorable economic environment on the same market, the existence of an unexploited production capacity and foreign command received. In the United States, Johnston and Czinkota (1982) identified thirteen export stimuli which are in the order: the opportunity to realize a better profit abroad, the provision of a unique product, the technological advance, the will of management, Government assistance, the pressure of the local competition and having a marketing advantage. On the Norwegian market, Joynt (1982) observed that the most cited stimuli are the reception of an unsolicited foreign command, the existence of an unexploited production capacity and the increase of the competitive pressure. With the development of the internationalization of markets, the research works on export stimuli multiplied since the 1970s. Indeed, a large number of researches listed by Katsikeas (1996) and Leonidou (1998) were made in North America whereas they find only few studies concerning transition countries.

In the context of a transition country "Cyprus", Katsikeas (1996) identified eighteen reasons for encouraging Cypriot SMEs to export. Indeed, the first major stimuli according to this study are in order: the will or the desire of the manager; receipt of a foreign command unsolicited; the international experience of the leader; the increase of sales and profit through exports; the diversification of markets and the reduction of risks. In the same context, Leonidou (1998) stipulates that among the most important objectives of any company are the sale, the profit, and the ambition of growth. Therefore, SMEs export because they want to operate sales and profit potential offered by foreign markets which are considered as a ground favorable to the realization of these objectives. In this study, this stimulus is followed by the need for growth of the company and the interest of the leader for the export. However, the most important motivation for export, according to Le and Luong (2009), is the receipt of an unsolicited order. This result shows the passive attitude of the managers of Vietnamese companies. So, during these debuts, the receipt of an unsolicited order can be a driving factor important due to lack of experience abroad which characterizes these companies.

The table below (table 1) recapitulates the results of the two studies conducted by Leonidou (1998) on SMEs of Cyprus and the works of Le and Luong (2009) realized on Vietnamese companies (see table 1) with which the results of our study will be compared

**Table 1: Rank order of export stimuli by Leonidou (1998); Le and Luong (2009)**

Export Stimuli	Rank by Le & Luong (2009)	Rank by Leonidou (1998)
Need for business growth	2	2
Sales potential / additional profits	3	1
Saturation / global decline of the domestic market	19	9
Particular interest of the leader for export	4	3
Discovery of an opportunity abroad	6	4
Competitive pressure on the domestic market	7	14
Reduction of the dependence in the internal market	9	7
Saturation / decline of sales / domestic profits	14	11
Exclusive information about an overseas market	15	8
Favorable exchange rate	16	12
Take advantage of an unexploited production capacity	13	11
Governmental assistance to export	10	16
Beginning of the export of a domestic competitor	8	17
Contact established during an international fair	17	10
Particular competitive Advantage	5	6
Research of economy of scale	12	5
Receipt of an unsolicited foreign order	1	15
Encouragement of a professional partner	18	18
Unique product features	11	8
Better seasonal spreading of sales	20	13

The export stimuli of SMEs are thus numerous and varied. The triggering factor most frequently cited by researchers is the arrival of an unsolicited foreign command. The literature review identifies two classifications of export stimulus. Indeed, some authors suggested distinguishing stimuli according to their internal or external origin to the company (Brooks and Rosson, 1982; Gibiat, 1994):

- The internal stimuli concern the factors which are endogenous to the company as the expansion needs and the detention of a unique competence.
- The external stimuli are linked to the environment of the company as the governmental programs which promote export, the competitive pressure, etc. but the most commonly cited stimulus is the reception of an unsolicited foreign command.

This typology of stimulus is the most used in literature and easy to use. In fact, several studies demonstrated that the decision of export of most of the SME was taken after the appearance of an external stimulus (Bilkey, 1978). However, the inconvenience of this classification, according to Katsikeas (1996), is to explain poorly the differences of behavior of companies in the export. To resolve this problem, certain authors proposed another way of classifying stimuli: the proactive and reactive stimuli (Johnston and Czinkota, 1982; Katsikeas, 1996; Orthodox priest, 2002). The reactive stimuli represent the motivations which are the result of reactive behavior to the external changes in the company. Thus, the proactive stimuli contain the active or aggressive behavior based on the internal situation of the company.

This classification of the proactive and reactive stimuli explains better the differences of behavior of the company on the overseas markets and is more efficient than the internal/external differentiation. The researchers conducted by Johnston and Czinkota (1982); Katsikeas (1996) and Orthodox priest (2002) used this classification and observed that the proactive stimuli are often considered important by the leaders of SME than the reactive stimuli.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Country of the study

Previous researches on the export performance are generally realized in developed countries (Cook, 2001; Luong, 2010). However, this study focuses on a more particular context. It is about an emerging country in phase of transition: Tunisia. The choice of this country is justified by the importance of the export in the Tunisian economy. It contributes to 46,4 % of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The Tunisian export knows every year a 13,1% increase (CEPEX, 2010). Consequently, 130 new exporting companies appeared in the sector (CEPEX, 2010).

### The data collection

In order to know the perception of export stimuli of the leaders of Tunisian SME, an exploratory survey was realized. The survey took place during one and a half month, from January 10th to 30 Mars 2013. The portal of the Tunisian industry (<http://www.tunisieindustrie.nat.tn>) was used to establish the list of companies to be questioned having a staff less than 200 permanent employees. The questionnaire was sent by electronic way to 250 Tunisian exporting companies and 115 answers were obtained. The response rate (46 %) is completely satisfactory and much upper to the average rate (29 %) of the studies conducted on this subject (Leonidou, 2004). From the literature review, we established a list of 20 export stimuli. To measure the perception of every stimulus, a scale with 4 points was used (1=Unimportant, 2=little important, 3=important and 4=very important). The results concerning the perception of export stimuli identified by the Tunisian exporters are presented in the following paragraph.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Characteristics of the sample

To interpret better the statistical results, it is advisable to describe the characteristics of companies interviewed (see Table 2).

**Table 2: characteristics of the sample**

Characteristics	Percentage
<b>Business sector</b>	18% Mechanics and electronics (IME)
	58% Textile and clothing (ITC)

	24% Agri-food (AF)
<b>Export experience</b>	32 % exporting to more than 5 countries
	54% have more than 10 years export experience

The IME companies constitute 18% of our sample. The companies of the ITC sector constitute 58% and the rest contains companies of the IAA. Concerning the export experience, 32% of the interviewed companies export to more than five countries. However, 54% of companies who have more than 10 years export experience.

### Rank order of export stimuli

First, we presented the results of the two studies conducted by Leonidou (1998) on SMEs of Cyprus and the works of Le and Luong (2009) realized on Vietnamese companies (see table 3) with which the results of our study will be compared. The latter was based on a ranking by order of importance of twenty export stimuli, that is according to the proportion of the "important" and "very important" answers (see table 3).

The analysis of factors motivating the commitment of Tunisian companies abroad indicates that 13 stimuli (the proportion of the "important" and "very important" answers is superior to 50 %) are important causes for export (table 3).

**Table 3: Rank order of export stimuli**

Export Stimuli	Rank (ranked in ascending order)	Average	Proportion of answers "Important" or "very important"
Need for business growth	1	3.53	96.4
Sales potential / additional profits	2	3.46	93.8
Saturation / global decline of the domestic market	3	2.84	71.5
Particular interest of the leader for export	4	2.78	69.7
Discovery of an opportunity abroad	5	2.96	67.2
Competitive pressure on the domestic market	6	3.89	65.1
Reduction of the dependence in the internal market	7	2.44	63.4
Saturation / decline of sales / domestic profits	8	2.52	62.4
Exclusive information about an overseas market	9	2.32	61.6
Governmental assistance to export	10	2.86	60.9
Contact established during an international fair	11	2.33	57.2
Favorable exchange rate	12	2.49	51.7
Encouragement of a professional partner	13	2.14	50.3
Take advantage of an unexploited production capacity	14	2.1	38.9
Particular competitive Advantage	15	2.05	36.3
Research of economy of scale	16	2.14	33.7
Receipt of an unsolicited foreign order	17	2.19	32.4
Beginning of the export of a domestic competitor	18	2.2	26.8
Unique product features	19	1.84	25.4
Better seasonal spreading of sales	20	1.65	23.7

The cause of export cited by 96,4% of the Tunisians SME is the need for the company's growth which was not the case of the Vietnamese SMEs (Le and Luong, 2009) and Cypriots SMEs (Leonidou, 1998). Secondly, the potential of additional sales/profits is a very important motivation for 93,8% of Tunisian companies. These two stimuli reflect the active attitude of the Tunisians SMEs to seek opportunities in foreign markets. Also, the results show that 71,5% of the Tunisian companies are attracted by the export because the domestic market is saturated. Seen the saturation of the local market, 69,7% of the leaders of the SME attach great importance for export in order to conquer new markets and discover opportunities abroad (67,2%). Furthermore, several leaders (65,1%) think that the local competitive pressure pushes them to conquer new overseas markets. Also, a significant number of the respondents (63,4%) want to reduce their dependence to the domestic market and find that their internal sales are saturated to see in decline (62,4%).

The Tunisian government also plays a key role in the commitment of SMEs to export. Thus, a significant number of Tunisian leaders (60,9%) consider that they more motivated abroad with assistance and aid from the State. Classified in 12th place with a rate of 51,7%, the exchange rate is also an important motivation for the managers of the Tunisian companies. Indeed, this interest is justified by the fact that the majority of the foreign customers of Tunisian companies are European companies (CEPEX, 2010). Finally, the rest of the stimuli is less important for the majority of Tunisian managers with proportions of the "important" and "very important" answers lower than 50%.

#### **Purification of the scale “export stimuli”**

After having classified these stimuli, we realized a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on stimuli classified as being the most important (the proportion of "important" and "very important" responses is greater than 50%).

The result of the PCA after a varimax rotation revealed four factors which explain 82,847% of the total variance. The KMO indexes as well as the alpha Cronbach of the four found dimensions are satisfactory (table 4).

**Table 4: Results of factor analysis of export stimuli**

Export stimuli	Components after Varimax rotation			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Need for business growth	0,935			
Sales potential / additional profits	0,846			
Particular interest of the leader for export		0,965		
Discovery of an opportunity abroad		0,821		
Exclusive information about an overseas market		0,836		
Contact established during an international fair		0,874		
Favorable exchange rate		0,753		
Competitive pressure on the domestic market			0,896	

Reduction of the dependence in the internal market			0,921	
Saturation / decline of sales / domestic profits			0,989	
Saturation / global decline of the domestic market			0,654	
Governmental assistance to export				0,754
Encouragement of a professional partner				0,643
<b><math>\alpha</math> of Cronbach</b>	0,865	0,835	0,859	0,696
<b>KMO</b>	0,721			
<b>Explained variance</b>	24,451	23,106	23,869	11,421

This study was able to demonstrate that the export stimuli are grouped in four factors. Indeed, the first axis gathers the stimuli which represent the potential of development to the export. Thus, we found that the companies which need growth are the ones which find that the export represents an additional potential of sale and profit. The second factor gathers the stimuli which indicate the commitment of the leader to search information about the overseas market and its interest in the export. Therefore, the leaders who give a particular interest for the export are the ones who have an exclusive information about the overseas market ( $r=0,621$  and  $p=0,000$ ), are the ones who are attracted by the favorable exchange rate during the transactions abroad ( $r=0,621$  and  $p=0,006$ ), are the ones who discovered an opportunity abroad ( $r=0,911$  and  $p=0,000$ ) and are the ones who developed contacts during an international fair.

The third axis gathers the stimuli which represent the characteristics of the local market and explains 23,869% of the phenomenon. Besides, SMEs which try to reduce the dependence to the internal market are the ones who face a saturated market ( $r=0,623$ ;  $p=0,000$ ) and with which the domestic sales decline ( $r=0,923$ ;  $p=0,000$ ) and are also the ones who face the competitive pressure of the local market ( $r=0,603$   $p=0,000$ ). The fourth axis explains 11,421% of the phenomenon and group stimuli relative to the State assistance and the encouragement of the professional partners to the export. The dimension of "aid and assistance" can be considered as new dimension compared to other studies carried out in the same context "the Tunisian context" such as the works of Zghidi A ., Boubakri W. and Zaiem I. (2012, 2013). This result explains the important role played by the Tunisian State and the other professional partners in the development of SME exports on an international scale.

## CONCLUSION

Face of the globalization of markets, the abolition of the borders and the increase of the competition, succeed internationally became a real challenge and a harder objective to achieve in particular for SMEs. This is the reason why a large number of researchers in international marketing carry a growing interest about the exporting companies. In the same context, these researchers consider that the perception of the manager of export stimuli can be a determining factor of the export performance of the company (Aaby and Slater, 1989; Walters and Samiee, 1990; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Boyer, 1994; Zou and Stan, 1998). In this context, the main objective of this present work is to determine the motivations which urge Tunisians SME to export and the links which exist between these various stimuli. Thus, the Tunisian managers can identify, through an overview of export stimuli, which are the most important factors for their company.

For the not exporting companies, this research can be considered as a support for the preparation of a first attempt to export. Several reasons explain the decision of export for certain Tunisians SME. Indeed, the most important stimuli for the Tunisian managers are the proactive stimuli. They find in the export a better solution for their growth needs and potential sales and additional profits. This result underlines the voluntary behavior of the leaders of Tunisian companies. So this study shows the very particular interest which carries the Tunisian manager to the export and his commitment in the research for the information and the discovery of new markets. This conclusion corroborates with the results of the works realized by Bellaaj and Akrouf (2005) who assert that "the export activity of the Tunisian companies is not the result of an occasional opportunity" but rather a deliberate and voluntary decision. On the other hand, this result diverges with that found by Le and Luong (2009) who assert that the most cited stimulus by Vietnamese SMEs is the receipt of foreign commands which is a passive motivation limited to an accidental export.

This research also shows that the Tunisian managers commit to international to face the characteristics of the market such as the narrowness of the local market and the competitive pressure.

The empirical result of this research demonstrates that the export stimuli are grouped in four dimensions contrary to the other studies which determined only three factors. Indeed, and by referring to other studies carried out in the Tunisian context (Zghidi A., Boubakri W. and Zaiem I., 2012, 2013), this present work reveals the importance of the role that the State can play regarding direct and indirect assistants for the development of the exports of the Tunisians SMEs. These assistants can be translated to export incentive programs in order to overcome the problems encountered by the Tunisian companies. Indeed, financial supports brought to these companies would have leverage mattering on the Tunisian exports. In addition, supports for the daily management of the export would be very useful for them, as a legal support for the implementation of contracts, an assistance to mutualize logistic circuits, etc. Thus, upgrading in connection with the good partner in the export (agent or importer) was identified as a key factor of the success of the launch of the export. It is thus essential that the State gives companies of the extremely successful tools to identify them. As any research work, this present article presents certain limits. Indeed, the number of the interviewed companies is relatively reduced which prevents us to generalize the obtained results. Another one limits that must be mentioned is relative to the business sector of the investigated companies. Indeed, we aimed in this research at the industrial sector what brings us to suggest in the future researches targeting the companies of services.

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