

Unpacking Organizational Innovation Drivers in High-Performing Exporting SMEs: A Systemic Interaction of Internal and External Determinants Beyond the Endogenous–Exogenous Divide

Décryptage des déterminants de l’innovation organisationnelle en contexte de PME exportatrices performantes : une interaction systémique de facteurs internes et externes, au-delà des clivages endogènes et exogènes

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Abstract:

In a demanding and uncertain international environment, high-performing exporting SMEs must continuously reinvent their organizational practices. This article offers a renewed perspective on organizational innovation by moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between endogenous and exogenous factors. Based on a qualitative study of six Moroccan SMEs in the agri-food and textile sectors, it shows that organizational innovation stems from a simultaneous, dynamic, and interdependent interaction between leadership characteristics, internal resources, strategic choices, sectoral requirements, and environmental opportunities. The leader acts as a catalyst, orchestrating organizational adjustments through a proactive reading of internal and external signals. The study highlights a systemic logic where each factor influences and is influenced by the others, within a co-evolutionary process. This integrated approach provides a deeper understanding of the transformation dynamics in exporting SMEs and offers a relevant analytical framework for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Organizational innovation is thus not merely a response to constraints, but a strategic lever for continuous change.

Key words: Organizational innovation, Exporting SMEs, Internal and external determinants, Leadership and social capital, Absorptive capacity, Internationalization strategy, Systemic interaction.

Résumé :

Dans un environnement international incertain et exigeant, les PME exportatrices performantes doivent continuellement réinventer leurs pratiques organisationnelles. Cet article propose une lecture renouvelée de l'innovation organisationnelle, en dépassant la logique dichotomique classique entre facteurs endogènes et exogènes. À partir d'une étude qualitative menée auprès de six PME marocaines des secteurs agroalimentaire et textile, il démontre que l'innovation organisationnelle résulte d'une interaction simultanée, dynamique et interdépendante entre les caractéristiques du dirigeant, les ressources internes, les choix stratégiques, les exigences sectorielles et les opportunités environnementales. Le dirigeant agit comme catalyseur, orchestrant les ajustements organisationnels à partir d'une lecture proactive des signaux internes et externes. L'article met en lumière une logique systémique où chaque facteur influence et est influencé par les autres, dans un processus de coévolution. Cette approche intégrée permet de mieux comprendre les dynamiques de transformation des PME exportatrices et offre un cadre analytique pertinent pour les chercheurs, les praticiens et les décideurs publics. L'innovation organisationnelle y apparaît non seulement comme une réponse aux contraintes, mais comme un levier stratégique de changement continu.

Mots clés : Innovation organisationnelle, PME exportatrices, Déterminants internes et externes, Leadership et capital social, Capacité d'absorption, Stratégie d'internationalisation, Interaction systémique

Introduction

Organizational innovations have not always garnered the same enthusiasm as technological innovations (Armbruster et al., 2008; Carrier & Garand, 1996; Coris et al., 2009; Sapprasert, 2008a; Sapprasert, 2008b; Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020; Tsai & Chuang, 2001). Yet, in building a truly innovative firm, they prove to be just as crucial as technological innovations (Bijou & Elmoutaouakkil, 2024; Chandler, 1962; Ndlovu, Ndlovu & Ebewo, 2025; Perrault & St-Pierre, 2008; Sapprasert, 2008a and 2008b; Shurweryimana, 2015, 2020; Saoudi, Aubry, Gomot & Renaud, 2023; Van de Ven, 1986). This is even more pronounced in the current context, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, fragility, and hostility, which compels firms to adopt agile and highly flexible structures.

For exporting SMEs facing often unfamiliar or volatile markets, organizational innovation becomes a vital pathway to adequately respond to the versatile demands of international markets (Kamaruddeen et al., 2009; Ndlovu et al., 2025; Perrault & St-Pierre, 2008; Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020). Regulatory requirements, customer expectations, foreign logistics channels, international activity management costs, and associated risks are generally and fundamentally different from what SMEs manage in their domestic markets, necessitating adaptation or overhaul of their organizational mechanisms and practices (Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020). Rather than passively enduring these environmental demands, some SMEs that perform well in foreign markets regularly initiate organizational innovations within their entities by adopting a proactive and entrepreneurial posture (Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020). However, in the literature, organizational innovation is often conceptualized in a compartmentalized manner—either as a response to environmental changes (exogenous conception of innovation) or as a proactive action by firms to influence their environment (endogenous conception of innovation) (Damanpour, 1996; Shurweryimana, 2015). This research aims to break away from this dichotomous view and proposes a reconciliation of both approaches to provide a reliable and realistic explanation of organizational innovation processes within exporting SMEs. Therefore, our research problematic is *“How do internal capabilities and external environmental pressures interact in a dynamic and interdependent manner to sustain continuous organizational innovation in exporting SMEs”?*

Through an exploratory qualitative study of six exporting SMEs in Morocco's agri-food and textile sectors, this research shows that organizational innovation in exporting SMEs results from a subtle and harmonious interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors. It suggests that the form and process of organizational innovation consistently stem from the simultaneous,

systemic, and dynamic interdependence of these internal and external factors. The study thus highlights the partial and reductive nature of each of the two approaches and argues that, contrary to their mutually exclusive framing, they are more complementary than divergent. To support these findings, the following sections present the literature review, the methodology employed, the main results of the research, and their discussion, before concluding.

1. Organizational Innovation in Exporting SMEs: A Choice Driven by Both Endogenous and Exogenous Considerations

Organizational innovations are defined not only by the novelty of the solutions provided to organizational problems, but also by their origin (internal or external), the expected outcomes (performance improvement), and the intended change objectives (incremental or radical evolution) (Shurweryimana, 2015). In this research, organizational innovation is understood as: *“a significant improvement in ways of doing things, the development or adoption of new organizational methods in business practices, workplace organization, and external relations. This novelty leads to a change in the design, form, quality, or state of a characteristic of the organization or one of its components (individual work, group, organization, or inter-organizational relationships), aiming to improve the company’s performance”* (Shurweryimana, 2015). Since the adoption of these innovative organizational practices is guided by both internal and external factors, we first present separately the endogenous and exogenous determinants of organizational innovation in the context of exporting SMEs, before advocating for their simultaneous and interdependent consideration.

1.1. Endogenous Determinants of Organizational Innovation

The adoption of organizational innovations in exporting SMEs is strongly influenced by the characteristics of the leader, the attributes of the SME and its strategy.

1.1.1. Leadership Attributes as Catalysts of Organizational Innovation

In exporting SMEs, leadership attributes directly shape how firms navigate international complexity. Leaders with international experience and sectoral expertise enable SMEs to anticipate foreign market requirements and adjust organizational routines proactively. Their strategic vision and entrepreneurial posture foster agility, allowing SMEs to redesign processes for compliance and responsiveness. Social capital becomes critical for accessing overseas networks, securing partnerships, and gathering market intelligence, which accelerates

organizational adaptation. Thus, leadership is not only a driver of innovation but a linchpin for sustaining competitiveness in global markets.

Table 1: Key Leadership Determinants of Organizational Innovation in Exporting SMEs

| Determinants of Innovation | Influence on Innovation | Authors |
|--|---|--|
| Age | Older leaders often conservative; younger leaders more open to disruption. | Hambrick & Mason (1984); Koberg et al. (2003) |
| Education & international experience | Foster openness to foreign practices and new ideas; support environmental scanning. | Shurweryimana (2015; 2020); St-Pierre & Perrault (2009) |
| Sectoral / professional experience | Reduces uncertainty; sharpens market/technology perception and opportunity exploitation. | Woywode & Lessat (2001); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Beylier, Messeghem et Sammut (2008); Shurweryimana (2015; 2020) |
| Strategic vision | Structures competences and embeds an innovation culture. | Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Shurweryimana (2015; 2020) |
| Managerial / industrial / entrepreneurial skills | Catalyze innovation and enable rapid adaptation to market changes. | Entrialgo (2002); Martinez (2022); Shurweryimana (2015; 2020) |
| Personality & commitment | Orient HRM toward innovation and mobilize staff. | Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Muzi, Dose & Desrumaux (2021) |
| Social capital (networks) | Access to strategic resources/information; strengthens learning and enables proactive change. | Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Aldrich & Zimmer (1986); Roxas & Chadee (2011); Beylier et al. (2008); Julien & Vaghely (2008); Julien & Ramangalahy (2003); Frambach & Schillewaert (2002); Lynch (2007); Martinez (2022); Shurweryimana (2015; 2020); Wahab et al. (2025) |

Source: Author

1.1.2. Organizational Capabilities and Structural Levers Driving Innovation

The internal configuration of exporting SMEs determines their ability to absorb and implement organizational innovations. A strong knowledge base and absorptive capacity allow SMEs to integrate foreign standards and practices swiftly. Skilled and diverse human resources enhance flexibility in responding to client-specific export requirements. Financial resources and organizational slack mitigate risks associated with international expansion, while adaptive structures and cultures promote resilience under volatile global conditions. These characteristics collectively enable SMEs to reconfigure operations and maintain performance across diverse export markets.

Table 2: Internal Organizational Features Driving Innovation in Exporting SMEs

| Determinants of Innovation | Influence on Innovation | Authors |
|---|--|---|
| Knowledge base & absorptive capacity | Boost creativity and knowledge acquisition / assimilation / sharing / application. | Cohen & Levinthal (1990); Zahra & George (2002); Sapprasert (2008b); Wang et al. (2025) |
| Human resources quality | Generate innovative ideas; talent management and continuous training are pivotal. | Halilem & St-Jean (2007); Julien & St-Pierre (2009); Ćirović et al. (2025); Dung & Dung (2024); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Malesu & Syrovátká (2025); Saoudi et al. (2023); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Wang et al. (2025) |
| Resource availability & financing | Enable entrepreneurial activities; financing access is decisive for innovation. | Covin & Slevin (1991); Damanpour (1987); Maurel (2009); Wolff & Pett (2006); Singh et al. (2024); Zaman & Tanewski (2024); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Lakhli & Abdellaoui (2024); Ndlovu et al. (2025); Pillon (2021); Saoudi et al. (2023) |
| Organizational slack | Compensates constraints; supports innovation performance. | Bourgeon & Demil (1999); Chen & Huang (2010); Lynch (2007); Wan et al. (2005); Malesu & Syrovátká (2025) |
| Partnership diversity & social networks | Improve access to strategic knowledge; foster admin and tech innovation. | Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Ćirović et al. (2025); Julien (2000); Julien & Ramangalahy (2003); Malesu & Syrovátká (2025); Pillon (2021); Rosenbusch et al. (2011); Fu (2022); Kantaruk et al. (2020); Wahab et al. (2025) |
| Organizational culture | Learning/sharing orientation builds learning organizations and promotes innovation. | Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Ćirović et al. (2025); Wang et al. (2025); Dung & Dung (2024); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Julien & St-Pierre (2009); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Muzi et al. (2021); Singh et al. (2024); Wahab et al. (2025) |
| Organizational structure | Organic, flexible structures are more conducive to innovation than mechanistic ones. | Burns & Stalker (1961); Covin & Slevin (1990; 1991); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Lakhli & Abdellaoui (2024); Wang et al. (2025) |
| Business model adaptability | Essential amid digitalization and sustainability challenges. | Dung & Dung (2024); Ndlovu et al. (2025); Saoudi et al. (2023); Singh et al. (2024) |
| Firm age & size | Younger firms more flexible; larger firms mobilize resources but face coordination/inertia prompting innovation. | Autio et al. (2000); Cohen & Levinthal (1990); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Kimberly & Evanisko (1981); Lakhli & Abdellaoui (2024); Penrose (1959); Julien et al. (2006); Zaman & Tanewski (2024) |
| Past performance | Poor results trigger revisions to organizational practices. | Cyert & March (1963); Nelson & Winter (1982); Sapprasert (2008b); Zahra et al. (2006); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Lynch (2007) |

Source: Author

1.1.3. Strategic Orientation and Its Transformative Impact on Innovation

Strategic choices in exporting SMEs dictate the scope and intensity of organizational innovation. Firms pursuing aggressive export development strategies must overhaul internal processes to meet stringent timelines and quality standards abroad. Proactive strategies foster radical changes, while reactive ones lead to incremental adjustments. Market diversification compels SMEs to adopt flexible organizational models to accommodate heterogeneous regulatory and client demands. Investments in R&D and digital transformation strengthen

SMEs' capacity to innovate continuously, ensuring alignment with global competitiveness imperatives.

Table 3: Strategic Determinants Shaping Organizational Innovation

| Determinants of Innovation | Influence on Innovation | Authors |
|--|---|--|
| Export development strategy | Requires qualitative leap → internal practice and structure revision. | Léo (2000); Dung & Dung (2024) |
| Strategic posture (proactive vs. reactive) | Reactive → incremental; proactive → radical; resource dexterity for opportunities. | Ćirović et al. (2025); Halilem & St-Jean (2007); Martinez (2022); Pillon (2021); Roxas & Chadee (2011) |
| Digital transformation & differentiation | Strengthen strategic innovation; demand structural / cultural change. | Bijou & Elmoustaouakkil (2024); Porter (1980); Noble et al. (2002); Saoudi et al. (2023) |
| Strategic clarity & communication | Catalyze change; boost engagement and risk tolerance. | Christiansen (2000); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Parzefall et al. (2008); Ćirović et al. (2025); Wang et al. (2025) |
| Time horizon | Long-term orientation supports durable organizational changes; short-termism hinders. | Coris et al. (2009); Wilkinson & Yong (2005) |
| Market diversity (countries/clients) | Exposure to diverse requirements stimulates new practices and adjustments. | Autio et al. (2000); George & Zahra (2002); Mol & Birkinshaw (2009) |
| Investment in assets & R&D | Complementary/precursor to organizational innovation; create climate for questioning. | Lynch (2007); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Ćirović et al. (2025); Gallego-Roquelaure et al. (2021); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Pillon (2021); Zaman & Tanewski (2024); Freel (2005, in Raymond & St-Pierre, 2008); Dung & Dung (2024); Saoudi et al. (2023) |
| Business models & knowledge / technology integration | Central pillars of organizational innovation and SME performance. | Ndlovu et al. (2025); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Bijou & Elmoustaouakkil (2024); Ćirović et al. (2025); Dung & Dung (2024); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Malesu & Syrovátka (2025); Saoudi et al. (2023) |

Source: Author

1.2. Exogenous Determinants of Organizational Innovation

The national and international environment strongly influences the adoption of organizational innovations within exporting SMEs, which, when faced with unexpected events and external pressures, must frequently reassess their practices to improve export performance (Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Zahra et al., 2006).

1.2.1. Global Market Dynamics as External Stimuli for Organizational Innovation

Global market dynamics exert strong pressure on exporting SMEs to innovate organizationally. Exposure to foreign clients and suppliers introduces new standards and operational benchmarks, compelling SMEs to adopt advanced quality systems and agile production methods. Competitive intensity and environmental uncertainty stimulate learning and

entrepreneurial behavior, driving SMEs to restructure workflows and decision-making processes. These adaptations are essential for sustaining export performance under conditions of rapid change and heightened global rivalry.

Table 4: Global Markets Pressures for Organizational Innovation

| Determinants of Innovation | Influence on Innovation | Authors |
|--|---|---|
| Knowledge exchanges in international trade | Foreign clients, suppliers, competitors provide ideas; push certification; diffuse innovation; boost network effects. | Gonzalez-Pernía et al. (2010); Halilem & St-Jean (2007); Berger-Douce (2002); Guilhon & Weill (1995); Vandewattyne (1998); Kantaruk et al. (2020); Frambach & Schillewaert (2002) |
| International competitive dynamics | Catalyze innovation, conditional on organizational capabilities. | Gonzalez-Pernía et al. (2010); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Ćirović et al. (2025) |
| Environmental uncertainty & complexity | Stimulate organizational learning and entrepreneurial posture; drive adaptive change. | Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle (2011); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Martinez (2022); Wang et al. (2025) |

Source: Author

1.2.2. Domestic Institutional and Sectoral Forces Shaping Innovation Trajectories

Domestic ecosystems provide exporting SMEs with resources and institutional support crucial for organizational innovation. Local training institutions and public R&D bodies equip SMEs with knowledge to meet international compliance norms. Government programs and professional associations offer financial and advisory assistance, reducing barriers to modernization. Sectoral dynamism and cultural factors influence how SMEs internalize global standards while preserving local practices. These national-level determinants complement international pressures, enabling SMEs to balance global competitiveness with contextual realities.

Table 5: Domestic Drivers Supporting Organizational Innovation in SMEs

| Determinants of Innovation | Influence on Innovation | Authors |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Local information / skills ecosystem | Creative domestic context feeds ideas; universities/training/R&D and consultants supply knowledge and managerial support. | Halilem & St-Jean (2007); Hourmat Allah (2009); Serra et al. (2012); Ayerbe-Machat (2003); OECD (2002); Malesu & Syrovátká (2025); St-Pierre et al. (2005); Paradas et al. (2017); Martinez (2022); Shurweryimana (2015; 2020) |
| Government assistance & associations | Provide financing/support and peer exchanges that spur innovation. | Kantaruk et al. (2020); Kassa & Kegne (2025); Singh et al. (2024); Zaman & Tanewski (2024); Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Malesu & Syrovátká (2025); Mercie-Suisse & Bouveret-Rivat (2010) |
| Sectoral dynamism & mimicry | Industry effects (e.g., quality-intensive agri-food) and imitation drive adoption of organizational practices. | Audretsch & Guenther (2023); Hourmat Allah (2009); Mol & Birkinshaw (2009); Halilem & St-Jean (2007); Lynch (2007); Billet (2010) |

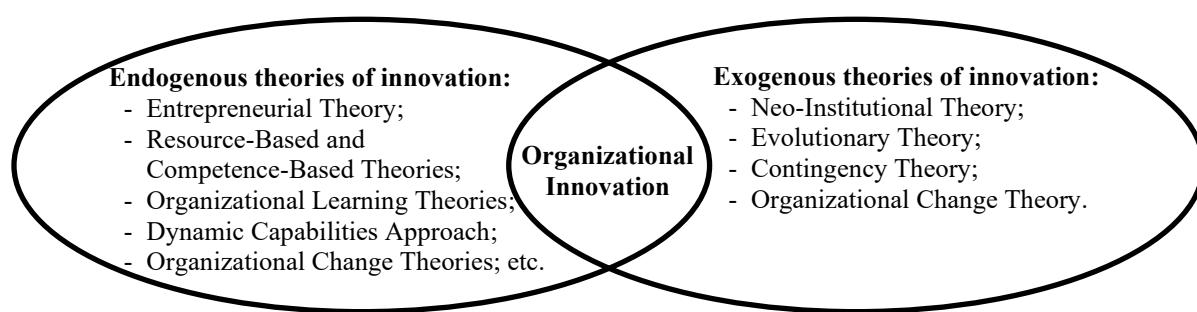
| | | |
|------------------------|--|--|
| National culture & HRM | Individualism favors idea exploration; collectivism favors implementation; green HRM strengthens engagement. | Rosenbusch et al. (2011); Lawter & Garnjost (2025) |
| Institutional change | Domestic institutional shifts reconfigure organizational modes and collaborative innovation. | Coris et al. (2009); Kantaruk et al. (2020) |

Source: Author

1.3. Toward a Decompartmentalization of Endogenous and Exogenous Logics of Organizational Innovation in Exporting SMEs

It is evident that organizational innovations in exporting SMEs are shaped by a combination of internal factors and external factors. While each of these determinants is individually significant in influencing the choice and adoption of new organizational practices, it would be reductive and potentially misleading to consider them in isolation when assessing the drivers of innovation (Shurweryimana, 2015, 2020; Wang et al., 2025). What is crucial, instead, is to examine the mutual and often simultaneous interdependencies among these internal and external factors in fostering organizational innovation. Accordingly, this study adopts a systemic perspective of the innovation process, viewing it as the outcome of dynamic interactions between internal and external determinants (Shurweryimana, 2015, 2020; Wang et al., 2025). Through an integrative approach (Figure 1), organizational innovation is conceptualized as the result of accumulating and recombining knowledge and resources—both internal (intra-organizational learning) and external (inter-organizational learning)—that enable firms to differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve superior performance. The resulting organizational innovations may follow an exploitation logic, reinforcing and refining existing practices, or an exploration logic, introducing entirely new organizational practices. This dual orientation underpins our reliance on an ambidextrous approach to innovation.

Figure 1: An Integrative Approach of Organizational Innovation



Source: Author

It is also worth noting that engaging in a specific innovation process can, in turn, trigger a cascade of additional innovative activities (Lynch, 2007; Shurweryimana, 2015, 2020), underscoring the need to recognize that beyond the determinants identified in this section, organizational innovations themselves can become catalysts for further innovation.

2. Research Methodology

Given that existing research on our topic is incomplete or only explains a small part of it (Thié tard et al., 2014), we adopted a qualitative research methodology, which is more suitable for a phenomenon like organizational innovation—inseparable from the context in which it develops (Hlady Rispal, 2002; Thiétard et al., 2014). Our approach was essentially exploratory, using the multiple case study method, with a sample of six exporting SMEs that regularly implement organizational innovations. These SMEs were selected based on their relevance to our research objective. They demonstrated longevity and sustained growth in foreign markets (market diversification, increased market share and/or number of clients; proven learning and change management capabilities; strong resilience during crises; satisfaction of managers with their export performance, etc.), which suggested a better understanding and mastery of the organizational requirements for thriving internationally—and thus, of the factors that govern their choices and structuring. Furthermore, as each sector has its own specificities and opportunities for innovation, our study deliberately focused on SMEs in the agri-food and textile sectors, given their importance in the Moroccan economic landscape and the strong demand for organizational innovation that characterizes them (Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020).

2.1. Case Selection Process

The identification of cases was carried out through theoretical sampling, in line with our research objective (Hlady-Rispal, 2002). The SMEs studied were selected from the agri-food and textile sectors: first, because they include more exporting SMEs than any other sector in Morocco; second, because they usually require organizational innovations due to the complexity and risk level of their activities and the magnitude of sectoral changes experienced. The following criteria served as the basis for their selection, as Hlady-Rispal (2002) suggested:

Table 6: Criteria for Selecting Our Theoretical Sample

| Criteria | Explanations |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Theoretical Representativeness | All SMEs were innovative and professional exporters (more than 80% of their turnover from exports, according to Julien et al., 1997), which implies greater global competition, higher risk, and therefore a strong propensity to adopt innovative behaviors. |
| Variety | Within each sector, the selected SMEs differed in terms of size (number of employees), number of exported products, years of international experience, geographic location, and target markets. This diversity aimed to assess whether the phenomenon under study exhibits consistent patterns despite varying contexts. |
| Balance | We included three distinct cases in each sector, pairing specific characteristics across sectors (e.g., single-product SMEs vs. multi-product SMEs; single-market SMEs vs. multi-market SMEs; relatively young SMEs vs. more established ones). |
| Discovery Potential | We chose to study SMEs that were already innovative and had received professional recognition for their achievements in innovation and organizational practices. |
| Alignment with Research Objective | Cases were selected based on their ability to provide deeper insights into the phenomenon under investigation and to generate new knowledge. |

Source: Author

Based on CNCE (National Council for Foreign Trade) and Maroc Export databases, a sample of professional exporting SMEs was compiled. Through extensive documentary research and the support of our network, we identified 68 agri-food and textile SMEs typically innovative in organizational terms. As our research followed an exploratory logic, we could not initially determine the number of exporting SMEs to retain. It depended on the relevance of the data collected in the field and corresponded to the number of cases that allowed us to reach theoretical saturation (Hlady-Rispal, 2002). We achieved this from the third case in each sector, resulting in our final sample of six SMEs, namely A-A, A-B and A-C in Agri-Food sector and T-A, T-B and T-C in the Textile sector.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide developed after our literature review. Its content, validated by two experts before starting the empirical investigation, was structured around four axes reflecting the main lines of our conceptual framework. The following table summarizes the themes addressed, the types of questions asked, and the main dimensions studied.

Table 7: Main Themes of Our Interview Guide

| Themes | Examples of Questions Asked | Target Objectives |
|---|---|---|
| Company Presentation | Could you tell us about your company, its history, and its evolution? | Understand the company's trajectory, its distinctive attributes, and the key milestones in its national and international development. |
| Interviewee Presentation and Career Path | Could you tell us about yourself and your professional background? | Capture the characteristics of employees and their contributions to achieving the company's strategic and organizational objectives. |
| Innovation Content | How have you managed to maintain your presence internationally? Have you taken specific measures to support export activities? Which ones? Why? | Identify and analyze the organizational changes implemented at functional, cross-functional, and operational levels to sustain export activities. |
| Internal and External Context of Innovation | Why did things change? Which stimuli were most influential in the change process? | Highlight the internal and external factors driving organizational transformations and the interactions that characterize them. |

Source: Author

In total, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, each lasting an average of one hour and forty minutes, amounting to 27 hours of recordings. In each SME, we interviewed the manager and, depending on the case, the Production Manager, HR Manager, Quality Manager, and Method Manager. Each interviewee had at least five years of seniority in the company and a solid understanding of its history, operations, strategy, and environment.

2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

For data analysis, we used thematic content analysis, consistent with our research objective of interpreting the meaning individuals assign to their actions. During data categorization, we adopted a hybrid approach combining closed or 'a priori' coding (Miles & Huberman, 2005; Allard-Poesi et al., 2007; Hlady-Rispal, 2002; Gavard-Perret et al., 2012) and open or 'a posteriori' coding (Allard-Poesi et al., 2007; Hlady-Rispal, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 2005; Gavard-Perret et al., 2012), in line with our abductive research approach. A provisional list of categories likely to reflect the studied reality was established based on the conceptual framework, research questions, and interview guide axes. After transcription and analysis of interviews, new empirical elements progressively amended this provisional list of codes, resulting in a definitive list of categories.

Table 8: Main Themes, Categories and Codes from Our Analysis

| Themes | Categories | Codes | Examples of verbatim |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Internal Context of the Exporting SME | Manager's Attributes | Education; Experience; Personal Skills; Network. | <i>"I have a law degree, and then I did two years of internship in quality management... I came for a three-month internship... and now it's my 20th year, I never left. ... Everything that happens from bottom to top, I've done it. I've been everywhere... I did sales, I did quality, I did mechanics, I went for internships abroad, so today my strength is that I know my job from A to Z." (SME Manager A-C)</i> |
| | Company Attributes | Employee expertise; Size; Culture; Performance. | <i>"We have a very advanced human resources policy in the sense that we do self-training, meaning we have an apprenticeship training center; we train our staff according to market needs to respond effectively and quickly to demand." (SME Manager T-C)</i> |
| | Company Strategy | Nature of the strategy; Vision sharing; Export horizon; Asset investments. | <i>"We know very well that most garment manufacturers are mainly single-product; we, on the other hand, are very multi-product, which allows us to have more versatility... in the production lines, in the production tools, which enables us to meet all demands." (SME Manager T-C)</i> |
| External Context of the Exporting SME | International Environment Requirements | Sector conditions; Level of competition; Clients/Suppliers. | <i>"Quality comes from large retailers; they are the ones who forced people to move toward quality." (SME Manager A-C)</i> |
| | Local Environment Support | Government support; Expertise of consultants and professional associations. | <i>"For training, we are supported by a consulting firm... we hold meetings to decide... we evaluate positions, we evaluate people, to say, for example, there is a problem here, so we will schedule this year a training for this person, for this project, for this activity." (SME Manager A-C)</i> |

Source: Author

We used two thematic analysis methods: a vertical analysis of each interview independently to understand each actor's perception, and a horizontal analysis to compare representations, highlight similarities and differences, and address our research question. This analysis was conducted at intra- and inter-case levels.

3. Analysis and Main Findings

Our research revealed that the textile and agri-food SMEs in our sample all regularly revise their organizational practices. This tendency to innovate stems from a complex interaction of organizational, strategic, sectoral, and environmental specificities, in addition to the attributes of their leaders. This section presents the findings and provides a response to our research question. It compares the empirical results obtained in the two sectors studied and draws key lessons from our investigation.

3.1. Leader's profile and its impact on the innovation process

Across all SMEs studied, regardless of sector, the professional background and social networks of their leaders were decisive in driving organizational innovations. Their long-standing and diverse experiences in their field and in managing international activities enabled them to better understand foreign markets, grasp their cultures and regulations, and build relational ties. This gave them the ability to monitor market trends, competition, and customer expectations, and adjust their organizations accordingly.

"The 45 years I've spent in garment manufacturing have taught me a lot. I held many responsibilities in this field, gained a great deal of experience, led several companies, visited many countries involved in the sector, and supervised many professionals in my trade. I also serve as a representative of industrialists on the board of directors of AMITH. This textile manufacturing domain is quite rich and has allowed me to meet many people. I believe it has given me a lot. Today, I sit alongside the major and prominent figures of the industry in conferences and associative and ministerial assemblies, both in Morocco and internationally. That's what allowed me to enter the great school of life—it enriches my experience with every encounter and helps me grow my business." (Leader – SME T-A).

Moreover, the personal qualities of the leaders—especially in the textile sector—played a crucial role in implementing innovations. Passion for the craft, dedication to work, and the ability to channel efforts and unite staff around a common goal were essential attributes for modernizing their organizations. In a labor-intensive sector where most employees have limited formal education, these qualities were indispensable for staying close to operations, building trust, and involving employees transparently in problem-solving.

"We have our director who pushes us to do our best, to feel responsible for our work. It's as if she gives us an injection—because I don't know how she does it—but she manages to make us feel, deep inside, that we are truly responsible for all the services here. Everyone—the managers, the female workers, even the security guard at the gate—she has succeeded in making us understand that we are responsible for the fate of this company. So, everyone is very careful; when we enter here, we know we must deliver quality, we must work to save the company from any problems that may arise, and we must contribute to its progress so as not to cause its closure." (Quality and Export Manager – SME T-B).

3.2. SME Characteristics and their contribution to the innovation process

All SMEs analyzed benefited from the expertise, training, and personal/professional networks of their employees in defining and implementing innovations. However, sectoral differences emerged.

"With experience and everyone's contributions, we've come to know our clients better, we know the markets better, we know the suppliers better, we know the production tools better, and we know the staff better. So, when there are anticipations to make, changes or adjustments to implement, we rely on our experience—it helps us anticipate and organize things more effectively, avoid repeating the same mistakes, and above all, take the right shortcuts." (Production Manager – SME A-A).

Nevertheless, the analysis of the contributions made to their respective entities highlights notable disparities across the sectors under study. In the agri-food sector, the academic background (minimum Master's degree) and multidisciplinary experience of functional managers enabled SMEs to understand and adopt quality and compliance standards more easily. Their contributions were more conceptual. In contrast, in the textile sector, the operational expertise and training of managers (especially in methods and production) allowed for a deep understanding of operational problems, making their contributions more practical and solution-oriented.

"The strength of our company is that in every department—whether it's the line supervisor, the storekeeper, the quality manager, the product manager, or anyone involved in technical matters—they all first went through method training. They already hold diplomas as method agents, which means they work more with their heads than with their hands; they are people who think before acting. They always ask themselves about the outcome of their actions before taking them—whether it will cause harm, improve things, or create disorder; how much time it will save them. Because for a method agent, the first thing they think about is the working method: how to save time, how to carry out the operation under good conditions, all while saving time." (Leader – SME T-A).

Additionally, the role of operational staff varied across sectors. In agri-food SMEs, although their suggestions were taken into account, their involvement remained limited to idea generation. This constraint stemmed from strict quality and safety requirements, as well as a lack of advanced training, which prevented them from contributing to more technical or strategic aspects of innovation. In contrast, operational staff in textile SMEs played a more active role in shaping new practices, owing to their close engagement with daily operational challenges.

"We take into account the operators' point of view when solving a problem, because neither I nor the line supervisors are the ones sitting at the machines. It's the women who are directly involved with the product—they see things we don't, they know the difficulties of the item much better than we do. So, we must always be open with the girls and ask them if they have any suggestions." (Production Manager – SME T-B).

Internal weaknesses—cultural, operational, and relational—also motivated organizational adjustments in all SMEs studied. Specific challenges in the textile sector, such as frequent absenteeism among female workers due to family obligations, further increased the need for innovation.

"There's generally an absenteeism problem in garment manufacturing, especially in our case where the workforce is limited. I have 60 people working on machines, and if I find myself one morning with 4 or 5 absences, that means 10% of my staff is missing—it's catastrophic. So, we have to do everything to keep the workforce complete, motivate people, engage the girls, to avoid absences." (Production Manager – SME T-B).

Finally, company size sometimes necessitated organizational restructuring. At least one SME in each sector had to revise its organization following significant growth in activity and workforce.

3.3. SMEs Export Strategies and their effects on the process of innovation

Our research identifies several key factors shaping organizational innovation within exporting SMEs in the agri-food and textile sectors. Strategic orientation emerges as a central determinant, influencing both the nature and implementation of innovation practices. Notably, textile SMEs—often operating as subcontractors for externally designed models—require agile and responsive organizational structures to manage multiple simultaneous orders.

"We don't create our own designs; we only industrialize. Our clients have designers elsewhere—in Europe and America—who work on the model and the look. They give us that, and we put it into series production. So, with multiple clients, we were forced to improve our responsiveness in order to execute any model that enters our factory and meet all the requirements it entails." (Production Manager – SME T-A).

Their strategy, focused on minimizing production time and costs, drives a strong emphasis on process innovations aimed at expanding industrial capacity and accelerating execution.

"For us, who operate internationally, quality is always a strict minimum requirement in our field, and competitiveness is more about lead times and costs. So, we always have to find an organization and operational methods that minimize costs and lead times, to reach a level that is at least between the best in the sector and the average. It's even essential for survival." (Method Manager – SME T-A).

In contrast, agri-food SMEs, which act as product designers, adopt a differentiation strategy that compels them to prioritize innovations in quality management. Their organizational practices are designed to monitor evolving customer expectations and competitor offerings, enabling continuous product improvement. Other forms of innovation are mobilized in support

of this strategic objective, reinforcing the sector's commitment to maintaining high standards and market relevance.

"Exporting means facing a highly competitive market. It forces us to align with international standards and to have—or seek—a strong position on the global scale. The production department must support this evolution; we need greater and faster responsiveness, adaptations to client needs, and a product that better meets the demands of the international market. It involves more marketing, commercial, and organizational constraints, and it's a challenge we must address." (Production Manager – SME A-A).

Beyond these sectoral differences, strategic clarity emerges as a critical enabler of innovation, particularly within textile SMEs. The explicit communication and internal appropriation of strategic goals foster a collective awareness of the importance of meeting customer expectations efficiently and cost-effectively, thereby encouraging continuous problem-solving and innovation at all levels of the organization.

Our findings further reveal that market diversity significantly shapes organizational innovation in both sectors. SMEs operating across multiple markets tend to innovate more frequently, adapting their approaches to the specific demands of each context. However, sectoral distinctions arise in how the concept of "market" is interpreted. In the agri-food sector, market diversity refers mainly to export countries, where varying regulatory and sanitary standards require product and process adjustments tailored to each destination.

"Starting from zero in export, naturally, we don't have the same needs and demands when managing a single export client as when managing five or fifteen clients in different countries. At that point, we need a well-structured organization, adapted to a diversified clientele and business across multiple markets." (Leader – SME A-A).

Conversely, in the textile sector, it is the diversity of clients—regardless of export destination—that drives innovation. Fashion brands differ in identity and marketing positioning, leading to specific requirements for each product line. As a result, organizational adjustments are shaped more by client expectations than by national export conditions.

"We don't work with just one brand. So, multiple brands also mean multiple specifications, because each client brings their own requirements. Under these conditions, it's difficult to maintain a single standard setup for all orders. Even for the same client, orders often change, which means we have to revise our organization. So, we normally conduct studies each time we receive a specification—we review it in advance and prepare the necessary adjustments. If there are trainings or instructions to give to the girls, we also do that ahead of time." (Quality and Export Manager – SME T-B).

Despite these differences, our study shows that the strategic time horizon exerts a consistent influence across sectors. Whether in agri-food or textile SMEs, long-term strategic orientation supports the design and implementation of organizational innovations aimed at sustaining competitiveness over time.

"An organization isn't built with just a pencil and paper—it's something that takes time and long-term effort." (Leader – SME T-B).

Finally, irrespective of sector, the strategic value placed on internal assets and capabilities prompts organizational adjustments within exporting SMEs. The need to retain experienced human capital and to adapt to frequent equipment upgrades leads firms to revise their organizational structures, training policies, and employee retention strategies. These efforts are essential to ensuring the continuity and resilience of operations in a dynamic and competitive global environment.

3.4. Effects of local and international environment on the innovation process

Our research reveals that regulations and sector-specific requirements play a crucial role in driving innovation within Moroccan SMEs. In the agri-food sector, the strict safety and compliance obligations, along with the variability of laws and regulations in each export country regarding food manufacturing processes, compel these SMEs to meticulously apply and observe a set of quality assurance standards and practices. This is essential to justify the credibility of their products and ensure their acceptance abroad.

In contrast, within the textile sector, the pressures for change do not necessarily stem from quality requirements. Instead, the versatility and sophistication of today's fashion models—characterized by more diverse and short-lived product lines—force SMEs to design organizations that are fundamentally efficient and agile, capable of executing multiple distinct models simultaneously and rapidly.

"Times are no longer like they used to be, when we had more or less standard orders of one hundred thousand or two hundred thousand pieces, which clients could keep in their shop windows for quite a long period. Now, orders are smaller, clients are much more demanding, stores change constantly, displays change every week, etc. So, there's a constant need to adapt the organization to this recurring cycle of style changes, which has forced us to adopt new approaches." (Leader – SME T-A).

This need for adaptability is further intensified by the high level of competition in global markets. The multiplication of rivals, the proliferation of products and brands, and the depletion

of supply sources have pushed the studied SMEs to reorganize both internally and externally to remain competitive.

"In international markets, the company that succeeds best is the one that manages to find a production process and organizational methods that are more efficient than the others. It's even a necessity for business continuity." (Method Manager – SME T-A).

However, the impact of recent economic crises has been different between sectors. While agri-food SMEs have remained largely unaffected—explaining their lack of urgency to reorganize—textile SMEs have, since 2005, been significantly influenced by these crises. This has led to a collective awareness of the need to improve or rethink internal operations to ensure survival. Beyond external pressures, client-specific requirements have also played a decisive role in shaping organizational practices. Regardless of sector, SMEs have been compelled to revise their structures to meet the unique and often varying specifications of their clients. This constant need for adaptation has driven them to develop flexible organizational methods that can respond effectively to diverse client demands.

"To meet quality standards at the lowest cost and within the required deadlines, a single organization is not enough. The models requested vary depending on the clients; and with each new item, the client imposes new requirements. So, you understand that we have to revise our organization each time. The client is king—if they're not satisfied, they'll go look elsewhere." (Method Manager – SME T-A).

Furthermore, supplier relationships illustrate sectoral differences. Textile SMEs, which often outsource purchasing to their clients, tend to have limited interaction with suppliers. In contrast, agri-food SMEs benefit more directly from supplier support in innovation. These suppliers are seen as well-positioned to advise on the optimal use of equipment and inputs, and their organizational recommendations are consistently valued and implemented.

Local stakeholders have also proven to be essential allies in the innovation journey of these SMEs. Their dynamism, expertise, and availability have greatly facilitated the initiation and realization of organizational upgrades. Public support agencies such as INMA, CMPP, Maroc Export, and ANPME, along with professional associations like AMITH, FENAGRI, FICOPAM, CGEM, and ASMEX, as well as consultants and advisory firms, have played a pivotal role in nurturing ideas, anticipating necessary adjustments, and implementing improvements that enhance organizational performance.

"We receive information almost daily from these various organizations, and we very regularly get invitations to attend conferences or events dedicated to specific themes. This already helps build networks, provides information, and also creates opportunities

"to connect with consultants and support professionals to develop programs. Sometimes, it really helps us make decisions." (Leader – SME A-A).

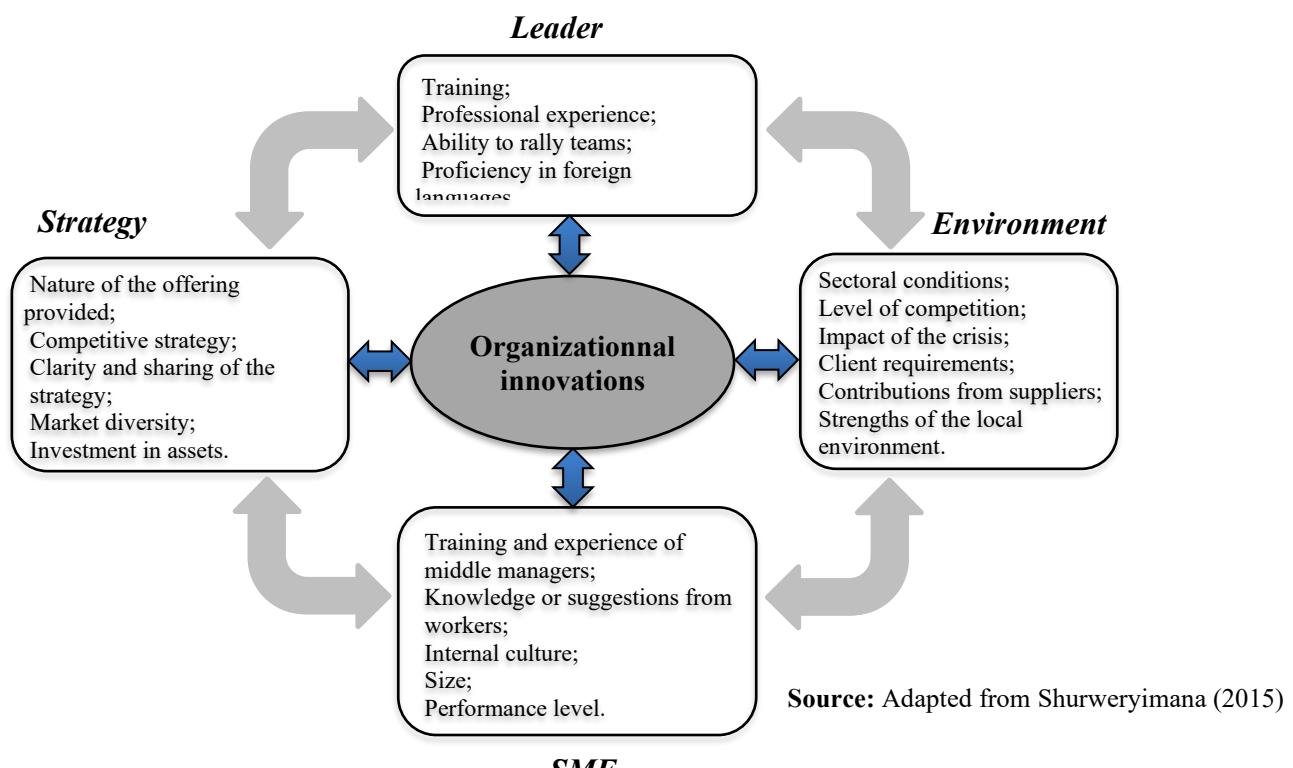
"There are support programs dedicated by the State to companies involved in export. There is assistance for business modernization, reimbursements for certain investments or for participation in trade fairs abroad... all of this helps us improve the company and its organization in some way." (Quality Manager – SME A-B).

Finally, cultural specificities have shaped the way organizational practices are understood and applied. Moroccan SMEs demonstrate a creative touch in their approaches, influenced by cultural habits. For example, the strong tradition of oral communication in Morocco ensures that direct and ongoing contact between managers and employees is maintained, even when written communication or delegation is in place. This approach helps ensure that directives are clearly understood and properly applied, while also reinforcing managerial proximity and support in implementing organizational solutions.

3.5. Complémentarité et rôle synchronique des déterminants internes et externes dans la conception et la conduite des innovations organisationnelles

While each individual stimulus for innovation proves to be important and meaningful in the choice and adoption of new organizational practices, our research has established that these factors operate in an interdependent and simultaneous manner within the studied SMEs. Together, they stimulate and guide innovation efforts, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 2: Interactions among the Different Determinants of Organizational Innovations



Based on a clear reading of environmental signals and drawing from their own knowledge and experience, the leaders of the sampled SMEs are able to reframe the strategy and vision of their organizations. This strategic realignment, combined with employee involvement and an assessment of internal needs, ultimately steers the innovation process. Such dynamics reflect the complex nature of innovation, which emerges as the result of a set of interacting internal and external factors.

Moreover, it is important to note that the newly implemented organizational practices, in turn, enrich the experience of both the leaders and their organizations, while also exerting influence on their strategies and surrounding environment. From this perspective, our findings confirm that engaging in a specific innovation process can itself trigger a series of additional innovative activities. This underscores the importance of viewing organizational innovations not only as outcomes, but also as catalysts for further innovation. Notably, we observed that the adoption of quality management practices in agri-food SMEs directly involves and influences the design and implementation of various organizational innovations in areas such as human resource management, production management, and risk and uncertainty management. A similar pattern was found in the textile sector, where innovations in production management often initiated and shaped the development of innovations in human resource management, quality management, and risk management. These interconnections highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of organizational innovation, where one change can lead to a cascade of others, reinforcing the continuous transformation of SMEs.

4. Discussion and Research Insights

Our research reveals that the SMEs examined frequently revise their organizational practices. This propensity for innovation stems from a complex interaction between the attributes of their leaders and organizational, strategic, sectoral, and environmental specificities.

4.1. A Dynamic of Organizational Innovation Based on the Simultaneous Interaction of Internal and External Factors

The findings show that these Moroccan SMEs do not merely endure the constraints of their international environment. Instead, they actively mobilize their internal resources—particularly the capabilities of their leaders, the skills of their teams, and their strategic choices—to design and implement organizational innovations tailored to their export contexts. This proactive stance contrasts with traditional approaches to organizational innovation, often compartmentalized between endogenous (firm-centered) and exogenous (environment-

centered) logics (Damanpour, 1996; Shurweryimana, 2015). Our study offers an alternative perspective: a subtle and harmonious interweaving of internal and external factors acting interdependently and simultaneously (Fu, 2022; Shurweryimana, 2020; Singh et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

4.2. The Central Role of the Leader: Catalyst for Innovation

The leaders of the six SMEs studied—whether in agri-food or textile—stand out for their ability to interpret environmental signals, leverage their networks, and rally their teams around a clear strategic vision (Julien & St-Pierre, 2009; Julien & Vaghely, 2008). Their entrepreneurial profiles, combining sectoral experience, international openness, mobilizing leadership, and social capital, serve as key levers of innovation (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023; Beylier et al., 2008; St-Pierre & Perrault, 2009). They demonstrate a strong entrepreneurial orientation (Covin & Slevin, 1989; McDougall & Oviatt, 2000), initiating organizational changes based on a proactive reading of opportunities (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023; Karlsson & Olsson, 1998 in Julien & St-Pierre, 2009; Soparnot, 2009). Their social capital facilitates access to strategic resources and information (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; 'Banjo' Roxas & Chadee, 2011; Beylier et al., 2008; Julien & Ramangalahy, 2003), enhancing their ability to learn and act innovatively (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023; Frambach & Schillewaert, 2002; 'Banjo' Roxas & Chadee, 2011).

4.3. Organizational Capabilities: Foundation of Organizational Learning

In the six SMEs studied, employee skills, training, and experience play a decisive role in the design and implementation of organizational innovations (Dung & Dung, 2024; Hoffman et al., 1998; Julien & St-Pierre, 2009; Wang et al., 2025). In agri-food SMEs, university-level profiles facilitate the adoption of international quality standards. In textile SMEs, the technical training of method agents enables precise process adaptation (Halilem & St-Jean, 2007). These dynamics confirm the relevance of cognitive approaches and organizational learning theories (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Nonaka, 1994; Penrose, 1959; Zahra & George, 2002).

Firm size also influences organizational structuring (Kimberly & Evanisko, 1981; Mintzberg, 1982). Some of the SMEs had to formalize their internal organization as they grew, responding to coordination challenges (Child, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979). However, this influence remains contingent: not all SMEs responded similarly to growth.

Internal shortcomings—related to performance, cost structure, or coordination—also acted as triggers for innovation (Cyert & March, 1963; Lynch, 2007; Nelson & Winter, 1982;

Sapprasert, 2008b; Zahra et al., 2006). These findings align with evolutionary and punctuated equilibrium theories, which emphasize the role of disruptions in revising organizational routines (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

4.4. Export Strategy: A Driver of Innovation Orientation

Strategic choices in the six SMEs directly influenced the nature of organizational innovations adopted (Miller & Friesen, 1978; Porter, 1980; Zaman & Tanewski, 2024). Agri-food SMEs, engaged in differentiation strategies, prioritized quality-related innovations. Textile SMEs, focused on cost reduction, concentrated their efforts on process agility.

Strategic clarity and sharing reinforced employee buy-in and involvement in innovation initiatives (Christiansen, 2000; Parzefall et al., 2008; Gallego-Roquelaure et al., 2021), fostering organizational learning and risk tolerance (Parzefall et al., 2008).

The diversity of export markets and clients, along with investments in human and technological assets, required constant organizational adjustments (Lynch, 2007; Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009; Zahra & George, 2002). The integration of new technologies or the enhancement of human capital prompted internal reorganizations ('Banjo' Roxas & Chadee, 2011; Dung & Dung, 2024; Lynch, 2007; Wang et al., 2025; Woodward, 1965).

4.5. The Environment: A Source of Constraints but Also of Resources

The international environment acted as a powerful stimulus for organizational innovation in all six SMEs. Agri-food firms had to comply with strict standards (Billet, 2010; Lynch, 2007; Vandewattyne, 1998), while textile firms demonstrated agility in response to volatile fashion models (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1982). Intense competition pushed these SMEs to innovate to remain competitive (Gonzalez-Pernía et al., 2010; Ibeh, 2003), and environmental uncertainty stimulated learning and entrepreneurial posture (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023; Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011). Foreign clients played an active role in shaping organizational practices by expressing specific requirements (Gonzalez-Pernía et al., 2010; Halilem & St-Jean, 2007; Kantaruk et al., 2020). Suppliers, especially in the agri-food sector, provided valuable advice on equipment use (Halilem & St-Jean, 2007; Gonzalez-Pernía et al., 2010; Kantaruk et al., 2020). The national environment also offered strategic resources through government support (Julien et al., 2006; Leonidou, 2004; Kantaruk et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2024; Sousa et al., 2008; Zaman & Tanewski, 2024), consulting expertise (Ayerbe-Machat, 2003; Malesu & Syrovátka, 2025; OECD, 2002; Paradas et al., 2017; St-Pierre et al., 2005), and the dynamism of professional networks and associations (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023;

Malesu & Syrovátká, 2025; Mercie-Suissa & Bouveret-Rivat, 2010; Paradas et al., 2017). These contributions facilitated the adoption of new organizational practices (Audretsch & Guenther, 2023; Ayerbe-Machat, 2003; Paradas et al., 2017; Serra et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2024).

Finally, Moroccan national culture influenced communication and management styles, as evidenced by the continued direct contact between managers and employees, despite formal practices (Rosenbusch et al., 2011).

4.6. An Interaction and Feedback Logic Between Determinants

One of the major insights from our study is that the determinants of organizational innovation in these six Moroccan SMEs operate in constant interaction, following a logic of synchronization and feedback (Fu, 2022; Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020; Singh et al., 2024).

Environmental signals are interpreted through the leader's experiences, who then adjusts the strategy, mobilizes internal capacities and competencies, and seeks external resources to innovate. In turn, organizational innovations alter internal capabilities, influence strategic choices, and reconfigure relationships with the environment. This iterative cycle confirms that organizational innovation is a systemic process, where each factor affects the others in a dynamic of co-evolution (Fu, 2022; Lynch, 2007; Shurweryimana, 2015; Singh et al., 2024).

4.7. Toward a Multidimensional Conception of Organizational Innovation

The results obtained from our sample support an integrated conception of organizational innovation, breaking away from the dichotomous views of endogenous and exogenous approaches (Dung & Dung, 2024; Hage & Meeus, 2006; Soparnot, 2009; Wang et al., 2025). They align with calls to adopt a multidimensional approach, combining deterministic and voluntarist logics (Soparnot, 2009; Shurweryimana, 2015). Organizational innovation appears as the result of a strategic compromise, where Moroccan exporting SMEs align their internal resources with external requirements (Frimousse & Peretti, 2005; Fu, 2022; Lynch, 2007; Shurweryimana, 2015; 2020; Singh et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025), to build agile, resilient, and competitive organizations.

4.8. Organizational Innovation as a Lever for Continuous Innovation

Finally, our research shows that organizational innovation in these six SMEs is not an end in itself, but a starting point for other forms of innovation. Adjustments made in areas such as quality, production, or human resources generated new ideas and capabilities (Lynch, 2007; Shurweryimana, 2015). This innovation loop confirms that organizational innovation is both a

result and a driver of change, within a logic of continuous transformation (Lynch, 2007; Shurweryimana, 2015).

4.9. From Determinant Interplay to Ambidexterity: How Combined Internal–External Drivers Sustain Exploration–Exploitation in Exporting SMEs

Our findings highlight the coexistence of exploitation and exploration innovations within exporting SMEs, albeit with sectoral variations. Agro-food firms prioritize exploitation due to food safety imperatives, favoring standardized procedures and incremental improvements that refine existing knowledge through cumulative learning (March, 1991; Damanpour, 1996; Chanal & Mothe, 2005; Shurweryimana, 2015). Conversely, textile SMEs, driven by model variability and operational versatility, lean toward exploration, embracing radical changes that disrupt established routines and foster qualitatively new practices (March, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Chen, 2006; Shurweryimana, 2015). While distinct in rhythm and scope, these innovation logics are not mutually exclusive; both coexist and evolve simultaneously, influenced by new knowledge and environmental stimuli (Crossan et al., 1999; Anderson, 1999; Shurweryimana, 2015). This dynamic interplay underscores the ambidextrous nature of exporting SMEs, where incremental adjustments and transformative shifts collectively sustain organizational adaptability and competitiveness in global markets.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research highlights the strong presence of organizational innovation within high-performing exporting SMEs. By confronting their internal capabilities with the demands of their external environment, these companies have successfully adapted their operations to thrive in international markets. The study reveals that innovation logics in these SMEs are neither exclusively driven by internal factors nor solely by external pressures, but rather by a simultaneous and interdependent interaction between:

- The capabilities of the leaders (experience, leadership, social networks),
- Strategic aspirations (competitive positioning, market diversification, asset development),
- Internal resources (employee skills, performance levels),
- Sectoral and international requirements (quality, compliance, agility),
- And opportunities offered by the local environment (institutional support, associative guidance, external expertise).

These findings challenge the dichotomous approaches to organizational innovation (endogenous vs. exogenous) and advocate for an integrated, more realistic and operational conception of the innovation process in the context of exporting SMEs.

On a theoretical level, this research contributes to the understanding of organizational innovation mechanisms in exporting SMEs by proposing a realistic articulation of the simultaneous, reciprocal, and ongoing interactions between internal determinants (leader profile, strategy, resources) and external ones (competitive, institutional, and cultural environment). In the Moroccan context, where few studies have explored this issue, the proposed model provides a useful foundation for conceptualizing the interactions between innovation determinants.

From a managerial perspective, the findings offer SME leaders a framework to better structure their innovation initiatives. The following matrixes translate empirical insights into a practical decision-making tool for exporting SMEs. They align client-specific requirements with organizational levers—leadership, human resources, processes, partnerships, investments, and strategy—identified in our study. By mapping these dimensions, managers can prioritize actions that strengthen compliance, agility, and responsiveness across diverse markets. The matrixes support proactive planning, enabling SMEs to anticipate regulatory, quality, and design constraints while optimizing internal capabilities. They are particularly relevant for sectors facing high variability and complexity, such as agri-food and textile, and serves as a roadmap for continuous organizational innovation in global contexts.

Table 9: Agri-Food Sector Matrix of Actionable organizational levers to meet client-specific requirements

| Client Requirements | Leadership | HR & Skills | Processes / Structure | Partnerships | Investments | Strategy |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Certification / compliance multi-country | A “quality first” Vision | Compliance training | Standard Operating Procedure, audits | Suppliers, consultants | Control equipment | Roadmap by market |
| Traceability & stability | Proximity leadership | Quality rituals | In-process controls | Professional networks | Monitoring tools | KPI integration |
| Country-specific adaptations | Proactive scanning | Regulatory skills | Variant processes | Institutional ties | Adjustments | Sequencing of markets |

Source: Author

Table 10: Textile Sector Matrix of Actionable Organizational Levers to Address Client Variability and Time-to-Market Pressures

| Client Requirements | Leadership | HR & Skills | Processes / Structure | Partnerships | Investments | Strategy |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Multiple models / specifications | Rapid decision-making | Method training & versatility | Pre-production studies | Client exchanges | Quick-change tools | Weekly review |
| Short lead times & cost pressure | Performance focus | Continuous improvement culture | Daily problem-solving | Benchmark peers | Equipment adjustments | Cost/delay KPIs |
| High variability (small series) | Agility vision | Multi-tasking skills | Flexible cells | Local expertise | Micro-investments | Client segmentation |

Source: Author

By identifying internal levers and mobilizable external supports, leaders can make more informed strategic choices, taking into account the necessary trade-offs between constraints and opportunities. The model developed through this research can serve as a strategic management tool, particularly for SMEs in the agri-food and textile sectors.

For public decision-makers, institutional actors, professional associations, and support organizations for SMEs and their export processes, understanding the nature and reciprocal interdependencies between the various determinants of organizational innovation would allow for more pragmatic and beneficial contributions to SMEs.

Like any study, this research has limitations. First, the number of cases studied, despite methodological rigor and theoretical saturation achieved during fieldwork, does not confer indisputable external validity to our results. A larger sample of exporting SMEs would have increased the explanatory power of our model and the validity of the results obtained. Similarly, since our study was conducted in the agri-food and textile sectors in Morocco, we cannot rule out sectoral differences that may limit the validity of our research in other sectors and countries. Moreover, our research focused on high-performing international SMEs, which suggests that their experiences may differ significantly from those of moderately or less successful SMEs.

Likewise, the number of interviewees (20 within the six SMEs studied) was not sufficiently large. Although the diversity of their functions and hierarchical levels allowed us to build an initial understanding of the essential elements of our research, our results only reflect the perceptions of a minority of actors, mainly managers and intermediate supervisors. A larger number of interviews, especially incorporating the views of operational actors in each SME, would probably have refined certain aspects of the studied phenomenon, even if the principle of saturation guiding our approach partially mitigates this limitation.

Several avenues for future research may extend this study:

1. Replicating the study with agri-food and textile SMEs that exhibit different characteristics, to test the robustness of the model.
2. Investigating SMEs that failed in international markets, to identify organizational barriers and poorly negotiated conditions.
3. Comparing success and failure trajectories by confronting the perceptions of leaders and employees.
4. Extending the analysis to collective organizational forms, such as export consortia, SME networks, or innovation ecosystems, to understand co-design and co-implementation logics.
5. Exploring inter-organizational mechanisms that could help SMEs overcome structural limitations and strengthen their innovation capacity.

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