

Theoretical Exploration of the Organizational Resilience Factors of the Family-Owned SMEs during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract: In a volatile and changing context shaped by the succession of economic, social and health crises, etc., the resilience of organizations and companies is a key issue for managers and decision-makers. The family business (FB) is the most dominant form of entrepreneurial activity in economies over the world. They represent 60 to 90% of all businesses worldwide, taking many forms such as: Very Small Enterprises (VSE), Small Enterprises (SE), medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and Large Enterprises. The main objective of our study is to explore theoretically the phenomenon of organizational resilience of FBs especially in this context of Covid-19 crisis. To this end, our research question is formulated as follows: *To what extent the family firms are resilient during the Covid-19 crisis?* The adoption of dynamic capabilities theory and the analysis of a rich and diverse literature review allow us to explore the antecedents of organizational resilience in the FB context. Therefore, this theoretical exploration reveals; agility, strategic behavior, and internal resources and organizational capabilities as antecedents of the family businesses resilience.

Keywords: Family Business, Family owned SME, Organizational resilience, Covid-19 context.

INTRODUCTION

The family business (FB) is the oldest and most dominant business form in economies (Bauweraerts *et al*, 2014). They represent between 60 to 90% (Maria Jose Parada, 2014) of all businesses in the world. Similarly, the presence of these firms has taken several forms VSE (very small enterprises), SMEs, MSEs (Larioui, 2021). Their important contributions to wealth production and job creation are widely supported by the conceptual and empirical studies (Basco *et al*, 2021) ; (Bauweraerts *et al*, 2014).

However, the environment turbulence caused by the technological change, the propagation of crises: economic, social and sanitary like the health crisis caused by Covid-19 (Calabrò *et al*, 2021), calls into question the well-functioning and the continuity of the businesses. Family (Larioui, 2021) and non-family (Messaoudi *et al*, 2021) SMEs are known for their vulnerability due to their lack of sufficient financial, human and technological resources. This reality makes the issue of organizational resilience of family and non-family businesses a fertile field of research that interests the research community.

This complex reality, marked by the evolution and hostility of the business environment, encourages business leaders to adopt resilient and adaptive behaviors in order to adjust to this continuous contextual metamorphosis. In this sense, the family business research community recognizes the specificity of these entities compared to their counterpart's non-family business (the familiness model, the emotional capital model, the stewardship theory, the three circles model of family businesses). Through, the predominance of family logics based on tight social connections and apparent emotional ownership that shape family business behavior (Larioui, 2021) (Berrone *et al*, 2012) ; (Basco, 2013). In this perspective, (Calabrò *et al*, 2021) admit the proactive behavior and organizational resilience capabilities of the FB towards the crisis. Therefore, the family's continuous control over the firm process tends to shape its behaviors, choices, and outputs (Bauweraerts *et al*, 2014).

Our paper proposes to shed light on family-owned behaviors and strategies in times of crisis. To do so, our main research question is: To what extent the

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Family Business firms are resilient during the Covid-19 crisis?

To answer this main research problematic, we expect the following to explore the:

- Organizational capabilities of family firms;
- The FB resilient strategies during the Covid 19 crisis.

To do this, we will conduct a theoretical and conceptual analysis of the literature review conducted on the organizational behavior of FEs in the context of the Covid crisis, in order to understand their managerial strategies, their decisions, and their choices on the one hand, and on the other hand, how these actions have enabled them to overcome the crisis and absorb their economic and non-economic effects. Or perhaps the family organization draw lessons from this health crisis to better relaunch again with new perspectives of growth and development.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Organizational Resilience

Research on resilience dates back to 1973 with the pioneering work of Holling, considering this organizational behavior as the ability of the organization to regain equilibrium and return to the normal state after situations of shocks and disruptions of the environment (saad *et al*, 2021). It is an umbrella concept that is difficult to define (Messaoudi *et al*, 2021). Resilience is multidimensional; it has been developed in different disciplines such as health sciences, ecology, psychology and biology before being transposed to economic and management sciences (Lotfi *et al*, 2017). This multitude of approaches according to which the resilience has been defined is explained by the hostility of the environment and the changing social context in which people and organizations evolve in the sense of researchers (Linnenluecke, 2017). So it makes sense to give it specific meanings depending on the context of its use.

Therefore, the authors do not claim to propose a single, common definition for the concept "organizational resilience", but rather to highlight the diversity of meanings that can be attributed to this concept in different disciplinary fields. Following the economic perspective, (Bigg *et al*, 2015) the organizational resilience is defined as "*the capacity of a firm to survive, maintain performance, income, employment, adapt to challenges by minimizing vulnerability situation facing them (i.e., disaster threats)*". Similarly, other studies approach this concept from the perspective of the firm's strategy. According to (Hamel *et al*, 2003), "*strategic resilience is distinguished by its continuous temporal character, and its objective is to reduce the impact of a disruptive event in order to avoid a crisis situation. Strategies of anticipation and permanent innovation are the basis of strategic resilience*" quoted by (TROUSSELLE 2014 P.38).

Certainly, the literature presents a multitude of definitions to approach "organizational resilience" that differ from one typology of enterprise to another (SME, large structure), from one economic, social and political context to another (saad *et al*, 2021). However, the conclusions of the systemic study on the conceptualization of the resilience of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) conducted by (saad *et al*, 2021) argue that despite the diversity of meanings attributed to this concept by the literature, they generally tend to share some commonalities in judging the resilient capacities of such structure. "*Most of the common characteristics including adaptability, maintaining positive performance (growth), responsiveness, competitiveness and firms ability to minimize vulnerabilities as well as their fast recovery from a disruptive state*" (saad *et al*, 2021). Furthermore, the conclusions of this same systemic analysis judge the organizational resilience of a structure not only on the basis of its ability to absorb crisis and adopt defensive strategies to establish equilibrium, but rather on the power to transform threats into opportunities (saad *et al*, 2021).

2.2. Family-Owned SME

The definition of the family firm is a major issue for researchers in business management (Basly, 2005), following the absence of a commonly accepted meaning attributed to this organization typologies (Handler, 1989). Research shows the multitude of single and multi-criteria definitions proposed to approach the concept of the family firm (Allouche *et al*, 2000). However, there is still a lack of consensus on how to define them. This challenge accounts for the youthfulness of research on this field of the family firm (Basly, 2005 P.35); (Rovelli *et al*, 2021). Synthesis works of the literature review on the concept "family business" conducted by (Allouche *et al*, 2000); (Harms, 2014) distinguish between monocriteria and multicriteria definitions. The first category approaches the FB by retaining one of the following dimensions (family-firm overlap, management control and ownership of the firm by members of the same or several families, intergenerational continuity of the firm). On the other hand, the second typology of definitions tends to retain these different criteria at the same time to properly identify FB. Lately, researchers tend to adopt multi-criteria definitions rather the uni-criteria ones according to scholars (Allouche *et al*, 2000); (Harms, 2014). This is in order to better conceptually frame the concept of "family business", which is considered complex and heterogeneous (Harms, 2014) due to the continuous and dynamic interaction between the family and the business (Basly, 2005).

Indeed, family businesses transcend all forms of enterprises (VSEs, SMEs and GEs) (Larioui, 2021); (Azizi *et al*, 2018). We focus in this study on the analysis of the resilient behavior of family SMEs vis-à-

vis the crisis. So we judge appropriate to define the notion of SME before attributing this family quality (family SME). Generally, researchers use quantitative (workforce, turnover) and qualitative (managerial practices, organizational structure, objectives) approaches to define the SME (EZZIADI 2019). In Morocco, public organizations (for instance: central bank, investment charter, etc.) are increasingly interested in the issue, through the proposal of many definitions. In this sense, the 1st article of the law 53-00 defines the SME as "*any enterprise managed and/or administered directly by the natural persons who are its owners, co-owners or shareholders, and which is not held at more than 25% of the capital or voting rights by an enterprise or jointly by several enterprises not corresponding to the definition of the SME..., in addition SMEs must meet the following conditions: for existing companies, to have a permanent staff not exceeding two hundred people and to have realized, during the last financial years, either an annual turnover excluding taxes not exceeding seventy-five million dirhams, or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding fifty million dirhams*".

Accordingly, the definition proposed by (Ouhadi et al, 2021) for the construct of family owned SME combines the family quality and the SME features through the interweaving of the definitions of the two concepts developed separately. According to these researchers, "*the family SME can be defined as a company whose workforce does not exceed 200 employees and annual turnover does not exceed 75 million DH on the one hand, on the other hand the capital structure, transmission and management are influenced by the family dynasty*" (Ouhadi et al, 2021).

3. Organizational Resilience in Family Enterprises: Theoretical Framework and the Literature Review

3.1. Dynamic Capabilities Theory

According to (Mahmoud J et al, 2009), the dynamic capabilities perspective is an extension of the resource-based approach (RBV) developed by (Wernerfelt 1984; Barney 1991). This theoretical approach falls under the strategic intent paradigm. Theorists of this current admit that the competitive advantage of the firm is mainly based on its resources and internal capabilities, rather than on its ability to continuously adapt to the demands of the environment, which is considered to be turbulent and undergoing rapid change (Teece, 2007); (Barney, 2001).

(Grant, 1991) quoted by (Tywoniak, 1998) proposes to define the firm "*on the basis of what it is capable to do*". The proponents of this new paradigm of strategic management of the firm link the firm's behavior to its internal potential, both tangible (organizational, financial and technological resources) and intangible (know-how, knowledge, human capital and background) (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). In this sense (Mira Bonnardel, 2000)

admits that "*Competencies do not appear as a state - or a product to be acquired - but as a construct balanced on four pillars: know-how in action, knowledge mobilization, knowledge integration of heterogeneous knowledge, and knowledge transfer to invent solutions to new situations*". Indeed, the effective articulation of this portfolio of resources through learning and organizational routines generates idiosyncratic skills and abilities that are difficult to imitate, rare, relevant and non-transferable, and which are the source of the firm's competitive advantage (Puthod et al, 1997).

In this perspective, the theory of dynamic capabilities was developed. It is a logical continuation of Resource Based View (RBV), whose basic premise is to continuously and dynamically update and develop the competencies and capabilities that are the basis of the firm's competitive power (Teece, 2007). Indeed, the hostility of the environment, the rapid technological revolution that is difficult to grasp and the openness of economies challenge the performance and continuity of companies (Teece, 2007). These challenges make the development of internal capabilities a strategic response to the changing environment. "*Enterprise success depends upon the discovery and development of opportunities; the effective combination of internally generated and externally generated inventions; efficient and effective technology transfer inside the enterprise and between and amongst enterprises; the protection of intellectual property; the upgrading of 'best practice' business processes; the invention of new business models; making unbiased decisions; and achieving protection against imitation and other forms of replication by rivals*" (Teece, 2007).

This theory of dynamic capabilities supports the role of reconfiguring the firm's internal and external capabilities, learning, and innovation capabilities, as well as developing continuous adaptive capabilities to changes of the environment (Naffakhi et al, 2008). The two dimensions, technical (material and technical resources) and evolutionary (evolutionary and adaptive capabilities), are the basis for the development of dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007). However, this evolutionary dimension of firm capabilities is widely supported in the literature as the source of their competitive advantage (Naffakhi et al, 2008); (Teece, 2007); (Ait Razouk 2007).

3.2. Organizational Resilience of FB: A Synthesis of the Literature Review

3.2.1. Agility as an Antecedent of Organizational Resilience of the FB

The concept of agility was first developed in the United States of America in 1991 following the scientific work carried out by the *Iacocca Institute of Lehigh University* (Nagel, 1991). This organization proposes the establishment of a flexible management system and an agile organizational structure as a strategic response to the challenges of environmental

change (Barzi, 2011). In the face of the rapidly changing business environment marked by the excessive use of communication media and the increased adoption of digitalized devices, economic and health crisis, etc. adaptability and flexibility are the guarantee of the future continuity of American factories in the sense of the researcher (Nagel, 1991). According to (Woltjer et al, 2015) agility stems from risk management. It reduces and controls the adverse effects of the environment on the company functioning (Shekarian et al, 2020).

From this perspective, the issue of agility is gaining scientific curiosity from the research community. Scholars in organizational management consider agility as "the critical capability that organizations need to meet the challenges of complexity and uncertainty", (Alberts, 2007). Moreover, studies in supply chain management acknowledge the agile behavior of the company by the efficiency and optimization of their production and distribution processes in times of crisis, "the capability to sense changes, rapidly respond to changes, rapidly reduce product development cycle time or total lead time, rapidly increase the level of product customization, rapidly increase the level of customer service, rapidly improve delivery reliability, and rapidly improve responsiveness to changing market needs" (Shekarian et al, 2020).

In addition, other research works in the field of corporate strategy propose broader definitions for the concept of "agility" that go beyond its narrow sense, closely linked to the development of capabilities and flexibility of organizations by taking into account other dimensions related to strategic agility and the ability to adapt their managerial practices (Barrand, 2009). This author considers agility as "managerial models that allow flexibility or the principles that support innovation. It is in fact a perpetual search for balance between an active dimension (doing and proving that one knows how to do), a reactive dimension (being opportunistic in the face of observed changes in order to build loyalty) and a proactive dimension (seeking innovation)".

From these pre-developed conclusions, we can retain that the different theoretical perspectives developed in the literature assume the organizational agility as an antecedent and a basic premise for establishing a resilient organizational structure.

- *Proposition 1 : organizational agility is a premise of the resilience of FB in a crisis context*

3.2.2. The Strategic Behavior of Family Businesses

The complexity of the environment following the evolution of market structures, the demands of customers, the increased use of technology and the

multitude of economic and social crises makes the resilience of organizations and individuals a major issue within a research community (Messaoudi et al, 2021).

Indeed, risk management is a toolbox and strategy for any structure to master the crisis impacts. Indeed, the risk management allows anticipating and managing uncertainties by analyzing the current state of the context and the performance of the company, in order to develop possible scenarios on future events. However, with the remarkable evolutions of the environment, crises are generated by improbable events (Reymen et al, 2015); (Messaoudi et al, 2021), which makes their prevention especially by mobilizing the classical tools a difficult objective to reach. To react in an effective way to the turbulence of the environment, studies support the adoption of resilient behaviors and strategy as relevant solutions no longer to avoid the crisis but rather to reduce, absorb and mitigate their adverse effects that tend to jeopardize the survival of organizations (Messaoudi et al, 2021).

Family entities are considered resilient as their non-family counterparts (Larioui, 2021). (Hoy et al, 2005) distinguish 4 strategic priorities (called 4Cs) that largely distinguish FBs, they are: **Continuity** (the continuity of the firm across generations is considered a priority), **Command** (the control and decision-making system of FB tends to be creative, participative, innovative and fast in order to ensure strategic regeneration), **Community** (the reason of existence of the family business is not only to achieve economic and financial results (a selfish logic focused on the financial interests of shareholders), but rather to create a climate of trust, cohesion, teamwork and satisfaction among the different actors of the company), **Connection** (it is about developing close and welded social connections).

- *Proposition 2 : The strategic behavior is a premise of the resilience of FB in a crisis context*

3.2.3. Organizational Resources and Capabilities: The Indispensable Premises of the Resilience of FBs

The lack of sufficient financial resources and human capacity exposes SMEs to the risk of disappearance and makes them vulnerable, especially in times of crisis according to (Pal et al, 2014). However, the organizational structure of these business structures are their source of advantage and strengthens (Sullivan T et al, 2011), which allows them to be flexible, to be able to adapt easily and in a flexible way to the changing environment by adopting resilient and proactive strategies (Pal et al, 2014). An empirical study conducted by (Salavou et al, 2004) among 150 Greek SMEs confirms the significant effect of learning and market orientation of the firm on their creativity and innovation capacity. Consequently, this has a positive impact on their resilience capabilities. Besides, the conceptual model developed by (Pal et al, 2014) distinguishes three main antecedents that underlie the

development of resilient organizational behavior of firms, these are: resource portfolio, dynamic competitiveness and learning capabilities. According to resource-based scholars, the acquisition of both tangible (financial, material, technological resources) and intangible (human capital, culture, strong social relationships) resources influence positively the performance of SMEs (Pal et al, 2014) and they consequently increase their adaptive and resilient capabilities (Freeman, 2004). In this same line of ideas, this author specifies, on the one hand, that sufficient financial resources tend to absorb the effects of the crisis, and on the other hand, the acquisition of qualified human capital and the maintenance of close and welded social relations, whether between internal actors or with external stakeholders, facilitate the management of the crisis and the mitigation of its harmful effects on the company through positive communication and the development of common ground. These hypotheses are widely supported especially in the context of the family business where emotional and collective values and social ties significantly shape the resilient behavior of the family entity (Larioui, 2021).

In addition, the continuous and dynamic competitiveness of the firm is another antecedent of organizational resilience of firms in the sense still of the model of (Pal et al, 2014). This antecedent is declined according to the literature by: flexibility (rapid decision making, effective communication, ability to understand and grasp change as well as to adopt the firm's processes and routines to the new requirements imposed), the development of a strong resource and competence portfolio, the development of strong social and relational capital and the firm's ability to bounce back from shocks and absorb their effects (Sullivan T et al, 2011).

According to (Pal et al, 2014), these dynamic capabilities are the main determinants of the establishment of an agile and flexible organizational structure that tends to react effectively towards the crisis through the implementation of resilient strategies (Shekarian et al, 2020); (Ismail et al, 2011); (Hatun et al, 2006). However, organizational resilience is a behavior contingent on the size of the firm, (Sullivan T et al, 2011) show the non-existence of a single model and the same resilient practices adaptable to all typologies and sizes of organizations. These authors confirm the flexibility of the SME management system, but their lack of resources and required capacities does not allow them to be sufficiently flexible, especially on the technical and operational level, as is the case with large organizations. It is a shortcoming of the SME addressed by the literature.

Furthermore, the culture and learning capabilities of the firm are widely supported by previous studies as another determinant of organizational resilience. This antecedent is strongly

nurtured by the intangible resources, knowledge and capabilities developed within the firm (Adama, 2019). (Beer et al, 2000) explain "*the role of non-technical aspects, i.e., human capital, motivation, communication, coalition building and training, etc., are critical to creating resilient firms through a process of change*" cited by (Pal et al, 2014). This points to the definitions proposed for the concept of organizational resilience, the learning dimension of which is widely emphasized as a primary condition for judging the resilient behavior of a structure (Zoungrana, 2017). It is the capacity of the organization to develop knowledge, learn from previous experiences and prepare to face future events.

- *Proposition 3: Organizational resources and capabilities are the premises of the FB resilience in a crisis context.*

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a synthesis of the literature review on the resilient organizational behavior of family-owned SMEs in the context of a Covid-19 crisis. It is a critical analysis of the previous studies conducted on the theme of the behavior of the FB during the health crisis propagated in early 2020.

The theory of dynamic capabilities constitutes the theoretical framework for analyzing the phenomenon of organizational resilience of FBs in the context of a Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, organizational agility is an antecedent of FBs resilience as revealed by the theoretical analysis conducted. Similarly, the strategies and strategic behavior as well as the capacities, resources and internal potential of the structures are the guarantee of their organizational resilience in a crisis context.

However, this theoretical analysis and synthesis of the literature review about the resilient behavior of the FBs should be deepened by an exploratory and empirical research in order to understand the reality of the social phenomenon studied thereby to confirm the theoretical propositions developed.

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