

An Investigation into the Development of the Competencies of the Tunisian Entrepreneur: The Importance of International and Social Dimensions

Une enquête sur le développement des compétences de l'entrepreneur tunisien : l'importance des dimensions internationales et sociales

Una investigación sobre el desarrollo de las competencias del empresario tunecino: La importancia de las dimensiones internacionales y sociales

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT

It is important to stress the importance of having the right competencies to sustain entrepreneurship initiatives in developing economies. Using a narrative approach based on the life stories of Tunisian entrepreneurs, this research aims to identify the entrepreneurial competencies developed over time and throughout the entrepreneurial journey. Our findings demonstrate the importance of social competencies that are related to the Tunisian context and the need for global entrepreneurial competencies framework. Furthermore, this research raises awareness about the challenges of the international context in entrepreneurship and the need to develop inter-cultural competencies, and elucidates the ambiguities surrounding required global entrepreneurial competencies.

Keywords: Tunisian entrepreneurs, life story, international competencies, social competencies

Résumé

Il est important de souligner l'importance de disposer des compétences appropriées pour soutenir les initiatives d'entrepreneuriat dans les économies en développement. Utilisant une approche narrative basée sur les récits de vie d'entrepreneurs tunisiens, cette recherche vise à identifier les compétences entrepreneuriales développées tout au long du processus entrepreneurial. Nos résultats démontrent l'importance des compétences relationnelles, ainsi que la nécessité d'un cadre global de compétences entrepreneuriales. En outre, cette recherche met l'accent sur les défis du contexte international de l'entrepreneuriat et la nécessité de développer des compétences interculturelles et clarifie les ambiguïtés autour des compétences entrepreneuriales requises à l'international.

Mots-Clés : Entrepreneurs tunisiens, récit de vie, compétences, compétences relationnelles

Resumen

Es importante enfatizar la importancia de tener las competencias adecuadas para sostener las iniciativas de emprendimiento en las economías en desarrollo. Utilizando un enfoque narrativo basado en las historias de vida de los empresarios tunecinos, esta investigación tiene como objetivo identificar las competencias empresariales desarrolladas a lo largo del tiempo y a lo largo de su viaje empresarial. Nuestros hallazgos demuestran la importancia de las competencias sociales relacionadas con el contexto tunecino, y la necesidad de un marco global de competencias empresariales. Además, esta investigación crea conciencia sobre los desafíos del contexto internacional en el espíritu empresarial y la necesidad de desarrollar competencias interculturales, y aclara las ambigüedades que rodean las competencias empresariales globales requeridas.

Palabras Clave: Empresarios tunecinos, historia de vida, competencias internacionales, competencias sociales



Despite the increase in research on international entrepreneurship, relatively little is known about the process in Africa (Dana and Ratten, 2017). In terms of entrepreneurial activities, with a score of Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) of 42.4, Tunisia is ahead of other North African countries such as Egypt and Morocco (FIPA, Foreign Investment Promotion Agency¹). Based on the 2012 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)² report (which is not the starting point of our work but included to strengthen the research context) and the observations in the field, we recognize that Tunisia is experiencing a very challenging economic situation, largely due to the turmoil triggered by the 2011 revolution. Despite the fact that historically the Tunisian state has always encouraged entrepreneurship, successive governments have attempted to undertake new initiatives and adopt new regulations. New support structures, such as Bank of SME Financing, the Tunisian Solidarity Bank and the Agency of the Promotion of Industry and Innovation have been established to accompany young entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurship journeys. However, despite these initiatives, the fear of failure rate remains high at 40.3% [according to the GEM Report, 2015/2016]. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the probability of creating a business in Tunisia after completing studies, remains high (Branchet *et al.*, 2017). These findings generate perplexity among experts in the field of entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurship literature reveals that this topic is a valuable matter for theoretical and practical research. In this paper, entrepreneurship refers to an individual or team creating opportunities for others in a marketplace and attempting to exploit those opportunities through various modes of organising (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990; Mitchel and al, 2002).

Several authors developed entrepreneurial competencies frameworks (Loué and Majdouline, 2015, Chandler and Jansen, 1992; De Hoe and Janssen, 2016). De Hoe and Janssen (2016) addressed the importance of experiential learning skills after failed entrepreneurial initiatives. In their study of entrepreneurship in the Egyptian context, Hussein and Abdel Aziz (2017) found that extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experiences are personality factors that are highly correlated with entrepreneurship. The findings of Alroaya and Bin Baharun (2017) revealed that entrepreneurial skills can be divided into three groups:

1. http://www.investintunisia.tn/Fr/accueil_46_33

2. GEM: A global study conducted by a consortium of universities. Launched in 1999, it aims to analyze the level of entrepreneurship in a broad spectrum of countries.

personal, business management and technical entrepreneurial competencies. Considering the cultural diversity of India, Valliere (2017) highlighted the role of differences in the social environment and the subjective norms of individuals who envision engaging in entrepreneurship.

Our research is aligned with the above findings. Given the importance of entrepreneurial development in developing countries (Ghanem, 2013; Parker, 2018), our goal is to address the topic of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial competencies in the Tunisian context. We therefore aim to construct a cluster of entrepreneurial competencies based on Tunisian entrepreneurs' discourses. In this research and in order to frame the findings of our study, we base our approach on the models of Chandler and Jansen (1992) and Adler and Kwon (2002). We are not claiming that there has not been research on entrepreneurship competencies and associated areas in the African context. We are fully aware of other studies, such as Zoogah (2012); Kamoche *et al.* (2012); SenyKan (2015). Zoogah (2012), for example, shows how African entrepreneurship can help to address the incompatibility between Western management models and African values. SenyKan (2015) highlights that Africans have an inclusive and participatory conception of leadership based on communal principles. This is an example of a study that shows how to integrate African values into organisational practices.

Based on these studies, it is clear that the challenge of the debate on "African management" lies in examining the conditions for conciliating the productive efficiency of organisations with the managerial implications of the African system of thought (Kamdem, 2000). From this perspective, the inclusion of societal values is presented as a way to balance the productive goals of organisations with the preservation of the communal harmony of African societies such as Tunisia.

Our intention is in line with this reflection. We therefore aim to point out the need for more research not only on entrepreneurial competencies but also on other topics, including management and leadership. By entrepreneurial competencies we understand the entrepreneur's ability to be successful in his/her business in terms of personality traits and skills (Man *et al.*, 2002). These competencies are developed and acquired throughout a dynamic entrepreneurial process (Omrane *et al.*, 2011). Especially in a Tunisian cultural context characterized by a good working atmosphere, relational flexibility between employer/employees and excellent communication between the actors (Issaoui, 2020).

In light of our literature review, we aim to investigate the following question: ***How do entrepreneurial competencies develop throughout the entrepreneurial process and to what extent does the cultural context impact the development of these competencies?***

To carry out this research, we conducted a study using the narrative approach based on the life story interviewing research method. To identify the relevant entrepreneurial competencies of Tunisian entrepreneurs, we interviewed fifteen entrepreneurs from the South-East region of Tunisia.

This research identifies and clusters entrepreneurial competencies according to an alchemical typology: entrepreneurial, managerial, technical and social. These competencies develop over time according to the three main stages of the entrepreneurial journey: before, at the start-up stage and during the growth stage. Furthermore, it offers insights into the need for entrepreneurs to develop their intercultural and international competencies.

This article is structured as follows: first, we provide the state of the art of entrepreneurial competencies and entrepreneurial success. We then introduce the entrepreneurial competencies model of Chandler and Jansen (1992) and the social competencies model of Adler and Kwon (2002). From this foundation, we present our methodology. Then, we highlight and discuss our findings.

Entrepreneurial Competencies and Entrepreneurial Success

The concept of entrepreneurial competencies is difficult to identify and delimit, and definitions in the literature are elusive (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). This is mainly because the concept stems not only from the competence and competency literature but also from the entrepreneurship literature, and thus several definitions have been given to the concept of entrepreneurial competencies. Bird (1995) refers to characteristics such as specific knowledge, motives, traits, self-image, social roles and skills. Man *et al.* (2002) talks about the total ability of the entrepreneur to perform a job role successfully. Johnson and Winterton (1999) point out the range of skills and competencies required to run a small firm that are different from those needed in larger organisations. In our research, we chose not to differentiate between entrepreneurial behavioural competencies

and a person's entrepreneurial characteristics. We consider entrepreneurial competencies from a holistic viewpoint, meaning that the set of competencies is relevant to successful entrepreneurship initiatives. Entrepreneurial competencies are one factor among others that determine the success and sustainability of a business (Boughattas and Bayad 2008; Chandler and Jansen, 1992; Piispanen *et al.* 2017).

According to Al-Zubaidy and Peiris (2016), competencies can be divided into two types: general and specific. These competencies represent the first trigger of the entrepreneurial initiative and the advocate of its later success, especially during the start-up phase (Omrane *et al.*, 2011; Gratner *et al.*, 1992). Omrane (2013) highlights three categories of social competencies: social persuasion, ingratiation and internal emotional intelligence. Similarly, Shapero and Sokol (1982) specify some factors that influence entrepreneurial intentions. Giordiani (2004) emphasises that the entrepreneurial process begins with articulation between the intention and the entrepreneurial opportunity.

From this same perspective, Boughattas and Bayad (2008) emphasise the importance of entrepreneurial competencies as sustainable strategic resources. It is therefore necessary to understand these competencies to develop them and ensure the sustainability of companies. In this sense, Jain (2011, 127) states *“that psychological and cognitive characteristics, namely, attitudes, motives, self-efficacy, and other personality traits/factors of entrepreneurs influence (to a lesser or greater extent) the actions of discovering, evaluating and exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities”*. Rozhkov *et al.* (2017) studied the effect of the workplace on the competencies and performance of the team. The result shows the importance of contextual factors as detectors of individual competencies.

In the course of this work, we have come across two models: entrepreneurial competencies (Chandler and Jansen, 1992) and social competence (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

The Entrepreneurial Competencies Model (Chandler And Jansen 1992)

This model has been used to identify the competencies of French entrepreneurs (Laviolette and Loué, 2006; Loué *et al.*, 2008; Loué *et al.*, 2008). The authors initially focused on the question of relevant individual constructions, which are based on a research framework encompassing three major roles:

- The entrepreneurial role aims to analyse the business environment and identify business opportunities. This role requires two distinct competencies: the ability to detect opportunities and the competence to have the motivation to engage in business creation (Chandler and Jansen, 2002).
- The managerial role concerns the essential tasks in the implementation of the strategy (develop programmes, budgets, procedures, etc.) This role includes conceptual competence (coordinating the interests of the organisation), human competence (competencies related to the management of people) and political competence (looking for growth opportunities). Chandler and Jansen (1992) add that manager effectiveness requires three competence categories: the abilities to manage, to build relationships and to lead.
- In the technical-functional role, the founder must have the ability to use the tools and techniques of his field (Alroaya and Bin Baharun, 2017). Chandler and Jansen (1992, p.226) add *“the specific competencies required are determined by the industry within which the firm operates”*. The authors highlight that entrepreneurial success depends on entrepreneurial, managerial and technical competencies (Chandler and Jansen, 1992).

The Social Competencies Model of Adler and Kwon (2002)

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Valliere (2017) believe that social capital is an inherent component of the relationships between people. Social capital is considered as a productive asset that facilitates certain forms of social actions while inhibiting others. Baron and Markman (2000) state that social capital leads to the success of the entrepreneur. Social competencies are thus specific competencies that play a role in determining the ability of individuals to interact effectively with others (Baron and Markman, 2000). According to Adler and Kwon (2002: p.18), it is possible to *“differentiate social capital from other types of resources by the specific dimension of the social structure underlying it; social capital is the resource available to actors as a function of their location in the structure of their social relations”*. Moscona et al. (2017) define social structure as a concept and term used to capture the collective properties exhibited by social entities, to identify their characteristics, and to specify the relationships among their component elements. Adler and Kwon (2002) identify three key dimensions of social structure, which are rooted in several types of relationships:

- Market relationships are situations where products and services are exchanged for cash or are bartered.
- Hierarchical relationships are situations where obedience to authority is exchanged for material and spiritual security.
- Social relationships are situations where the exchange concerns favours and gifts.

The literature introduces the main definitions of the entrepreneurial competencies concept. We next focused on the classification of these competencies by providing two models that serve as a basic conceptual framework, which allows us to carry out this study. Other recent work on entrepreneurship is taken into account in this research. This approach will provide an analytical framework based on previously identified competencies. Our goal is to identify the entrepreneurial competencies of a sample of Tunisian entrepreneurs by establishing a cluster of competencies required throughout the entrepreneurial journey before, at start-up and during growth stages.

Methodology

In this section, we present our methodological approach. First, we introduce our data collection process and the reasons behind our focus on the Tunisian South-East region. Second, we highlight our findings.

The Choice of the Tunisian South-East Region

Historically, political factors have contributed to a territorial disparity between different regions of Tunisia and thereby hampered regional development (Sadiki, 2019). According to Béchir, Ounalli and Sghaier (2011), Tunisia has been treated as a single entity in policy makers approach to national economic development. The South-East region, for instance, is one region that has been marginalised. With an unemployment rate of 24.3%, according to the National Institute of Statistics (2017)³, this region is ranked second on the national scale for unemployment. This regional disparity prompted the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) to intervene in the subareas of this region to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This programme helped many young

3. http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/Note_ENPE_2T2017.pdf

entrepreneurs to start businesses thanks to technical and financial support. Many young people, mainly unemployed graduates, have been trained in entrepreneurship in different sectors, and many projects have been launched. The success of this initiative by the UNDP led us to investigate the topic of entrepreneurial competencies and how it relates to entrepreneurial success. In doing so, we saw an opportunity to highlight the competencies required throughout the entrepreneurial journey in this regional context. Furthermore, the experiences of two of the authors, originally from this region, reinforced our intention to focus there.

Data Collection

To answer our research question, we decided to investigate the entrepreneurial journey of 15 entrepreneurs. Thanks to *Alpha Bank*, which is specialised in small and medium-sized enterprise funding, we had the opportunity to access the contact details of entrepreneurs in this region. For the purpose of our research, we selected 20 profiles (recommended by the financial analyst of Alpha Bank). Only 15 entrepreneurs agreed to participate in our study. The majority of our sample are young and have a university degree, and they operate in different sectors. Data were collected through the life story telling method. The major contribution of this method for research in management sciences is the improved ability to understand a phenomenon and detect the differences between the stages (Sanséau, 2005). This approach is appropriate for our research because of the flexibility that this method of interviewing provides us with. Pailot (2003) presents the life story as a dialogical space of description that allows the individual to describe an act and to understand it in an exact and detailed way while expressing the details and emotional feelings that prove the story. Life stories are a widely used approach in the social sciences and humanities. In recent years, life stories have also begun to interest human resource managers (Joyeau, Robert-Demontrond and Schmitt, 2010). This method provides access to reality (Wacheux, 2005) and can also be considered a form of comprehensive interview (Kaufmann, 2011). The first works, which

appeared in the 1920s, aimed to understand social dynamics through the experiences lived and told by the actors (Joyeau *et al.*, 2010). The literature provides us with different terms for this method, including life story, biography interview, practice story, autobiography, and monography (Joyeau *et al.*, 2010). The narrative of a life is considered to be a narrative method that gives a researcher the chance to extract valuable data from an interviewee (Bertaux, 2005). This method is also appropriate for our research because it clearly highlights individual interior life (Wacheux, 1996). In our case, life story telling enables us to draw the link between the entrepreneur's emotions and feelings, which are linked to the personal level, and his family, his company and its stakeholders, which are linked to the collective level (Wacheux, 1996).

A thematic guide based on predefined themes (guidelines used to frame the interviews) inspired by the categories of competencies highlighted by the models identified in the literature. The guide covers themes, such as the entrepreneur's presentation, professional experience, and profile; the entrepreneurial journey; the business environment and its challenges; the sector; and generic competencies.

For our data analysis, we opted for a thematic textual analysis method using NVivo software (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2008). NVivo allows raw data to be classified into categories that are either given a priori or constituted as they arise (Krief and Zardet, 2013). This facilitates the coding process of attaching sentences or paragraphs to topics called nodes (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2003). Thematic analysis was carried out based on the variables identified in the Chandler and Jansen model (1992), Adler, and Kwon (2002). This method is characterised by its degree of depth and rigor in qualitative research, as it permits the analysis of complex relationships between several types of data. We also made matrix queries to study the possible relationships between the themes of our guide and the activity sectors of the entrepreneurs, which are the manufacturing, service (tertiary) and food industries.

Table 1 summarises the sample studied:

TABLE 1
Sample of Tunisian Entrepreneurs (developed by the authors)

	Age	Gender	Industry	Number of employees	Year of creation	Turnover in 2016 (thousand dollars)	International trade
E1	34	Male	Manufacture of plastic bags	5	2014	45.71	No
E2	40	Male	Bottling of cooking oil	10	2015	429.29	No
E3	50	Male	Food ice cream	6	2009	103.35	No
E4	40	Male	Heavy goods services	9	2000	238.49	No
E5	40	Male	Marketing of agricultural equipment	3	2001	31.8	China Italy
E6	32	Male	Hotel and party hall	6	2010	39.75	No
E7	33	Male	Water drilling	12	2011	119.25	No
E8	39	Male	Gravel crushing unit for tiles	11	2009	153.43	No
E9	30	Male	Spirulina culture	8	2014	79.5	Germany Algeria
E10	37	Female	Moulded pallet manufacturing	10	2016	83.47	China
E11	37	Male	Manufacture of flexible plastic packaging	9	2010	106.13	No
E12	25	Female	Photovoltaic sales and installation	10	2016	27.82	Germany
E13	32	Female	Glass craft	2	2011	23.85	Italy
E14	43	Female	Herbal treatment	4	2007	19.87	Egypt China Algeria
E15	28	Female	Dental prosthesis	2	2016	15.9	No

Results

The competencies quoted by the interviewees are listed below in accordance with the two models we use for this research:

TABLE 2 Categorisation of entrepreneurial competencies			
Three roles	Verbatim keys	Social abilities	Verbatim keys
Managerial competencies	<p><u>Organise, motivate, delegate, preserve the organisation, coordinate and supervise</u></p> <p>"My employees are motivated by trust, communication on the company's situation and our goals". (E8)/"I try to empower them so that every employee is engaged". (E14)/"Everyone is focused on his task, and after work we are friends". (E15)/"If one of them has a problem he talks to me about it, and I always try to supervise". (E15)/"I try to involve them in the work, so that they feel that they work in their factory". (E1)</p>	Market relations	<p>Supplier loyalty: "I keep my suppliers because I find what I am looking for." (E6)</p> <p>Customer loyalty: "I developed good market research by building good customer relationships." (E10)</p> <p>International relationships: "I import the raw material from Italy and exactly from a city called Murano" (E13); "My machines are exported from China because the price is competitive and because they do not exist in Tunisia" (E10); "I used to have a supplier in Germany from whom I import the solar water heaters which are not produced in Tunisia" (E12)</p>
Entrepreneurial competencies	<p><u>Identify customers' future needs, perceive the needs of unsatisfied consumers, develop valuable products, and capture good business opportunities</u></p> <p>"I realised that there is a demand for ice cubes, but the offer does not exist". (E3)/"It was an innovative project; at the time there was no tachograph in Tunisia". (E4)</p> <p>Take risk, refuse to fail, and make sacrifices "So, this is an opportunity to discover new knowledge and live the adventure". (E9) "I was close to a state of depression, but I am here now". (E4)</p>	Social relations	<p><u>Stress management and relaxation</u></p> <p>"I try every time to change the pace to avoid the routine and the stress, for example, I organise small parties in the lab," (E15)</p> <p>Put the employee at ease and satisfy hem/her</p> <p>"We provide food and drinks so that the employee else comfortable and feel considered which encourages him to work with efficiency. (E13)</p>
Technical competencies	<p><u>Professional experience and mastering technical tools</u></p> <p>"After I became a professional in this field, I decided to go back to Tunisia and create my own centre". (E14)/"To gain experience, I for worked 6 months just to have knowledge in the field". (E7)</p>	Hierarchical relations	<p><u>Authority and collective decision-making</u></p> <p>"I am authoritarian to ensure the work flow. I do not like a worker to make the decision alone; he must ask for my opinion and inform his colleagues". (E3)</p> <p>Authoritative but kind: "At work, I'm a little bossy in order to ensure the smooth running of work, but without exaggeration and with outshouting". (E15)</p>

Source: Developed by the authors

Entrepreneurial Competencies Held by the Entrepreneur Before the Entrepreneurial Journey

Our study reveals that it is important to have innate qualities to engage in entrepreneurial activity. Our interviewees emphasise self-determination. Furthermore, it appeared that the ability to identify and seize opportunities is also required to mitigate the risk of failure. In fact, it is not enough to identify an opportunity; it is necessary to seize this opportunity. Seizing an opportunity is considered the trigger of the entrepreneurial process, since it encompasses other key capabilities that ensure the creation of a business. In most of the studied cases, the intention to establish an enterprise is inspired by the identification and observation of business opportunities. The identification of an opportunity requires special attention from the entrepreneur and good knowledge of the market and its trends. In this sense, several entrepreneurs highlight that their business ideas reflect local market demand.

In some cases and depending on the activity, entrepreneurs are required to look for external competencies to build a team. This team must be diversified and complementary to accomplish different tasks (technical, financial, legal, orientation management, etc.). On some occasions, the members of the team are relatives or friends. These entrepreneurs attribute the success of their creations, in large part, to the key people who contributed to the project. Entrepreneurs E1, E10 and E15, for example, listed the names of officers and coaches who supported and guided them throughout the entrepreneurial journey. Some entrepreneurs (E9 and E11) were aware of the benefits of sponsors and partnerships and their contribution to the project in terms of capital sharing and financing. This support is very useful for young entrepreneurs with large investment projects and innovative ideas that attract investors. We particularly find this advantage in the case of entrepreneur E9; the company belongs to a group of companies that work in the same field (the culture of spirulina), and grant partnerships are aimed at technical, financial and commercial assistance. Regarding contributions from experienced people (family, friends, colleagues, etc.), they have complementary competencies that are absent in the entrepreneurs' profiles. For example, entrepreneurs E4, E9, E11 and E12 have projects that are totally, or partially, different from their qualifications. In most cases, it is the family that provides the most important moral support.

The ability to work closely with experts and support structures, such as the Agency for the Promotion of Industry and Innovation, the Agricultural Investment Promotion Agency, Business Incubators, and the Southern Development Office, is highly valued by entrepreneurs. In addition, the interviewees emphasise the role of internships and training (E1 and E15), past professional experience (E6), meeting with experts (E4 and E12), and expertise and good knowledge of the market (E3, E13 and E14).

As per the results above, it is clear that entrepreneurs develop and acquire more competencies even before launching their activity, in part thanks to their ability to work in close contact with experts, coaches and others (family, friends and colleagues).

Another category of competence highlighted by the interviewees includes three interrelated key-sub competencies (make the venture work no matter what, refuse to let the venture fail, and make large personal sacrifices). The first one was identified in the profiles of some interviewees who are adventurers and challenge seekers (E9). They tend to take risks and are therefore keen to engage in creative and innovative processes. The second sub-key competence is the most common determination. We found that all the interviewees in our sample encountered enormous difficulties when setting up their businesses, but despite these pitfalls, these entrepreneurs managed to create their business, which shows their determination. The third sub-key competence, which is very important in this kind of situation, stems from the second key competency in that the entrepreneur does not put himself first before or during the start-up phase. The entrepreneurs insist that business creation in Tunisia requires many sacrifices and much patience, especially among those who need substantial financing. In this regard, some interviewees reveal that they were close to falling into a depression, such as E4 and E15.

Regarding the technical competencies included in the technical-functional competencies category, it has been noted that creative individuals pursue their business in their own fields of training and experience. This continuity makes it easier to start a business and increases its probability of success. In this context, the recorded interviews demonstrate that most of the interviewees are experienced or qualified in their areas of business creation, which facilitated the task design and the technical aspects of their projects. Nevertheless, a

minority of these entrepreneurs completely changed course and launched into business creation in sectors completely new to them. These entrepreneurs found interesting opportunities, which led them to think seriously about exploiting these opportunities, although they did not have the necessary technical knowledge. These entrepreneurs then tried to surround themselves with experts and solicit the services of their entourage and experienced employees.

Here, we mainly discuss the competencies learned through education and previous professional experiences.

As per the intersectoral analysis, our study revealed that the entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector (E1, E7, E8, E11 and E12) are highly educated and have a strong professional background in the area of their business creation. Our analysis shows that good knowledge of the market is more of a requirement in the manufacturing sector, whereas only a little knowledge of the market is sufficient in the service (tertiary) and food industry sectors. Indeed, professional internships seem to suffice.

Regardless of the sector, our analysis highlights that entrepreneurs need external support from experts and require the competences of identifying and seizing opportunities.

Entrepreneurial Competencies of the Growth Stage: Situational Competencies

Market Relationships: Barriers for Entrepreneurs

These relationships are considered a priority for entrepreneurs to increase the chances of having a successful start-up. In fact, maintaining privileged relationships with suppliers allows the new creator to avoid several problems related to raw materials and production equipment, such as risks of supply disruption and delayed delivery times. For this, the intelligent entrepreneur does not miss any opportunity to establish this kind of relationship, which we have discovered among some of the entrepreneurs in the interviewed group. These entrepreneurs believe that these relationships allow them to have a priority position in terms of supply, on the one hand, and that they facilitate negotiation, on the other. The advantage of these relationships is most evident in crises when there is a shortage of raw materials. Convinced by this principle, entrepreneur E6 insists that he chooses to keep the same supplier despite the diversity of choices.

He added that thanks to these connections, he has been able to find some needed flexibility to ensure the continuity and survival of his hotel.

Similarly, for the target audience, it is important to pay more attention to partner dependency. Indeed, most are aware of the need to properly identify their customers and thus establish the right allocation of resources to meet their requirements. For this, we find that in addition to the loyalty offered by entrepreneurs, some insist on the importance of adapting their words to the profile of each client to retain the maximum benefit. Here, entrepreneur E13 states that customers prefer to establish direct relationships with the owner of the company and to solicit his attention and his opinion on the requested product.

In conclusion, we can add that some problems encountered by some entrepreneurs in terms of a lack of raw materials or insufficient demand can be resolved by the complexity and superiority of direct contacts. This can also be explained by the lack of real concretisation of market studies before the creation. As long as feasibility studies remains paper-based, the real benefit lies in establishing sincere and cordial relations with both partners, as rapport with suppliers or with customers can bring many privileges. In this context, we have a good example to follow, the entrepreneur E10 who managed to engage and initiate business relationships with his customers and suppliers and to legitimise his company, even before its actual creation.

Hierarchical Relationships: Informal Management

This axis of analysis concerns hierarchical relationships that are organised in a contractual framework. Maintaining this type of relationship requires respect for the regulations on the part of both parties: by the employees who must respond to the orders of their managers and by the managers who must be authoritarian and keep some distance from their employees. Reading the interview transcripts sheds light on the nature of the hierarchical relationships that bind the encountered entrepreneurs with their subordinates. Indeed, most interviewees say they prefer not to be too demanding on the reporting relationship and that they are more pushed towards informal relationships. These relationships tend to create human interactions. The entrepreneurs emphasise the benefits of upward and downward communication in a collaborative and helpful team. In addition, novice entrepreneurs believe that the establishment of informal relationships is more beneficial, as they need advice and assistance from their

groups. At the same time, friendly relationships can be a motivator for staff because when the employee is satisfied with the behaviour of his employer, his degree of respect will drive him to think as though he was working in his own company, which will have repercussions for profitability.

In addition, it is important to remember that the adoption of informal relationships does not affect other types of relationships. Instead, entrepreneurs are aware that directive styles and top-down relationships are on some occasions required to get things done. In this regard, some interviewees (E15, E9, E10, and E1) highlight the distinction between release time and compression time. Others point out a line in the organisation encompassing the heads of each department and their teams in which the role of the entrepreneur is summed up in the need to manage those relationships and to foster meaningful interactions.

The key to establishing these relationships is the need to formally engage with employees in a legal framework. Fostering human relationships will only contribute to achieving a balance between the accomplishment of tasks and the involvement of staff.

Social and Human Relationships: Particular to the Tunisian Context

We cannot speak of social relationships without evoking those that describe these relationships as convivial, where human warmth is more manifest. Our analysis reveals that many entrepreneurs are interested in this type of relationship, albeit to varying degrees. Beyond the concerns of the company, its productivity and its problems, three entrepreneurs consider their employees as friends or, even more, as a second family. For them, communication and collaboration are indispensable instruments between members who are very close in spirit and age (E12 and E15) or even of relatively different ages. For instance, E14 states “they are almost my daughters”. Good relationships inspire good exchanges while ensuring a minimum of respect, be it between the manager and his associates or between team members. Indeed, each entrepreneur has a special method for showing his friendliness and willingness to satisfy his employees. For this, three entrepreneurs (E3, E13 and E15) declare that they provide food to their employees. The first two consider it an obligation to meet the needs of their workers, while the latter believes it is an effective way to change the pace and reduce the workload. This entrepreneur also admits that she sometimes carries out tasks and assumes all the work to grant moments

of rest to her employees. Consideration of employees also appears when entrepreneurs (E13 and E15) highlight their vigilance regarding the health, hygiene and well-being of their employees. To this end, they try to ensure the best possible working conditions (equipment, detergent products, local, etc.). Entrepreneur E12 goes as far as helping to solve the personal and family problems of his workers, which gives them the opportunity to explain their situations and seek solutions together. Two other entrepreneurs (E3 and E11) said that their affability with employees allows them to gain their trust and sympathy in crisis situations. For this reason, even if they pay them low wages, the employees continue to work until the problems are completely or partially solved.

In the end, we assume that this human touch exists in the profile of every entrepreneur encountered, even though they did not all speak of acts demonstrating this quality. Our presence on the company premises during registration sessions with some entrepreneurs allowed us to observe the special relationship between the manager and his team. We saw that entrepreneurs are friendly with their subordinates. When communicating, they speak with them with respect and gentleness, even when giving orders or recommendations. This skill is more prevalent in creative women, who appeared to hate relationships of superiority. Instead, they tend towards informal relationships such as those between members of the same family rather than those of a working group. As a direct result, these relationships make it possible for them to manage and motivate the team to then realise its objectives by delegating its services and immersing itself in its work.

Finally, in the current context, and given the challenges faced by entrepreneurs, it is imperative to maintain good relations with all staff members. This managerial approach ensures the sustainability of the project and protects it from associated risks.

Relationships With International Business Partners

Several entrepreneurs (E5, E9, E10, E12, E13 and E14) do business internationally with countries such as Italy, Algeria, Turkey, China and several Sub-Saharan countries. E5, for example, identifies international suppliers as per client's demands. E10 leverages her innovative project to boost her reputation internationally and thereby enlarge her international clients' and suppliers' portfolios. It is common in the Tunisian context for entrepreneurs to call for relatives' support to grow their business. E10 reveals that early in the life cycle of her

project, she received financial support from relatives to attend a fair in China. This move helped her to identify the right supplier and acquire the equipment needed to start her business. In addition to the importance of social ties in the Tunisian context, E12's international background and open-mindedness allowed her to expand her suppliers' portfolio. According to her, a large portfolio is important. She also reveals that in addition to the need to develop international negotiation competencies, a large supplier portfolio reduces her dependency on one or two suppliers and therefore helps her avoid putting her business at risk. This approach is also shared by E14, who has several business partners in Africa and Europe. For E13, the nature of the business activity, premium handicraft products, requires knowledge about international business trade. Despite the lack of financial resources, E9 emphasises the importance of allocating resources for marketing and advertising purposes in the countries he exports to. He adds that this investment is associated with intercultural risk, as there is a need for intercultural management competencies.

Ultimately, it is clear that Tunisian entrepreneurs value international business relationships within and beyond French-speaking countries. They consider this type of relationship vital to sustain their entrepreneurial activities in the current business environment. The analysis of the discourses reveals the need for international competencies. In addition to knowledge of the international context and the international background of the entrepreneur, the entrepreneurs need to develop other competencies, such as intercultural communication, including language, skills and international negotiation skills. These skills are important to better handle intercultural risks.

Regarding the inter sectoral analysis, our study reveals that all entrepreneurs managed their business from commercial and marketing perspectives, and it appeared that they did not lack such competencies. They did implement different approaches to selling their goods or services, but ultimately, no major issues were observed. However, the analysis shows that supply seems to be, in some cases, an issue in the manufacturing sector (E1, E7 and E11) and in the food industry (E2 and E3).

From a team management perspective, entrepreneurs in the service (tertiary) sector (E6, E13, E14 and E15) develop closer relationships with their teams since they are equally involved in performing tasks. With regard to doing business

internationally, our analysis demonstrates that only 6 entrepreneurs are involved internationally (3 entrepreneurs from the service (tertiary) sector, 2 entrepreneurs from the food industry sector and 1 entrepreneur from the manufacturing sector). Among these entrepreneurs, one is involved in export activities, and the others are involved in import activities. The figure below summarises our findings:

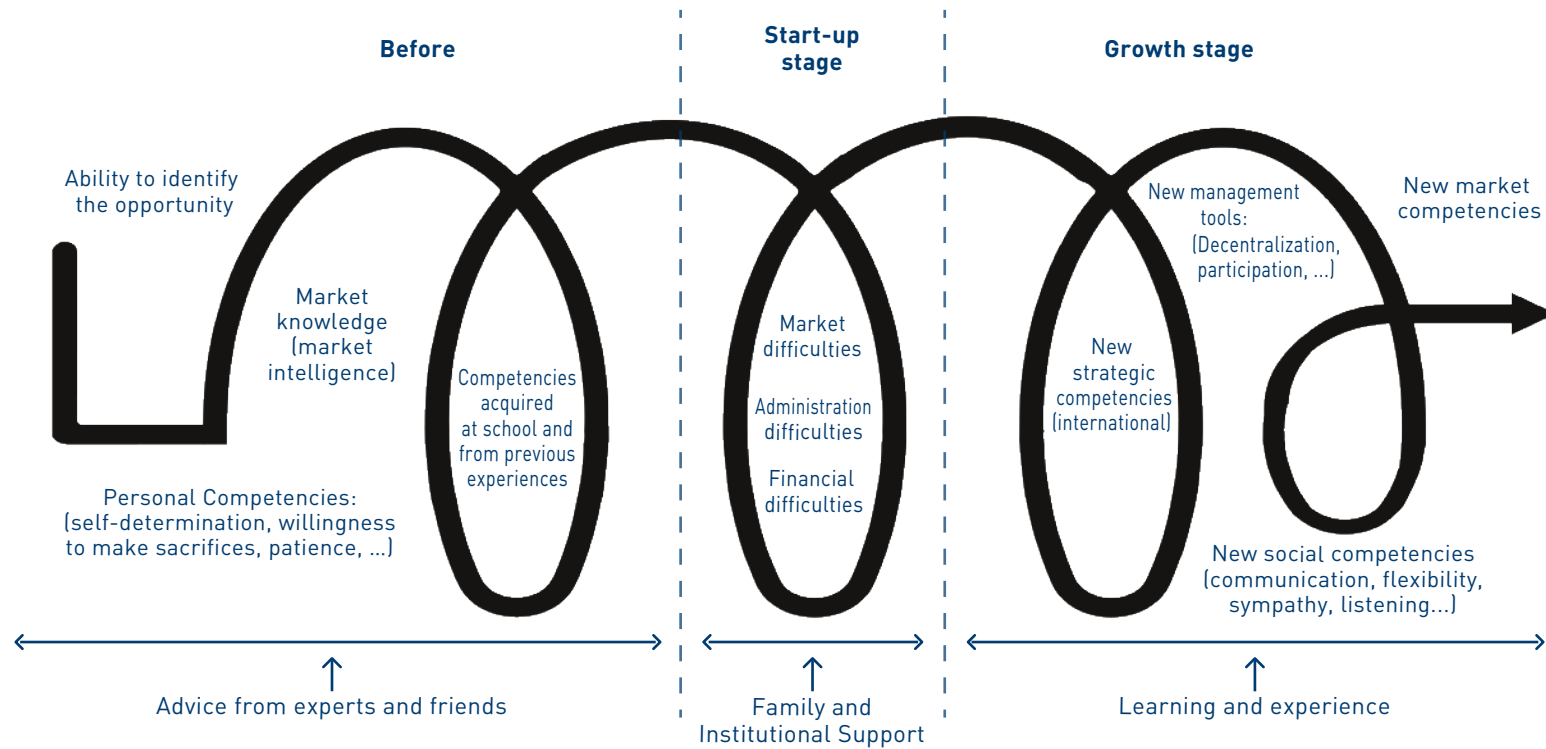
Discussion

Based on the adopted qualitative method, we were able to identify a wide range of entrepreneurial competencies. In their discourses, the entrepreneurs identified several types of competencies needed for their entrepreneurial journeys. In line with the five categories of competencies (human competence, ability to identify and seize opportunities, technical/functional competence and managerial competence), our results propose an extension to the work of Chandler and Jansen (1992), Alroaya and Bin Baharun (2017), Adler and Kwon (2002) and Loué *et al.* (2008).

The first competence highlighted by our research as specified by Piispanen *et al.* (2017) is human resource management competencies. These are indispensable for the entrepreneur throughout his entrepreneurial career (Loué *et al.*, 2008; Laviolette and Loué, 2006). The use of human resource competencies differs from one entrepreneur to another, and each competence is adapted to the situation of the entrepreneur. Indeed, the means of motivating staff members are different from one Tunisian entrepreneur to another (for the female entrepreneurs, the motives are moral, as shown by Chasserio *et al.* (2016); however, for the male ones, they are instead financial). Based on Chandler and Janssen's (1992) model, our results show that male managerial competencies are considered to be crucial, requiring good knowledge of the staff members, the ability to analyse profiles, and above all, personal charisma to know how to optimally manage these resources.

Furthermore, our research reveals that the ability to identify business opportunities is a required competence in the entrepreneurial journey, as advocated by Loué *et al.* (2008), Chandler and Jansen (1992) and Omrane *et al.* (2011). This ability to identify business opportunities is the trigger for the creation of a business and the first step in showing that the individual is endowed with early entrepreneurial prudence that will enable him to position himself as a future entrepreneur (Gartner *et al.*, 1992). In contrast, distinguishing between negative

FIGURE 1
Competency development in entrepreneurial journeys⁴



Source: By the authors

4. This figure shows how the competencies of the entrepreneur develop dynamically throughout the entrepreneurial process. Before the start-up stage, the entrepreneur has personal competencies and primary knowledge about the market. During the start-up stage, the entrepreneur faces several difficulties, which will be overcome with family support and help from those around him. During the growth stage, the entrepreneur engages in a learning process from experiences and acquires new managerial, strategic, and social competencies. The latter are specific to the Tunisian cultural context, which is based on relationships.

and positive factors, as recommended by Shapero and Sokol (1982), our interviewees are concerned only by negative factors. This is explained through the origin of ideas that are, in most cases, encountered and tend towards the pragmatic, functional, and real.

Our study also highlights that the ability to manage a project and drive it to success is also a crucial competence in the entrepreneurial process. This includes the strong personality of the individual, which indicates the character of a challenger on one side and the willingness to make great sacrifices on the other. In this sense, Omrane *et al.* (2011) suggest that it is the role of the entrepreneur to have sufficient energy and the aptitude and patience necessary to overcome the barriers encountered, especially during business creation. Additionally, our interviewed entrepreneurs managed to overcome constraints by applying key competencies to manage situations, ambiguity and paradoxes (Omrane *et al.* 2011).

In line with the work of Alroaya and Bin Baharun (2017), our study states that an entrepreneur must have a minimum level of technical knowledge to carry out his entrepreneurial activity, especially in the manufacturing sector. In the same vein, we have found entrepreneurs who have created companies in fields totally different from their backgrounds, especially in the tertiary and food industry sectors. In this category, some entrepreneurs have encountered flagrant technical problems, especially during the start-up stage of the entrepreneurial journey. However, entrepreneurs who lack technical knowledge also lack relevant experience related to a factor needed for survival, in the sense of Hussein and Abdel Aziz (2017). In our study, the entrepreneurs indicated that they have overcome these obstacles, thanks to a rich entourage of experienced professionals who provided them with the necessary support.

Furthermore, in line with the work of Chandler and Jansen (1992), we can add that when the entrepreneur lacks technical skills, it is important for him or her to seek needed skills within staff members. Beyond technical support, it has also been shown that a young entrepreneur needs financial support. In addition, s/he must have the capacity to seek, coordinate and allocate the required resources in an optimum manner (Giordani, 2004). In reality, these combinations were not indicated by the interviewees, since most of them funded their projects through bank loans and state subsidies instead of investors.

The competencies listed by our interviewees confirm the presence of the three categories of social competencies recommended by Adler and Kwon (2002) and valued by Valliere (2017). These competencies are well mastered by our entrepreneurs, who could evoke testimonials and specific examples. The interviewees emphasised the importance of maintaining “market relationships” to facilitate procurement and sales operations, “hierarchical relationships” to maintain the level of respect and manage formal relationships with employees, and “social relationships” to have the sympathy of those around them and the commitment of the staff. In addition to the findings of Adler and Kwon (2002), our analysis reveals an international dimension that nurtures social competencies. It appears that international competencies are only associated with foreign trade activities (import and export).

In line with the work of Omrane (2013), the relational capital of the entrepreneur defined by Youndt, Subramaniam, and Snell (2004) and Cucculelli *et al.* (2019) is a resource that is associated with the company’s external stakeholders. It allows the entrepreneur to collect required resources throughout the entrepreneurial process. Our findings emphasise the importance of building this relational capital. In the same way, the relationships between the market players, which directly affect the realisation of the project is highly valued by our novice entrepreneurs. They stress out that they have discovered that it is useful to privilege relevant and permanent relationships with their suppliers and their customers to overcome problems related to purchase and sale transactions.

As for hierarchical relationships, the entrepreneurs indicate that they hate to switch into an unnecessary formalism; instead, they prefer to have friendly relationships and naturally committed staff without making use of managerial authority. These entrepreneurs aim to maintain a healthy workplace to unleash the individual competencies and the performance of the group in the sense of Rozhkov *et al.* (2017). However, this does not mean the definitive exclusion of authority, and sometimes strict relationships seem necessary to maintain respect among all members and ensure the continuity of the activity. With regard to this, we tend to believe that this behaviour is triggered by national culture, as highlighted by Branchet *et al.* (2017). As per the findings of Issaoui (2020), our research highlights the importance of the Tunisian cultural context in the workplace. Thereof is characterized by a good working atmosphere, relational flexibility between employer/employees and excellent communication between the actors.

Conclusion

By adopting a qualitative research design based on the life story interviewing approach, we conducted research on entrepreneurship in the Tunisian context. Through a study carried out with 15 entrepreneurs located in the South-East region of Tunisia, we can assert the existence of key competencies specific to the Tunisian entrepreneur and the Tunisian entrepreneurial context.

The theoretical contribution of our research lies in the identification and clustering of entrepreneurial competencies according to an alchemical typology: entrepreneurial, managerial, technical and social. These competencies develop over time throughout the three main stages of the entrepreneurial journey: before, at the start-up stage and during the growth stage (see figure 1).

In addition to the fundamental competencies of the entrepreneur, our research highlights the importance of sociocultural competence, which is specific to the Tunisian context and may be extended to the North African context. The qualities resulting from social relationships are the most commonly identified and stressed by entrepreneurs. This shows the human and relational values of the Tunisian entrepreneur. For another theoretical contribution, we can argue that this research offers insights into the need for entrepreneurs to develop their intercultural and international competencies. We can also argue that it is not actually common, especially in the African context that small entrepreneurs engage in international business relations despite the lack of financial resources. We have also noted that regardless of the sector, competencies developed throughout the entrepreneurial journey are similar in the Tunisian context.

As for the managerial contribution of this research, as managers, Tunisian entrepreneurs need to develop their interpersonal and social competencies to be successful and sustain their entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, our research can serve as a “guide” that can help new business creators and investors to understand the key success factors of entrepreneurial initiatives in advance. We also see in our research an opportunity to stress the need for future research to address the study of entrepreneurship within and beyond the African context. Our study offers a holistic approach to regional and national policy makers to appropriately support young entrepreneurs in their business creation.

At empirical level, we see a contribution in our research methodology, especially in addressing the topic of entrepreneurship in the Tunisian context. We hope therefore that our study contributes to the enrichment of the topic of entrepreneurship in the context of a developing economy. Studying the profile, from the competencies perspective, of Tunisian entrepreneurs in a dynamic geopolitical and economic situation contributes to understanding entrepreneurial status from a global perspective.

As for the limitations of our research, our findings are related to the South-East region of Tunisia and to a certain extent to the whole Tunisian and North African context. There are, however, some signals and valid insights in our findings about the importance of entrepreneurs’ human competencies that might remain valid in different contexts, such as Africa, but because people are different, there is still a need to study this area in other regional contexts.

Furthermore, the absence of quantitative study in our research may represent a limitation. We believe that it would be relevant for future research to use methods such as structural equations to target more entrepreneurs and identify other types of competencies needed for entrepreneurial activities.

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