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The Differential Effects of Customer, Competitor and Distributor Orientation Levels on the Commercial Performance of Agri-Food SMEs in Senegal: An Analysis Using RBV and Resource-Dependence Theories

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Abstract

Purpose: The objective of this article is to examine market orientation by distinguishing between customer orientation and distributor orientation, to study the levels of customer, competitor, and distributor orientation, and to empirically analyze the effect of each component on the commercial performance of the Senegalese agri-food SMEs. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** We adopted a quantitative approach. The final data for the study were collected through face-to-face interviews with 255 SME managers and executives, with the support of professional interviewers. These data were then analyzed using SPSS and AMOS (version 22) software to test the significance of the relationships between latent and observed variables and to estimate the structural model. **Findings:** The study reveals that a strong distributor orientation negatively impacts the commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs due to the high margins demanded by distributors. It also shows that, although agri-food SMEs gather information on their competitors, their limited resources restrict their ability to react effectively, which explains the lack of a significant effect of competitor orientation on commercial performance. Conversely, the level of customer orientation has a significant influence on the commercial performance of these companies. **Originality/Value:** This article examines the influence of market orientation culture on the commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs. Its originality lies in the adoption of the cultural approach to market orientation, considered from a slightly different perspective than that proposed by Narver and Slater (1990). The study incorporates distributor orientation, deemed particularly relevant in the context of Senegalese agri-food

SMEs where distributors are key players. The levels of customer, competitor, and distributor orientation were determined. Furthermore, the analysis utilizes resource dependence theory, which remains relatively uncommon in SME research.

Keywords

Market Orientation, Commercial Performance, Agri-Food SMEs, RBV, Resource-Dependence Theories

1. Introduction

In Senegal, SMEs form the backbone of the country's economy, representing 99.8% of businesses and generating approximately 30.4% of the revenue (ANSD, 2017). They are not only key to growth but also a powerful driving force of the private sector. Most of these businesses operate in the local agricultural processing sector, a sector already identified by several studies as a promising niche.

Studies have shown that the lack of training, the absence of a financing policy and the lack of infrastructure are the main constraints to the development of Senegalese agri-food SMEs (Ndiaye, 2018). Indeed, the necessity to take into account the difficulties related to financing has facilitated the establishment of the National Bank for Economic Development (BNDE), a bank adapted to the specific needs of SMEs. Furthermore, some support structures, such as the Agency for the Development and Support of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (ADPME) and the Food Technology Institute (ITA), implement guidance and promotion initiatives for agri-food SMEs. However, the development of those businesses continues to face major constraints. Their commercial performance remains far below what could be expected of them.

Based on comments from some SME food industry executives, we can say that the main obstacle to their growth is their chronic inability to meet market demands. Yet, their size and the specific nature of their products allow them considerable flexibility, often considered a key asset for adapting to and responding to market conditions.

Senegalese SME managers are more concerned with the day-to-day management of their businesses, which results in little or no market orientation. Yet, the ability to generate and intelligently use market information can be a long-term differentiating asset for SMEs (Pelham, 2000; Jabeen et al., 2013; Kajalo and Lindblom, 2015), and even a source of performance (Bamfo and Kraa, 2019; Qifa and Marunda, 2020).

From this perspective, market orientation appears to be an opportunity for success for Senegalese agri-food SMEs. It is addressed in the vast majority of studies as the implementation of a marketing mindset within an organization. However, the effort to define the concept of market orientation has historically revolved around two approaches: a behavioral one and a cultural one.

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) define market orientation as a set of procedures and/or actions stemming from a company's understanding of the market and its ability to respond accordingly. As to Slater and Narver (2000), they approach market orientation from a cultural perspective, defining it as the most effective and efficient organizational culture for establishing the behaviors necessary to create added value for buyers and to improve company performance, particularly in a stiff competition environment. Market orientation is considered a three-dimensional concept: customer orientation, competitor orientation, and cross-functional coordination. The last one remains, in fact, a matter of debate in the literature.

Narver and Slater (1990) distinguish two main behavioral manifestations of a market-oriented culture: customer orientation and competitor orientation. Similarly, Gatignon and Xuereb (1997), Lambin and Caceres (2006), Gotteland (2005), and Diao, Gotteland, and Boulé (2017) demonstrate that cross-functional coordination is not a component of market orientation, but rather a mediator of the market orientation-performance relationship. Other researchers have also shown a non-significant effect of cross-functional coordination on SME performance (Bamfo and Kraa, 2019). Furthermore, some authors have shown that the centralization of power in the hands of a single decision-maker (e.g., the owner-manager) and the business size affect the level of interfunctional coordination (Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere, 2007; Diao, Gotteland, and Boulé, 2017).

Narver and Slater consider that an organization practices cross-functional coordination when there is a coordinated use of company resources aimed at improving its performance. However, insufficient resources often prevent the effective implementation of marketing strategies in SMEs (Bamfo and Kraa, 2019; Ambroise, Andriuzzi, Fleck and Prim-Allaz, 2024). Furthermore, these authors consider the customer as an actual or potential buyer of goods or services offered by a company. However, in the consumer goods market, the important role of distributors illustrates the need to consider them as full-fledged customers who must be satisfied (Gotteland, 2005; Ambroise, Andriuzzi, Fleck and Prim-Allaz, 2024). Thus, some studies demonstrate that, depending on the size and structure of the agri-food companies, distributors are the actors with the strongest market power (Billows, 2017; Aubert and Mione, 2024).

Despite mixed results, the positive impact of market orientation on performance has been confirmed by numerous researchers. In other words, market orientation improves business results, whether in the context of large companies (Slater and Narver, 1994; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993) or SMEs (Pelham, 2000). However, the approaches to market orientation presented often remain focused on competitors and customers, who, in most studies, are considered end customers (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990; Ambroise and Prim-Allaz, 2015; Bamfo and Kraa, 2019; Diao, 2022).

The analysis of the literature relating to market orientation reveals few studies that consider distributor orientation as a component of market orientation or that study its effect on the performance of companies (Gotteland, 2005; Lambin and Caceres, 2006; Abbad et al., 2012; Ambroise and Prim-Allaz, 2015; Doucoure and Diao, 2023).

This research attempts to alleviate those limitations by examining the issue of market orientation through the lens of end-customer, competitor, and distributor orientations, and by analyzing the influence of the level of each orientation on the commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs. To this end, we utilize theoretical frameworks based on resources and capabilities, as well as resource dependence, since it is generally accepted in the literature that SMEs are characterized by a lack of resources (Ambroise, Andriuzzi, Fleck, and Prim-Allaz, 2024) and a dependence on the commercial resources of downstream actors (Billows, 2017; Aubert and Mione, 2024).

The objective of this research is twofold. The first is to distinguish between end-customer and distributor orientation and to study the levels of end-customer, competitor, and distributor orientation among Senegalese agri-food SMEs. The second is to empirically observe the differential effects of the three components of market orientation on the commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs. Thus, our first section focuses on the theoretical and empirical framework of the research, the second outlines the methodology adopted, and a third one presents and discusses the results obtained.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Development of Hypotheses

2.1. RB and Resource-Dependence Theories

The fundamental principle of resource-based theory is that firms compete based on their resources and capabilities (Aklilu and Chalchissa, 2024). This approach emphasizes the importance of resources as a competitive advantage (Hailu et al., 2025). In fact, to respond effectively to changes in their market, firms must possess the resources and capabilities to adjust their offerings to meet market needs (Doucoure and Diao, 2023). They can create value for customers through high-quality products, efficient services and sustainable practices (Hailu et al., 2025).

SMEs are generally characterized by a lack of resources, sometimes even more so than by a lack of skills (Touratier-Muller and Mesnier 2024). For example, Wahyuningsih, Rombe, and Sutomo (2023), showed that most SMEs in developing countries lack the skills and specialized resources to conduct market research. This lack of resources prevents the effective implementation of market orientation in SMEs (Kadić-Maglajlić, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Lee, 2017). For these reasons, SMEs are distributor-oriented and dependent on the commercial resources of downstream actors (Billows, 2017; Aubert and Mione, 2024). The use of intermediaries implies a lack of direct market presence and, consequently, a lack of direct interaction with end customers. The company then becomes dependent on intermediaries for its operations and performance (Efrat and Øyna, 2021).

Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) has been applied by several authors to analyze the implications of one firm's power over others in manufacturer-distributor relationships (Chinomona and Pretorius, 2011). In fact, firms lacking essential resources to achieve desired organizational outcomes will seek to establish relationships with others to obtain the necessary resources (Singh, Power, and Chuong, 2010).

According to Chinomona and Pretorius (2011), distributors possess resource-based power in the form of knowledge and skills that are valuable to manufacturing SMEs. These resources, based on the expertise of a major distributor, become the foundation upon which manufacturing SMEs seek to build. However, it should be noted that distributors are more likely to favor the development of long-term relationships when they are dependent on a small or medium-sized supplier (Abbad, Paché, and Fenandez, 2012).

Previous studies have shown that businesses need the ability to acquire valuable resources to achieve their objectives and enhance their functionality (Seo, 2020). These objectives can be financial, related to value creation, communication, the distribution process, market access, and/or the protection of specific investments (Abbad, Paché, and Fenandez, 2012). Similarly, Aklilu and Chalchissa (2024), in their study, concluded that SME managers can acquire and more effectively leverage valuable resources such as knowledge, ideas, and information by establishing and maintaining strong relationships with their customers.

2.2. Market Orientation: Theoretical and Empirical Reflections

The development of the market orientation concept has been the subject of much theoretical reflection and empirical work, leading numerous researchers to contribute to various facets of business regarding its application (Schulze, Townsend, and Talay, 2022). Considered as the operational counterpart to the marketing concept (Kefi Ben Chehida and Monnoyer, 2022), market orientation stipulates that to ensure sustainable success, companies must identify and satisfy customer needs more effectively than their competitors (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden, 2005). Two perspectives on market orientation have been presented: a behavioral perspective (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) and a cultural perspective (Narver and Slater, 1990). The behavioral perspective describes market orientation in terms of organizational activities related to competitive intelligence, while the cultural perspective is linked to organizational norms and values. Our research adopts the cultural approach because a company is unlikely to survive if it does not maintain a market-oriented culture in its business activities (Attia, 2013).

Market orientation is considered an organizational culture that effectively and efficiently creates higher value for customers through customer focus, competitor focus, and cross-functional coordination (Narver and Slater, 1990). Researchers adopting this approach primarily study the association between the components of market orientation (customer focus, competitor focus, and cross-functional coordination) and organizational performance. Narver and Slater (1990) argued that in SMEs, businesses are managed by a single person; meaning that decisions are not made by different divisions but by a single decision-maker. Along the same lines, researchers such as Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere (2007); Diao, Gotteland, and Boulé (2017) showed that centralization and size affect the level of interfunctional coordination (Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere, 2007; Diao, Gotteland, and Boulé, 2017).

Other researchers have pointed out that SMEs do not rely on long-term market plans or conduct market research due to their limited resources (Moreira, Navaia, and Ribau, 2022; Ambroise, Andriuzzi, Fleck, and Prim-Allaz, 2024). This lack of resources hinders the effective implementation of marketing strategies in SMEs (Kadić-Maglajlić, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Lee, 2017; Bamfo and Kraa, 2019). Furthermore, they lack effective communication systems or models to integrate customer information, which can make cross-functional coordination difficult (Levy and Powell, 1998). Small businesses therefore have a limited capacity to implement cross-functional coordination (Royo-Vela et al., 2021).

In the Senegalese context, one of the specific characteristics of SMEs is that power can be concentrated in the hands of a single decision-maker (for example, the owner-manager); this can influence strategic decisions within the company, especially those relating to organizational structure and the rules for coordinating work between functions. For these reasons, we have not taken interfunctional coordination into account.

Keskin (2006) argues that when SMEs adopt a market orientation, they have a greater potential competitive advantage than large companies because they are less structured, less formal, have minimal organizational divisions, and closer relationships with customers. Consequently, this improves their ability to perceive and respond to market demands and needs quickly and appropriately. Although few studies have examined all the components of market orientation (Noya, Taneo, and Melany, 2025), the results of these studies are contradictory. Thus, Osuagwu (2019) suggests that more research should be conducted to explore the dimensions of market orientation and the effect of performance in various contexts. Other researchers have also proposed a conceptual enrichment of the dimensions of market orientation by combining different traits that characterize it (Kefi Ben Chehida and Monnoyer, 2022).

Studies have shown that, depending on the size and structure of agri-food companies, intermediaries are the actors with the strongest market power (Aubert and Mione, 2024). In fact, in the Senegalese agri-food sector, the important role of distributors illustrates the need to consider them as full-fledged customers who must be satisfied (Gotteland, 2005; Doucoure and Diao, 2023; Ambroise, Andriuzzi, Fleck, and Prim-Allaz, 2024). Therefore, a market-oriented culture is considered here as a manifestation of three main behaviors (customer orientation, competitor orientation, and distributor orientation).

2.3. Commercial Performance of SMEs: Theoretical Overview

Commercial performance occupies a central place in marketing activities. Indeed, one of the major concerns of marketers, which aligns with that of researchers, is to find explanations for commercial performance (De La Villarmois, 2001). Authors approach it either according to the context studied (Issor, 2017) or according to the objectives set, the analytical perspective, and the field of interest (Ahmani and Bouazza, 2022). It can be defined as a company's ability to offer goods or services adapted to the expressed needs of customers (Lebzar and Nejjari, 2018; Ahmani and Bouazza, 2022). According to Cappelletti (2008), commercial performance is broadly understood as the level of effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of sales and marketing practices. Effectiveness refers to the achievement of set objectives, efficiency seeks to combine available resources in the most productive way possible, and sustainability corresponds to the company's ability to consistently achieve satisfactory (not exceptional) performance in terms of growth and margin over a long period. Commercial performance thus expresses the level of resource utilization by companies to achieve their objectives (Thuy, Nhung, Oanh, and Hoa, 2023).

Economic actors consider performance to be one of their short-, medium-, and long-term objectives and realize that it is open to many interpretations, particularly for SME managers (Saoudi, Aubry, Gomot, and Renaud, 2023). In fact, the effects of marketing actions on the performance of very small and small businesses are not easily measurable and can only be felt in the medium term for immediate investments (Ambroise and Prim-Allaz, 2015). Despite the crucial role of marketing within companies, measuring commercial performance remains difficult (Youb, 2022). Numerous quantitative and qualitative indicators are used to evaluate commercial performance. Among these indicators, sales or turnover, market share (Bourguignon, 1995; Hmioui, Alla, Bentalha, & El Ghalfik, 2019; Beddaa and Bachiri, 2020; Ghali-Zinoubi, 2021; Ahmani and Bouazza, 2022; Thuy, Nhung, Oanh, and Hoa, 2023); customer loyalty and satisfaction are widely used in management research (Furrer & Sudharshan, 2003; Sogbossi Bocco, 2010; Hmioui, Alla, Bentalha, & El Ghalfik, 2019; Thuy, Nhung, Oanh, and Hoa, 2023). Other criteria such as profit (Furrer and Sudharshan, 2003), profit growth (Sogbossi Bocco, 2010), overall profit margin, sales prospecting success rate (Beddaa and Bachiri, 2020), etc., also attract the attention of researchers. However, it should be noted that marketing research has a less formal approach to performance and focuses on more qualitative measures such as customer satisfaction, customer loyalty levels or the reduction in the number of doubtful customers, considering them as antecedents of profit levels (Ambroise and Prim-Allaz, 2015).

Commercial performance can be measured objectively or subjectively, but in this research, we are interested in perceived commercial performance, as the best evaluation criteria are determined subjectively (Brownhilder, 2018). Perceived commercial performance is considered a measure of the success of commercial activity, based primarily on the judgment of business leaders through evaluation criteria. This is explained by the fact that in Africa, most managers of small and medium-sized enterprises primarily define performance in terms of success (Sogbossi Bocco, 2010; Nkakleu and Djika, 2017; Souley, 2023). In the context of Senegalese agri-food SMEs, the specific characteristics of the sector led us to consider commercial performance as an outcome, a measure of the reality of the commercial activity that will allow us to judge its success. We therefore resorted to the only measure of commercial performance that any SME is able to provide: subjective evaluation.

2.4. Empirical Studies on the Relationship between Market Orientation and Commercial Performance of SMEs

Market orientation is identified in the literature as one of the most important strategic orientations for business success and performance (Gotteland et al., 2020; Hailu et al., 2025). The relationship between market orientation and performance is one of the most studied themes by marketing researchers. These researchers have suggested that market orientation is essential to a company's success and, consequently, to its performance improvement (Bamfo and Kraa, 2019).

Some empirical research has highlighted a positive impact (Narver and Slater, 1990; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Gotteland, Haon and Jolibert, 2007) while other studies suggest no link between a company's level of market orientation and its performance (Gotteland and Ray, 2008; Jamaludin et al., 2022). These results are supported by meta-analyses, such as that of Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden (2005). However, it is important to emphasize that the differential effects of the link between market orientation or its components and performance are due to the diversity of economic development, national variation, and industry-specific problems (Osuagwu, 2019), as well as sectorial realities. Consequently, it has been recommended that further studies are needed to better understand the nature of the relationship between market orientation or its components and firm performance in different contexts (Kadić-Maglajlić, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Lee, 2017; Osuagwu, 2019). To examine the differential effects between the components of market orientation and the business performance of agri-food SMEs, we formulate a number of hypotheses.

2.4.1. Customer Orientation and Commercial Performance of SMEs

Customer orientation has been identified as a key driver of business performance (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden, 2005; Smirnova et al., 2011), a fundamental aspect of any company's relationship with its market (Leeflang, 2011; Pekovic and Rolland, 2016). In other words, customer focus can be implemented as a strategic driver of business performance without requiring competitive and cross-functional dimensions (Kadić-Maglajlić, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Lee, 2017). This view is supported by a series of studies that have confirmed the existence of a positive and significant relationship between customer orientation and SME performance. For example, Pongwiritthon and Awirothanonon (2014) established a positive link between customer orientation and the performance of

Thai small and medium-sized enterprises. Frambach, Fiss, and Ingenbleek (2016) also showed that focusing on value creation allows a company to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, innovation, and success. This is because market-oriented companies place their customers at the center of their operations and formulate action plans based on market information. These strategic actions encourage customers to purchase products and services that meet their needs, which results in increased sales and improved overall performance (Brownhilder, 2018).

However, researchers such as Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden (2005), Smirnova et al. (2011), and Pekovic and Rolland (2016) have increasingly questioned the universality of the positive influence of customer orientation on firm performance due to mixed results from various studies. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: A high level of customer orientation improves the commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs.

2.4.2. Competitor Orientation and Commercial Performance of SMEs

Competitor orientation, as an aspect of market orientation, is essential for helping companies obtain information and a clear understanding of the market in order to offer products and services tailored to customer needs and requirements (Bamfo and Kraa, 2019). The relationship between competitor orientation and firm performance has been validated by several studies (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden, 2005; Ellis, 2006; Kaliappen and Hilman, 2013).

Previous research has also demonstrated the importance of competitor orientation on SME performance (Asomaning and Abdulai, 2015; Oyedele and Akinlabi, 2022; Ogundare and van der Merwe, 2024). For example, Asomaning and Abdulai (2015), in their study of small businesses in Ghana, found a strong and significant positive correlation between competitor orientation and business performance. The findings of these studies indicate that a competitor orientation allows companies to monitor their competitors, react appropriately, and deliver value to customers. This value creation for customers, within the framework of a business strategy, can enable competitively oriented SMEs to achieve long-term viability, growth, and sustainable profits that surpass those of their competitors.

Small and medium-sized enterprises that can identify, maintain, and leverage their competitive advantages are therefore more likely to succeed in the long term and outperform their competitors (Ogundare and van der Merwe, 2024). However, several studies have found negative or insignificant results regarding the relationship between competitor orientation and performance (Ogundare and van der Merwe, 2024).

Ayyagari, Demirgüç-Kunt, and Maksimovic (2011) showed that SMEs in developing countries face specific competitive challenges, such as competition from the informal sector and inadequate infrastructure, which significantly impact their performance. These companies do not appear to have a pre-conceived, considered, matured, and planned competitor tracking strategy (Rojas-Méndez, Kara, and Spillan, 2006). Furthermore, longitudinal studies by Oguh and Bello (2023) and Kardos, Chmielová Dalajková, and Ahmad (2024) revealed that strong competition leads to higher failure rates among SMEs, particularly those lacking the resources and capabilities to compete effectively. Therefore, we can conclude that the impact of a competitor orientation on SME performance varies across countries and sectors (Rua, França, and Ortiz, 2018). This leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

H2: A high level of competitor orientation is positively associated with improved commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs.

2.4.3. Distributor Orientation and Commercial Performance of SMEs

Although end customers remain central, they are no longer the only market players influencing how a company operates. The bargaining power of distributors in many sectors, particularly consumer goods and agricultural products, is such that these key market players contribute to the ongoing delivery of superior value in the market. Distributor orientation appears as a new behavioral manifestation of a market-oriented culture (Lambin and De Moerloose, 2008).

Some authors advocate the need to understand distributors' needs and behaviors and to establish a profitable, partnership-like relationship with them in order to better satisfy customers (Lambin and Caceres, 2006; Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere, 2007; Smirnova et al., 2011). According to Bamfo and Kraa (2019), companies must gather information on the commercial landscape and make decisions based on this information in order to create value for both distributors and end customers.

Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere (2007), who studied the link between distributor orientation and performance in the context of SMEs, concluded that maintaining good relationships with distributors and integrating their requirements is a source of company performance. Distributors are therefore perceived as an important source of performance. Based on the observations and reflections presented above, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: A high level of distributor orientation leads to improved commercial performance of Senegalese agri-food SMEs.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participation Procedure

The survey was conducted by professional interviewers. Before administering the questionnaire, the team introduced themselves to the participants and read the questionnaire's introduction aloud to clearly explain the study's objectives, the survey process, the use of the information collected, the guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity of responses, and the voluntary nature of participation**.** Verbal informed consent was obtained from each owner, manager, or executive of an agri-food SME before data collection began. This method of consent was preferred due to the exclusively quantitative nature of the study, the need to respect the anonymity of respondents, and the low level of risk to participants.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The target of our study is agri-food SMEs that process local cereals, fruits, and vegetables. Based on the SME typology established, we consider the companies with 1 to 250 employees. Thus, companies with 1 to 20 employees are considered small businesses, and those with 21 to 250 employees are considered medium-sized businesses. In addition, the following are considered respondents: the owner-manager, who is part of the general management, and the marketing or sales manager. For the purposes of our research, due to the lack of a database encompassing all Senegalese agri-food SMEs, we opted for a convenience sample. The businesses in our population are formal Senegalese SMEs that process local cereals, fruits, and vegetables. This category was chosen because a portion of the agri-food sector consists of micro-enterprises operating within the so-called "informal" sector, whose productive capacities are therefore poorly determined (Bricas, Tchamda, and Martin, 2016). These businesses, primarily family-run, are part of a social network economy (IFAD, 2020), and their informal nature complicates performance measurement.

The data collection method used was a questionnaire, and the final data were collected face-to-face from 255 SMEs by professional interviewers.

Descriptive analyses performed using SPSS software highlighted the characteristics of the respondents, as presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample (N = 255).

Variables	Workforce	Percentage
Permanent workforce		
[1 - 10[	91	35.7%
[10 - 20]	117	45.9%
More than 20	47	18.4 %
Processing activities		
Processing and marketing of fruits and vegetables	41	16.1%
Processing and marketing of cereals	81	31.8 %
Processing and marketing of cereals, fruits and vegetables	133	52.2%
Legal form		
Sole Proprietorship	82	32.2%
Limited Liability Company	8	3.1%
Single Member Limited Liability Company	3	1.2%
Economic Interest Group (EIG)	158	62%
Others	4	1.6%
Number of years of company experience in the activity		
[0 - 5]	56	22%

Continued

]5 - 10]	64	25.1%
]10 - 15]	67	26.3%
]15 - 20]	54	21.2%
More than 20	14	5.5%

Source: Survey data.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Market Orientation

We adapted the customer-centric and competitor-centric dimensions developed by Narver and Slater (1990), translated from English into French, to our study context. We also reproduced the distributor-centric dimensions from Lambin and Caceres (2006), which identify distributors as key players in an organization's environment, given that they interact with the end customer.

3.3.2. Commercial Performance

Commercial performance can be determined through objective and/or subjective criteria, but perceived commercial performance is what we are interested in, as regards this research, since the best evaluation criteria are determined subjectively (De La Villarmois, 2001). Perceived commercial performance is considered a measure of the success of sales activity, based primarily on the judgment of business managers using evaluation criteria. Note that the criteria identified by Sogbossi Bocco (2010) in the African context are of particular interest to us.

3.4. Analysis Method

In accordance with Churchill's recommendations, initial data collection was carried out with 150 managers of SMEs processing local grains, fruits, and vegetables. We began by performing an exploratory factor analysis of the measurement scales. A series of principal component analyses (PCA) were then conducted using SPSS21 software. Thus, the factor structure of each scale was estimated using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were also calculated to establish the reliability of the measurement scales. The PCA results yielded highly significant Bartlett's sphericity indices and KMO that far exceeded the 0.5 threshold, along with good representational quality (community > 0.50) for all scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirm the good internal consistency of the measurement scales, as the reliability indices obtained are well above the norm of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

Based on the purified questionnaire, a second data collection was conducted on a sample of 255 SME managers. Those data allowed us to reassess the dimensionality and reliability of the measurement scales and to confirm them.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis show adjustment indices that are far from the required standards, as well as the reliability and validity criteria for all scales (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

Latent variables	Items	Communalities	Cronbach's A	Rhô A	AVE
Customer orientation	Orconso 1	0.581	0.727	0.909	0.670
	Orconso 2	0.663			
	Orconso 4	0.504			
	Orconso 5	0.647			
Competitor orientation	Orcon 6	0.800	0.892	0.897	0.744
	Orcon 7	0.837			
	Orcon 8	0.802			
Distributor orientation	Ordist 17	0.794	0.902	0.942	0.803
	Ordist 18	0.703			
	Ordist 19	0.839			
	Ordist 20	0.762			
Perceived commercial performance	Perf 1	0.578	0.815	0.929	0.929
	Perf 2	0.540			
	Perf 5	0.782			
	Perf 9	0.721			

Model fit	RMR	RMSEA	CMIN/DF	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	IF
Values	0.065	0.065	2.377	0.912	0.871	0.947	0.914	0.948

Source: Survey data.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Customer, Competitor and Distributor Orientation Levels

The orientation level index will be calculated using the formula below proposed by Gotteland (2005).

$$\text{Index} = \sum \delta_i m_i / \sum \delta_i .$$

δ_i: factorial score of item i; m_i: average response mode of item i (Table 3).

Table 3. Levels of customer, competitor and distributor orientation.

Components	Customer Orientation	Competitor orientation	Distributor orientation
Index	3.917	3.38	4.35

Source: Survey data.

We observe that the level of customer orientation among Senegalese agri-food SMEs is low (3.917), compared to the average scores (4.5 and 5) found by Narver and Salter (1990). The level of competitor orientation (3.38) is also low compared to customer orientation. This is, again, a low score compared to the companies in Narver and Salter (1990), which had average scores of 4.06 and 4.85. In contrast, the level of distributor orientation is high (4.35).

4.2. Effects of Customer, Competitor, and Distributor Orientation Levels on Commercial Performance

The study of the correlation between variables and the significance of the relationships, using Student's t-test or the critical ratio and probability, allows us to confirm or refute the hypotheses. We reiterate that we used structural equation modeling to test the hypotheses. **Table 4** below summarizes the results of the tests of the relationships between the variables.

Table 4. Significance of causal links.

Hypotheses	Estimate	S. E.	C. R.	p	Decision
H1: ORCUST → PERF	0.204	0.085	2.405	0.016	Validated
H2: ORCOM → PERF	−0.017	0.036	−0.469	0.639	Non validated
H3: ORDIST → PERF	−0.137	0.59	−2.301	0.021	Validated

Source: Survey data.

The results of the empirical study show a significant and positive relationship between customer orientation and perceived commercial performance (correlation coefficient = 0.204; Student's test = 2.405; p-value = 0.016, with a margin of error of 0.085). In contrast, the relationship between competitor orientation and perceived commercial performance has a negative impact but is not statistically significant (Student's test = 0.036 (less than 1.96), and the p-value (0.639) is greater than the threshold (0.05)). Regarding the relationship between distributor orientation and perceived sales performance, we observed a significant and negative relationship (correlation coefficient = −0.137; Student's test = 2.301; p-value = 0.021).

The results show a significant positive correlation between customer orientation and perceived commercial performance, and a significant negative correlation between distributor orientation and perceived commercial performance. The link between competitor orientation and perceived commercial performance is not statistically significant.

5. Discussion

5.1. Customer, Competitor and Distributor Orientations

According to the results, Senegalese agri-food SMEs are customer-oriented. Listening to customers and addressing their needs is a priority for these businesses. According to Bamfo and Kraa (2019), customer-centricity should translate into an effort to understand what customers want by acquiring information and implementing it to create value for customers and remain competitive. It stipulates that to ensure sustainable success, businesses must identify and satisfy customer needs more effectively than their competitors (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden, 2005). However, small businesses have the potential strategic advantage to grow because they are close to their end customers and can adopt a market-oriented approach (Kajalo and Lindblom, 2015).

Competition-oriented SMEs believe that competition persists in the agri-food sector and is largely unfavorable to them (one company's gain is another's loss). This phenomenon leads them to believing that they have just as much reason to gather information on competitors in order to counter their actions. In contrast, other SMEs are not concerned about competition. They are aware of the mutual existence of competitors but do not consider themselves competitors. This is partly explained by the fact that some companies operate within the same group; they see themselves as members and support each other. The other reason is that within SMEs, companies that design similar products do not consider themselves competitors, but rather "colleagues" or "fellow producers". Thus, an institutional logic takes hold within small enterprises.

The high level of distributor orientation stems from the fact that, in the consumer goods markets, adopting a customer-centric approach is no longer sufficient. To market their products, SMEs rely on distributors, who act as local intermediaries between the company and end customers. Therefore, these distributors must be treated as full-fledged customers in a B2B, or even B2B2C, relationship. Some of the SMEs surveys highlighted the important role of distributors who, through direct contact with end customers, gather a significant amount of information.

5.2. Effects of Customer, Competitor, and Distributor Orientation Levels on the Commercial Performance of Senegalese Agri-Food SMEs

Senegalese agri-food SMEs are customer-centric. They gather information to adapt their products to end-customer requirements. Customer satisfaction is considered a goal for these companies, and this customer-centric approach enables them to achieve it. In fact, strategic actions encourage customers to purchase products and services that meet their needs, resulting in increased sales and improved overall performance (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden, 2005; Brownhilder, 2018). This practice brings added performance to SMEs, or a pathway to performance that can ultimately translate into the company's sustainability. This result is consistent with the findings of recent studies in the context of SMEs (Norzalita and Norjay, 2010; Didonet, Frega, Toaldo, and Diaz, 2014; Ghanavati, 2014; Jawad, Kamariah, and Akhtar, 2015) and those of Frambach, Fiss, and Ingenbleek (2016), which also showed that focusing on value creation allows a company to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, innovation, and success. In line with the findings of Prifti and Alimehmeti (2017) and Schulze, Townsend, and Talay (2022), organizations that better understand and respond to end-customer needs achieve greater satisfaction and, consequently, perform better in the market.

The effect of competitive orientation on the commercial performance of agri-food SMEs is negative and not significant. Our results confirm the findings of Gaur, Vasudevan, and Gaur (2011), who demonstrated the absence of a significant link between competitive orientation and the business performance of Indian manufacturing SMEs, and those of Oguh and Bello (2023) and Kardos, Chmielová Dalajková, and Ahmad (2024), who revealed that strong competition leads to higher failure rates for SMEs that lack the resources and capabilities to compete effectively.

These results support the numerous studies conducted using resource-based theory, according to which insufficient resources hinder the effective implementation of market orientation in SMEs (Ayyagari, Demirgüç-Kunt, and Maksimovic, 2011; Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann, 2011; Kadić-Maglajlić, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Lee, 2017; Bamfo and Kraa, 2019). In fact, agri-food SMEs are in competition with one another. They gather information on competitors but lack the resources to respond effectively to their actions, rendering competitor intelligence insignificant. Competitor information is only useful if agri-food SMEs have sufficient resources to respond to competitors' actions. This result is consistent with the literature on competitive rivalry, which suggests that firms must have both motivations and resources to respond to competitive actions (Gaur, Vasudevan, and Gaur, 2011). Even if SMEs collect information about competitors, they do not necessarily consider competition to be the primary driver of performance.

According to Schulze, Townsend, and Talay (2022), deploying resources to keep up with the competition does not improve innovation or product differentiation outcomes. These authors argue that resources should be allocated to supporting products through actions such as aggressive marketing communications, cost reductions, and price cuts.

Finally, our results indicate a significant negative link between distributor orientation and the commercial performance of agri-food SMEs. These results contradict those found by some authors. For example, Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere (2007), who studied this link in the context of SMEs, concluded that distributors are perceived as an important source of performance. In line with this finding, companies try to integrate distributors' demands and adapt their offerings to incorporate their requirements (Gotteland, 2005). In Senegalese agri-food SMEs, distributors' demands focus primarily on profit margins. In fact, distributors want to acquire the product at the lowest possible price and sell it at a high price. In other words, they seek to capture the largest possible profit margin, which is not at all advantageous for these SMEs. Since the vast majority of SMEs share almost the same distributors, and one distributor's refusal will be accepted by another, they are forced to comply with these demands, which, in turn, negatively impact their sales performance.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this research is to empirically examine the effects of end-customer, competitor, and distributor orientation levels on commercial performance. We attempted to conduct original research by:

- Demonstrating the differential effects of market orientation components on sales performance;
- Conducting the study in SMEs processing local grains, fruits, and vegetables.

We also situated our work within the dual perspective of Narver and Slater (1990) and Lambin and Caceres (2006) by proposing a model.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

Empirical studies have used the concept of customer orientation without distinguishing between the end customer and the distributor customer. This dual perspective thus helps to resolve an ambiguity in the marketing literature. In fact, we have delved deeper into the cultural approach to market orientation, starting from its conceptualization, which we believe is limited in the literature.

Furthermore, the impact of distributor orientation on commercial performance has only been empirically analyzed in the literature by Lambin and Caceres (2006); Rochette-Ladouceur and Cassiere (2007); and Gotteland, Haon, and Gauthier (2007). Therefore, we explored the importance of distributor orientation and empirically identified its contribution to the company's sales performance. Unexpectedly, the study reveals a new finding regarding the significant and negative effect of distributor orientation on the commercial performance of agri-food SMEs.

While the effect of market orientation has been the subject of extensive literature (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990), it is surprising that the study of the level of distributor orientation and its impact on companies' commercial performance has received less attention from researchers. Based on the results, we can conclude that the relationship between distributor orientation and commercial performance is not monotonic. This relationship is positive when distributor orientation aims to establish joint operations between the SME and the distributor, based on the principle of partnership while respecting the respective strategies of producers and distributors, with the ultimate goal set to improve the results of both parties (Gotteland, 2005). This commercial performance can be impaired when distributors place more emphasis on profit.

6.2. Managerial Implications

This research provides strategic guidance to managers agri-food SMEs for the effective implementation of market orientation and the improvement of their commercial performance. The analysis of orientation levels across the three dimensions—customer, competitor, and distributor—brings significant results.

These results require careful consideration from agri-food SME managers, who could benefit from the advantages of a market-oriented culture. They must pay particular attention to the effects of each component of market orientation on their company's commercial performance. Thus, the pursuit of superior commercial performance necessarily implies a market reorientation.

Senegalese agri-food SME managers must prioritize customer orientation. This involves developing in-depth knowledge of customer expectations and preferences, particularly regarding quality, price, and local origin of products, and building lasting relationships with their customers. Innovation is also an essential lever for these companies, allowing them to constantly adapt their products to the specific requirements of the Senegalese market. Direct sales via social networks also help to strengthen customer orientation while reducing dependence on traditional distributors.

Senegalese agri-food SME managers would benefit from prioritizing collective actions to limit the excessive profit margins demanded by traditional distributors and improve their commercial performance. Thus, the mutualization of resources, through the creation of cooperatives or purchasing centers, could reduce distributor orientation and strengthen customer orientation. Senegalese public authorities must also establish an appropriate regulatory framework aimed at protecting local agri-food SMEs against the domination of large Western distribution chains and traditional distributors.

In addition, the structures for the management and support of SMEs, particularly the SME Development and Management Agency (ADEPME) and the Food Technology Institute (ITA), should encourage inter-company cooperation. Such a collaborative dynamic would promote, within Senegalese agrifood SMEs, the sharing of knowledge and resources, thus contributing to the improvement of their performance and their overall competitiveness.

6.3. Limitations and Direction for Future Work

Our study has several limitations that should be highlighted. The first limitation concerns the conceptualization of market orientation. Our work falls within the framework of Narver and Slater's (1990) cultural approach, which includes three components: customer orientation, competitor orientation, and cross-functional coordination. The last one was not taken into account in our study context. Failing to consider other market players, such as suppliers, in the conceptualization of market orientation also limits our research.

The composition of our sample, consisting of smaller (81.6%) than medium-sized (18.4%) businesses, is another limitation to highlight. Furthermore, our sample consists solely of companies processing local grains, fruits, and vegetables, which limits the generalizability of our results.

Another limitation of our work concerns performance measurement. We approached the concept of performance in a very subjective way, which may bias our results. The question of measuring commercial performance remains a sensitive issue in market orientation research; we were not immune to the difficulty of characterizing it.

The cultural approach to market orientation is shared by several researchers. Their analytical perspective is distinguished by the implementation of certain internal practices, both systematic and spontaneous. Thus, a promising avenue of research is to propose a typology of market orientation specific to small agri-food businesses and to study the role of the manager's profile in implementing this market orientation.

Declaration

The author confirms that ethical and professional conduct principles were followed throughout the research process. Before participating, all participants were provided with informed consent as required.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix: Scales Items

Customer Orientation

Orcust 1: We meet regularly with our end customers to understand their current and future expectations.

Orcust 2: We regularly enhance our understanding of the current and future needs of end customers.

Orcust 4: We frequently use information from current and future consumer needs in our various strategies.

Orcust 5: We regularly collect information about end customers and their needs.

Competitor orientation

Orcom 1: We regularly monitor information regarding our competitors' products and strategies.

Orcom 2: We systematically analyze information regarding the actions of our competitors.

Orcom 3: In our company, we regularly share information about our competitors.

Orcom 4: We respond quickly to competitive actions that threaten us.

Orcom 5: We have a solid understanding of our competitors' strengths and weaknesses.

Distributor Orientation

Ordist 1: We regularly measure distributor satisfaction levels and their perception of our company.

Ordist 2: We often adapt our offering to the requirements of distributors.

Ordist 3: We systematically analyze the current and future needs of our distributors.

Ordist 4: We regularly analyze the compatibility of our strategy with the objectives of our distributors.

Perceived sales performance

Perf 1: We are pleased with the success our products are enjoying in the market.

Perf 2: We are satisfied with our customer loyalty level.

Perf 5: We have a great reputation thanks to word of mouth.

Perf 9: We are managing to increase our sales.