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The Importance of Emotional Intelligence of Leaders for Entrepreneurial Success: The Case of Tunisian SMEs

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Abstract:

Purpose: *The main purpose of this study is to explore the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in enhancing the performance and overall success of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Tunisia. While traditional research has focused on financial, strategic, and operational factors in business success, this study shifts the lens toward emotional and psychological competencies of SME leaders. Specifically, it distinguishes between intrapersonal EI (self-awareness and self-regulation) and interpersonal EI (social awareness and relationship management) to examine their individual contributions to entrepreneurial achievement. The study seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent does emotional intelligence influence the success of SME leaders in the Tunisian context.*
Design/methodology/approach: *This research adopts a quantitative methodology grounded in a positivist paradigm. A structured questionnaire, based on validated emotional intelligence and business performance scales, was distributed to 131 SME leaders operating in various sectors across Tunisia. The collected data underwent statistical processing through Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to extract the key dimensions of emotional intelligence. Following the validation of these dimensions, linear regression analysis was employed to test the relationship between intrapersonal/interpersonal EI and entrepreneurial success. The study controlled for variables such as sector, company size, and years of managerial experience to ensure the robustness of the findings.*
Findings: *The results show a statistically significant and positive relationship between both components of emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success. Intrapersonal EI—characterized by a leader's ability to understand and manage their own emotions—was found to contribute to better decision-making, stress management, and resilience. Interpersonal EI—related to understanding and influencing others' emotions—enhanced communication, conflict resolution, and team motivation. Together, these emotional competencies were linked to higher levels of business performance, innovation, and employee satisfaction, underscoring their value in the Tunisian SME landscape.*
Practical implications: *The findings suggest that emotional intelligence is not only a personal trait but also a managerial asset with practical value for improving organizational outcomes. For policymakers, educators, and business support institutions in Tunisia, this implies the need to incorporate emotional intelligence training into entrepreneurship development programs. For SME owners and managers, developing EI competencies can lead to improved leadership effectiveness, employee engagement, and customer relations. This research can also guide HR professionals in recruiting and training leaders who*

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possess strong emotional competencies, particularly in fast-changing or uncertain environments.
Originality/value: *This study fills an important gap in the literature by empirically examining the impact of emotional intelligence on business success in an emerging market context, which remains underexplored in academic research. Unlike prior studies conducted mostly in Western countries or large corporations, this research focuses on SMEs in Tunisia, providing culturally relevant insights. Moreover, by distinguishing between intrapersonal and interpersonal EI, the study adds nuance to how emotional intelligence operates in entrepreneurial settings. The originality also lies in its methodological combination of PCA and regression analysis to validate the proposed model and generate actionable insights.*

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence (EI), intrapersonal EI and interpersonal EI, Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Linear regression, success of Small and Medium Enterprises.*

JEL Classification: *J24, J24, J28, L26, M54, O15.*

Paper Type: *Research paper.*

1. Introduction

Globally, SMEs are key drivers of creativity and economic development (Fernandes *et al.,* 2022; Davcik *et al.,* 2021). Business creation remains a major driver of employment and economic renewal (Benchikh, Fekir, and Mrabet, 2019). In Tunisia, SMEs represent over 90% of the national economic fabric. They contribute significantly to job creation and the country's economic development (Ben Youssef, 2025). In the first quarter of 2025, these businesses will create 3,568,900 jobs (INS, 2025), compared to 1,087,000 in 2021 (INS, 2021).

In this context, entrepreneurs must succeed in their projects to contribute to the economic growth of their countries while taking into account various challenges such as globalization and technological advances (Muafi and Marseno, 2021). Indeed, entrepreneurial success is not limited only to technical skills but also depends on emotional skills (da Silva, 2024).

Indeed, leaders must go beyond the limits of traditional management, where intellectual intelligence is the sole measure of performance, to evolve towards a more collaborative and participatory model, where the emotional quotient takes precedence over other factors (Goleman, 1995). Furthermore, according to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs 2023 report, skills such as motivation, self-awareness, leadership and social influence will be among the most sought-after skills by 2027 (Di Battista *et al.,* 2023).

It is therefore important to take into account the psychological factors of entrepreneurs to succeed in their projects while managing their own emotions (Afouda and Sogbossi, 2018) and those of others (Ellouze and Louati, 2017). Today, emotional intelligence (EI) constitutes a catalyst for performance, as it optimizes actual individual results, increases leadership effectiveness and shapes a collaborative and excellence-oriented organizational culture (De-Esteban-Escobar *et al.,* 2025).

Rezvani *et al.* (2018) conducted a study of 1,008 hydroelectric project managers in Paris, which showed that emotional intelligence profoundly revolutionizes team communication, promotes rapid and optimal access to information, and ensures ultra-efficient task execution. Indeed, it has been shown that companies that invest in developing the emotional intelligence of their employees achieve superior organizational performance. In addition, emotional intelligence also depends on intrapersonal skills, which are also part of business performance (Zaiker, 2023).

The literature on emotional intelligence remains insufficient, with limited research carried out in the Tunisian context. Considering this reality, this article aims to address the following research question : how does emotional intelligence, through its intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, influence the success of small and medium-sized enterprises in Tunisia?

This article aims to analyze the impact of emotional intelligence with its intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions on the performance of Tunisian SMEs based on a study conducted with 131 entrepreneurs. First, we will conduct a literature review to explore the link between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success. Subsequently, we will adopt a methodology based on principal component analysis (PCA) and linear regression to empirically evaluate this link within Tunisian SMEs. Finally, the results will be presented and discussed in order to identify the managerial implications for the companies concerned.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory proposed by Barney (1991) provides a solid framework for understanding SME performance. According to this theory, firms can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and irreplaceable (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996).

Among these strategic resources, emotional intelligence—particularly its intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions—represents a key intangible asset. Intrapersonal intelligence enables managers to understand and regulate their own emotions while interpersonal intelligence facilitates communication and collaboration with others and together these competencies contribute significantly to internal cohesion, organizational effectiveness, and overall business performance (Tahri and Al Maache, 2023; Goleman, 2021; da Silva, 2022).

2.2 Emotional Intelligence: Hypothesis Development

Historically, cognitive psychology has long focused on rationality, viewing emotions as intense and irrational reactions that can disrupt reasoning (Mikolajczak *et al.,* 2020). In this vein, the workplace has been perceived as a rational space, where emotions are dismissed (Castro, 2004). Before 1930, management research on emotions was rare (Jacquet, 2017).

However, the limitations of Taylorism gave rise to a movement led by psychologists, aiming to rehumanize work. This work helped integrate the socio-affective aspect into the study of organizations. A new vision of humans at work then emerged, focused on emotions and social relationships (Landrieux-Kartochian, 2018). The growing interest in emotions in the workplace, in a context of seeking human and collective performance, has encouraged the emergence of the concept of emotional intelligence in organizations (Coulon and Lafitte, 2016).

Salovey and Mayer (1990), the pioneers of emotional intelligence, defined this concept as *"the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own feelings and emotions as well as those of others, to discriminate between them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions."* Indeed, these authors show that emotional intelligence, as a subset of social intelligence, refers to the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others in order to make more informed decisions.

Today, the concept of EI is associated with the name of Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and science journalist for the New York Times, who truly projected it into the field of management science, while highlighting its decisive role in the success of organizations. Indeed, Goleman (2021) defines emotional intelligence as *“the ability to recognize our own feelings and those of others, to motivate ourselves, and to effectively manage emotions in ourselves and in our relationships.”* In 2021, Goleman emphasized that emotional intelligence is crucial for effective leadership, where the leader’s personal development fosters a harmonious and productive work environment.

This research work adopts Goleman's mixed approach, which is ranked among the major theories most used by researchers to measure emotional intelligence in relation to personality traits and other individual characteristics (Carvalho *et al.,* 2016). Goleman's mixed model (1998) emphasizes five emotional skills such as: self-awareness, self-management, motivation, empathy, and social competence.

They are divided into two dimensions: the intrapersonal dimension and the interpersonal dimension. This model highlights the strategic role of EI in the professional environment, in particular, the value of emotional skills for effective leadership that ensures organizational success (Goleman, 1998).

Emotional intelligence is therefore closely linked to professional success, thanks to the personal (intrapersonal) skills and social (interpersonal) skills of entrepreneurs. Indeed, this combination is decisive for the overall performance of the company (da Silva, 2022).

2.3 Emotional Intelligence and the Success of SME

Faced with limited resources, SMEs must imperatively mobilize non-traditional levers to remain competitive with large companies. From this perspective, the emotional intelligence (EI) of managers emerges as a major strategic asset. Emotional intelligence is a distinct skill from intellectual intelligence.

Goleman (1995) points out that intelligence quotient accounts for only 20% of performance, compared to 80% for emotional skills. According to this author, emotional quotient plays twice as important a role in professional success as intelligence quotient. Consequently, in an entrepreneurial context, success relies on a dual requirement: emotional self-management and social awareness (Baron and Tang, 2009).

For Goleman (1998), emotional intelligence is divided into two dimensions: intrapersonal and interpersonal. On the one hand, the first dimension, which represents intrapersonal emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-control, motivation), plays a decisive role in professional performance (Hu *et al.,* 2022).

First, self-awareness consists of recognizing one's own emotions and demonstrating self-confidence (da Silva, 2022). This emotional lucidity forms the basis of authentic leadership. Second, emotion management is the ability to control one's reactions and adapt without becoming overwhelmed (Shafiq and Rana, 2016).

Finally, motivation is based on the strength of deep desires, acting as an inner engine that guides action, stimulates initiative, promotes performance, and allows one to overcome setbacks with perseverance (Shafiq and Rana, 2016). Therefore, these personal emotional skills constitute an essential foundation for organizational performance.

On the other hand, Goleman (1995) also shows that the second dimension represented by interpersonal emotional intelligence (empathy and social competence) affects organizational performance (Popovici *et al.,* 2020). Indeed, empathy is the ability to understand and feel the emotions of others (Ellouze and Louati, 2017). It involves sincere attention to others and adaptation to emotional reactions (Aliyamutu, 2011). In addition, social competence defines the ability to manage interpersonal relationships satisfactorily (Ellouze and Louati, 2017).

It manifests itself in actions and mobilizes internal and external resources (Agathe, 2016). For Goleman (2000), social competence strengthens cooperation and leadership. Therefore, these intrapersonal and interpersonal skills enable entrepreneurial success (Goleman, 2021).

In recent years, we can observe the evolution of the number of works that have confirmed the positive link between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success while demonstrating that managers who are emotionally intelligent have achieved impressive results in their professional environments (De-Esteban-Escobar *et al.,* 2025; da Silva, 2024; Khattabi, and El Amili, 2024; Camplisson and Cormican, 2023; Elghazi and Cherkaoui, 2021; Lee and Kim, 2020).

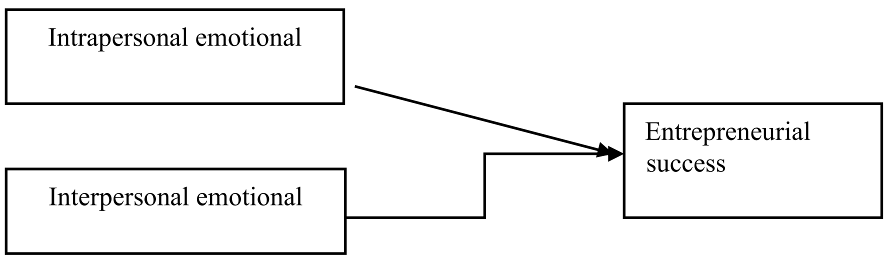
The study conducted by Tahri and Al Maache (2023) reveals that emotional intelligence, whether intrapersonal or interpersonal, has a positive impact on the performance of SMEs. Good emotion management, combined with effective communication between team members, improves business operations. These intrapersonal and interpersonal skills therefore play a key role in the success of SMEs.

3. Research Methodology

Based on the literature review, we developed our conceptual model to better explain the relationship between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success. Therefore, "entrepreneurial success" is the endogenous variable in our conceptual model, and the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of EI represent the exogenous variables. We draw on the work of (Goleman, 1995) examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial success to present our conceptual model (Goleman, 1995). We predict two hypotheses:

H1.1: Intrapersonal emotional intelligence positively affects entrepreneurial success.
H1.2: Interpersonal emotional intelligence positively affects entrepreneurial success.

Figure 1. *Conceptual research model*



Source: *Authors' model.*

In this research, we adopted a hypothetico-deductive approach, which involves formulating hypotheses based on existing literature and subjecting them to empirical testing. This approach follows a deductive reasoning process: starting from an established theoretical framework, we identified potential relationships between the studied variables and then tested them using data collected in the field.

The aim of this method is to confirm or refute the proposed hypotheses while assessing the validity of the conceptual framework used. Thus, it allows for a close connection between theory and observation by providing empirical evidence that can strengthen or refine existing knowledge about the phenomenon under study.

The empirical methodology adopted in this study is based on a quantitative approach, which aims to measure and analyze phenomena using numerical data in order to test the hypotheses derived from the conceptual model. This approach provides objective and generalizable results through the use of rigorous statistical methods. It relies on standardized measurement instruments, such as structured questionnaires (Evrard *et al.,* 2009), designed to collect precise and comparable information from respondents.

These questionnaires were administered to a carefully selected sample representative of the target population, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. Thus, the quantitative approach offers a solid methodological framework for examining relationships between the model's variables and empirically verifying the research hypotheses.

The study was conducted on a sample of 131 managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in the regions of Sfax and Tunis, two major economic hubs that provide a relevant context for observing the phenomenon under investigation. The choice of this sample allows for the collection of diverse data while remaining representative of the local entrepreneurial landscape. A non-probability sampling method was employed to deliberately target individuals most directly concerned with the research problem—namely, managers with an in-depth understanding of their company's operations and the issues addressed by the study.

This purposive selection approach enhances the relevance and reliability of the collected information**,** ensuring that respondents possess the necessary experience and expertise to provide informed answers. Consequently, the composition of the sample strengthens both the internal validity of the results and the credibility of the empirical analysis.

The questionnaire, a common tool in management sciences for collecting quantitative data, was distributed both online and in person to entrepreneurs. This dual mode of administration was chosen to maximize the response rate and encourage participation from managers, while ensuring better representativeness of the sample. The choice of a questionnaire is justified by its simplicity, flexibility of use, and its ability to gather a wide range of information regarding respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Evrard et al., 2009). To measure the studied variables, we employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *1: strongly disagree* to *5: strongly agree*.

This type of scale, widely recognized in social science research, allows for the quantification of opinions and judgments in a nuanced way, while facilitating statistical processing and comparative analysis of responses. Thus, the use of this instrument contributes to the methodological rigor and reliability of the findings obtained.

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26, a widely used software in management sciences for statistical processing and the interpretation of quantitative data. First, we employed Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to validate the measurement scales**,** by examining the factorial structure of the instruments and ensuring the reliability and internal consistency of the different dimensions under study.

This step ensures that the measured variables accurately reflect the theoretical concepts defined in the conceptual model. Subsequently, simple and multiple regression analyses were applied to test the relationships between the model's variables, assess the influence of independent variables on dependent variables, and determine the strength and direction of these relationships (Evrard *et al.,* 2009). This comprehensive analytical approach ensures a rigorous interpretation of the results**,** providing a solid statistical framework to confirm or refute the research hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1 Exploratory and Reliability Analyses

Exploratory analysis was conducted on the measurement scales using SPSS 26 software. The objective of this analysis was to assess the quality and relevance of our conceptual model. The results obtained are summarized in the following table (Table 1):

✓ The measurement scales present data compatible with factor analysis. Indeed, the KMO index must not be < 0.5 and the Bartlett test must be significant (Evrard *et al.,* 2009). The results obtained show that the KMO indices are acceptable. Furthermore, the Bartlett test is significant. Therefore, the model is factorable.

✓ The Cronbach's alpha coefficients must exceed 0.6 (Evrard *et al.,* 2009). Indeed, the table shows the Cronbach's alpha values for our variables, which exceed 0.7. Thus, we can deduce that there is good consistency between the elements.

Table 1. *Results of the exploratory analysis*

The variables	KMO	Cronbach's alpha
Entrepreneurial Success	,736	,789
Intrapersonal emotional intelligence	,601	,852
Interpersonal emotional intelligence	,500	,725

Source: *Author's calculations.*

4.2 Simple Linear Regression

We will then present the results of the simple linear regression to analyze the relationship between a dependent variable (Y) and an independent variable (X) (Table 2).

Table 2. *Simple Regression Results*

Hypotheses Standardized	Standardized coefficient (β)	R^2	t of Student	Sig.	Fisher test	Sig.
H1.1	.701	.492	11.173	.000	124.840	.000
H1.2	.756	.572	13.119	.000	172.095	.000

Source: *Author's calculations.*

The table above shows that the coefficient of determination R^2 associated with hypothesis H1.1 is 0.492, indicating that the independent variable explains 49.2% of the variance observed in the dependent variable. Furthermore, the F-value is 124.840 with a significance of $p < 0.05$, meaning that the model is statistically significant overall.

Furthermore, the results reveal that intrapersonal emotional intelligence has a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial success, with a coefficient $\beta = 0.701$ and a Student's t-statistic = 11.173 ($p < 0.05$). These results corroborate the existence of a significant relationship between these two variables, thus validating hypothesis H1.1.

Regarding hypothesis H1.2, the coefficient of determination R^2 is 0.572, reflecting a satisfactory level of explained variance. The F value, equal to 172.095 ($p < 0.05$), confirms the overall significance of the model.

Furthermore, the results indicate that interpersonal emotional intelligence also exerts a positive and significant effect on entrepreneurial success, with a coefficient $\beta = 0.756$ and a Student t statistic = 13.119 ($p < 0.05$). These results validate hypothesis H1.2.

4.3 Multiple Linear Regression

After this simple regression analysis, which aimed to test the individual significance of each variable, we will now conduct a multiple regression to assess the overall significance of the proposed model.

Table 3. *Multiple Regression Results*

Variables	Standardized coefficients (ß)	t Student	Sig.
Intrapersonal emotional intelligence	.299	3.499	.000
Interpersonal emotional intelligence	.528	6.193	.000
Correlation (R)= .780			
Coefficient (R^2)= .609			
Fisher's F coefficient = 99.671 (sig=.000)			

Source: *Author's calculations.*

5. Discussion of Results

The results show that emotional intelligence (H1) positively affects entrepreneurial success. Indeed, the results in the table above show that the impact of emotional intelligence on entrepreneurial success is positive and significant (H.1: $\beta = 0.780$, $T>1.96$, $p<0.05$). This shows that entrepreneurs with high emotional intelligence are capable of succeeding in their projects.

Several studies have shown that emotionally intelligent leaders stand out for their ability to generate exceptional results and excel in their professional environment (Branca *et al.,* 2025; Montenegro *et al.,* 2021; Camplisson and Cormican, 2023; Elghazi and Cherkaoui, 2021; Tahri and Al Maache, 2023; Billion and Doussard, 2023; Park and Cho, 2020).

Furthermore, the analysis shows that intrapersonal emotional intelligence H1.1 and interpersonal emotional intelligence H1.2 play a determining role in entrepreneurial success. The results in the table above show that the impact of intrapersonal emotional intelligence (H1.1) of entrepreneurs on entrepreneurial success is positive and significant (β= .299, $T>1.96$, $p<0.05$).

Thus, we can deduce that intrapersonal emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-control, motivation) positively affects the performance of Tunisian companies. Thus, Afouda and Sogbossi (2018) state that entrepreneurial success is largely based on the ability of managers to manage their own emotions. For their part, Nate *et al.* (2022), Ellouze and Louati (2017) show that intrapersonal emotional intelligence promotes organizational performance.

The results also show us that the impact of interpersonal emotional intelligence (H.1.2) on entrepreneurial success is positive and significant ($\beta = .528$; $T>1.96$, $p<0.05$). Indeed, interpersonal emotional intelligence (empathy and mastery of human relations) positively affects entrepreneurial success.

This suggests that the quality of interactions between team members is considered to be a key lever of performance in Tunisian SMEs, in accordance with the results of (Jansen *et al.,* 2023; Lee and Kim, 2020). Therefore, interpersonal emotional intelligence allows entrepreneurs to improve their social relationships with their teams and strengthen organizational performance (Afni and Amar, 2019).

Thus, it can be inferred that emotional intelligence exerts a significant and positive impact on entrepreneurial success through its two complementary dimensions: intrapersonal and interpersonal EI.

The ability to understand, regulate, and channel one's own emotions, combined with the capacity to perceive and manage the emotions of others, enables managers to make more effective decisions, foster collaboration, and create a more resilient organizational climate. Consequently, these emotional competencies contribute directly to improving business performance (Tahri and Al Maache, 2023; Chen *et al.,* 2021; Lee and Kim, 2020).

6. Conclusion

In this study, we explored the fundamental contribution of emotional intelligence to the performance of Tunisian SMEs. To empirically examine this relationship, we relied on Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to validate the underlying structure of the emotional intelligence dimensions, followed by simple and multiple regression analyses to assess their predictive power.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that both the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence are positively and significantly associated with firm performance in the Tunisian context. These results highlight the strategic value of emotional competencies for SME managers, suggesting that the ability to understand, regulate, and manage emotions—both one's own and those of others—constitutes a decisive factor in improving organizational outcomes.

This work highlights the crucial impact of personal emotional intelligence as well as the effectiveness of social interactions on the performance of Tunisian SMEs. However, the small sample size hinders the generalization of the results to a larger sample. In addition, the failure to take into account all success factors may lead to the exhaustive and in-depth interpretation of the results.

To strengthen this research, it is essential to integrate other key factors influencing performance into our research model. Also, longitudinal studies will be necessary to track the evolution of the concept of emotional intelligence over time and to measure its long-term impact on business sustainability. In addition, comparative analyses between companies of different sizes or carried out in distinct cultural contexts will reveal significant disparities in their influence on entrepreneurial success.

Finally, future research must explore the link between emotional intelligence and business performance in a context of digitalization and profound changes in the professional world, particularly with the development of teleworking, in order to meet the challenges of major changes and ensure their sustainability. At a time when entrepreneurial challenges are becoming more complex, emotional intelligence appears to be an essential key to guaranteeing the resilience and performance of organizations.

Ultimately, emotional intelligence (EI) is emerging as a fundamental lever for enhancing entrepreneurial performance. When proactively integrated into the core of SME management practices, EI not only contributes to strengthening managerial effectiveness and organizational resilience but also reinforces firms' competitive advantage in an increasingly complex environment.

Beyond its impact on internal performance, the diffusion of emotional competencies within SMEs fosters more responsible leadership, improves stakeholder relationships, and supports sustainable business practices. In this sense, EI becomes a catalyst for broader economic, social, and territorial development, positioning it as a strategic asset for both enterprises and the ecosystems in which they operate.

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