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# The Algerian entrepreneur and the socio-cultural environment: Understanding firm growth as a socio-economic activity

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**Abstract**--This article explores the socio-cultural factors influencing the growth strategies of Algerian entrepreneurs, focusing on how social and cultural contexts shape entrepreneurial behavior. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with 12 Algerian entrepreneurs, this study examines the interplay between social norms, trust networks, and perceptions of ownership in shaping firm growth. The findings reveal that entrepreneurs view their firms as personal property rather than purely economic entities, which significantly influences their growth aspirations and strategic decisions. Additionally, fear of failure and low levels of trust in formal institutions emerge as critical barriers to firm growth. The study highlights the importance of understanding the socio-cultural embeddedness of entrepreneurial actions in developing economies and offers insights for policymakers aiming to foster a conducive environment for entrepreneurship in Algeria.


**Keywords**--Entrepreneurship, Socio-cultural embeddedness, Firm growth, Ownership perception, Algerian entrepreneurs.

**Jel classification:** L26, M13, D22, D91

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is often conceptualized as an economic activity driven by rational decision-making, market opportunities, and profit maximization (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, this perspective tends to overlook the profound influence of socio-cultural factors on entrepreneurial behavior, particularly in contexts where social and cultural norms play a central role in shaping economic actions. In developing economies, such as Algeria, entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric, influencing how entrepreneurs

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perceive their firms, make decisions, and pursue growth opportunities (Granovetter, 1985; Bourdieu, 1987). This article seeks to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of entrepreneurship in Algeria, focusing on how social and cultural values, perceptions of ownership, fear of failure, and interpersonal trust shape entrepreneurs' growth strategies and aspirations.

The theory of embeddedness, as developed by Granovetter (1985), provides a useful framework for understanding the interplay between economic actions and social structures. According to this theory, economic activities are not isolated from their social context but are deeply rooted in social relationships and cultural norms. In the case of Algerian entrepreneurs, firm growth is not merely an economic decision but a socio-economic activity influenced by the entrepreneur's social network, cultural values, and perceptions of their role within society (Henni, 1993; Madoui, 2012). This study builds on this theoretical foundation to analyze how socio-cultural factors shape entrepreneurial behavior in Algeria.

Drawing on data collected from interviews with 12 Algerian entrepreneurs, this study conceptualizes firm growth as a socio-economic activity that is deeply rooted in the entrepreneur's social and cultural context. The findings reveal that entrepreneurs often view their firms as personal property rather than purely economic entities, a perspective that significantly influences their strategic decisions and growth aspirations. This perception of ownership reflects the entrepreneur's social identity and status, which are closely tied to their firm (Dittmar, 1992). As a result, entrepreneurs are often reluctant to take on external partners or loans, fearing a loss of control over their firms. This reluctance limits their ability to pursue growth opportunities that require external financing or partnerships.

In addition to the meanings attached to ownership, the study identifies fear of failure and low levels of interpersonal trust as critical barriers to firm growth. Fear of failure discourages entrepreneurs from engaging in risky but potentially rewarding growth strategies (Mitchell & Shepherd, 2011). This fear is compounded by a lack of trust within society and toward formal institutions, which are often seen as unreliable and potentially hostile to private enterprise (Fukuyama, 1996). The lack of trust creates a cautious approach to business growth, with many entrepreneurs preferring to maintain the status quo rather than risk expanding their firms.

By analyzing these factors, this article contributes to the broader literature on entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping economic actions and growth strategies. It underscores the need to address socio-cultural barriers to foster a more conducive environment for firm growth in Algeria and similar contexts. The study also provides practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to support entrepreneurship and economic development in regions where socio-cultural factors play a critical role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior.

## 2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a key driver of economic development, fostering innovation, job creation, and wealth generation (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, entrepreneurial activity is deeply influenced by the socio-cultural context in which it occurs (Granovetter, 1985). In Algeria, the entrepreneurial landscape is shaped by a unique interplay of historical, economic, and societal factors, which present both opportunities and challenges for business owners.

The concept of embeddedness, as introduced by Granovetter (1985), is central to understanding the economic actions of Algerian entrepreneurs. Granovetter argues that economic actions are not isolated or purely rational decisions but are deeply embedded in the social networks and relationships within which individuals operate. This perspective challenges the classical economic view of the *homo economicus*—a rational actor who maximizes utility—and instead posits that economic behavior is influenced by social structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. In Algeria, where social networks are tightly knit and familial obligations are strong, entrepreneurs often rely on these networks for resources, information, and support (Cheraghi et al., 2014). For example, family members may provide initial capital, labor, or business connections, which are crucial for starting and sustaining a business (Henni, 1993; Madoui, 2012; Bourdieu, 1987). However, this reliance on social networks can also limit entrepreneurs' ability to expand beyond their immediate circles, as they may face pressure to prioritize familial or communal interests over business growth (Gillet, 2003; Sadeq & Setti, 2013; Mitchell & Shepherd, 2011; Welter, 2002). This tension between familial obligations and business growth is particularly pronounced in societies with strong collectivist values, where social cohesion and familial honor often take precedence over individual economic gains (Fukuyama, 1995; Inglehart & Rabier, 1984; Delmar & Wennberg, 2007).

One of the key aspects of socio-cultural embeddedness in Algeria is the meaning of ownership for entrepreneurs. Ownership is not merely an economic concept but a deeply social and symbolic one (Etzioni, 1991; Nordqvist, 2005). For Algerian entrepreneurs, owning a business is often tied to their identity, social status, and familial honor (Setti, 2015; Baba et al., 2021). The business is seen as an extension of the entrepreneur's self and their family, rather than just a financial asset (Henni, 1993; Bourdieu, 1987; Madoui, 2012). This perspective is rooted in the cultural and social fabric of Algerian society, where ownership is closely linked to personal and familial reputation. As highlighted by Henni (1993), Algerian entrepreneurs often view their businesses as a means of achieving and maintaining social status. The business is not just a source of income but a symbol of the entrepreneur's ability to provide for their family and contribute to their community (Gillet, 2003, Madoui, 2012). This symbolic meaning of ownership influences entrepreneurial behavior in several ways. For instance, entrepreneurs may be reluctant to take on external partners or investors, as this could dilute their control over the business and, by extension, their social standing (Fukuyama, 1995; Mitchell & Shepherd, 2011). The fear of losing ownership is not just about losing financial control but also about losing face in the eyes of their family and community. This reluctance is further reinforced by

the cultural emphasis on maintaining autonomy and control over one's economic activities, which is seen as essential for preserving social status and familial honor (Inglehart & Rabier, 1984; Delmar & Wennberg, 2007). Additionally, the symbolic value of ownership is often tied to the entrepreneur's ability to fulfill social obligations, such as providing employment for family members or contributing to community projects, which further entrenches the social significance of business ownership (Madoui, 2012; Henni, 1993).

This reluctance to share ownership is further reinforced by the fear of failure, which is a significant barrier to entrepreneurial growth in Algeria. Failure is not just an economic risk but a social one. In a society where honor and reputation are paramount, the failure of a business can lead to a loss of social standing and familial honor (Sridharan et al., 2002; Gómez et al., 2007; Ucbasaran et al., 2012). This fear of failure is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context and shapes the way entrepreneurs approach risk and decision-making. As Mitchell and Shepherd (2011) argue, fear of failure can lead to risk-averse behavior, where entrepreneurs avoid expansion or innovation to minimize potential losses. In Algeria, this fear is amplified by the social consequences of failure. Entrepreneurs are not only concerned about the financial impact of failure but also about the social stigma that comes with it. A failed business can damage the entrepreneur's reputation and, by extension, the reputation of their family. This fear of failure is particularly pronounced in the context of Algeria's informal economy, where many businesses operate outside the formal regulatory framework (Abdellaoui & Djeddi, 2017; Baghdad, 2019). In such an environment, entrepreneurs face significant uncertainty and risk, as they lack the legal protections and institutional support that are available in more formalized economies. As a result, many entrepreneurs prefer to maintain the status quo rather than pursue growth strategies that could menace their existing operations. This risk aversion is further reinforced by the lack of trust in formal institutions (Welter, 2002; Wang, 2015).

Trust is another crucial concept in understanding the socio-cultural embeddedness of economic action in Algeria. As Fukuyama (1995) argues, trust is essential for fostering economic development, as it facilitates cooperation and reduces transaction costs. However, in Algeria, trust is often limited to close-knit social networks, such as family and friends, rather than extending to formal institutions or strangers (Mellahi & Wood, 2003). This lack of generalized trust—trust in people outside one's immediate social circle—poses a significant challenge for entrepreneurs, as it limits their ability to access external resources and form partnerships (Lajqi & Krasniqi, 2017; Puffer et al., 2010). The reliance on social capital within close-knit networks can be both a strength and a limitation for Algerian entrepreneurs. On the one hand, these networks provide a reliable source of support, including financial resources, labor, and business connections (Strobl et al., 2014; Menzies et al., 2000). On the other hand, they can constrain entrepreneurial growth by reinforcing insularity and limiting access to external opportunities. For example, entrepreneurs may be reluctant to seek external financing or form partnerships with outsiders, as this could involve sharing control of their business with people they do not fully trust (Setti, 2015).

The socio-cultural embeddedness of economic action in Algeria is also reflected in the way entrepreneurs navigate cultural and institutional barriers. The legacy of a

centralized, state-controlled economy has left a lasting impact on the entrepreneurial landscape, with many entrepreneurs viewing the state with suspicion and distrust. As Inglehart and Rabier (1984) note, low levels of trust in institutions can hinder economic development by creating an environment of uncertainty and risk. In Algeria, the relationship between entrepreneurs and state institutions, such as tax authorities and regulatory bodies, is often characterized by mutual distrust (Abdellaoui & Djeddi, 2017). Entrepreneurs frequently perceive these institutions as corrupt or inefficient, which discourages them from engaging in formal economic activities or seeking institutional support. This lack of trust is further exacerbated by the historical context of Algeria's economic development. The country's transition from a centralized, state-controlled economy to a more market-oriented system has been slow and uneven, leaving many entrepreneurs skeptical of the state's commitment to supporting private enterprise. As Gillet (2003) observes, this skepticism is rooted in the legacy of Algeria's socialist past, where private enterprise was often viewed with suspicion and state intervention was pervasive.

The interplay between national values and entrepreneurial aspirations is also critical in understanding the Algerian context. Sadeq and Setti (2013) explore how national values, such as collectivism and familial loyalty, influence entrepreneurs' expectations for job growth and firm expansion. Their study highlights that in societies with strong collectivist values, such as Algeria, entrepreneurs often prioritize social stability and familial obligations over aggressive growth strategies. This aligns with the findings of Delmar and Wennberg (2007), who argue that entrepreneurs in risk-averse environments tend to set lower growth targets to avoid the uncertainties associated with expansion. In Algeria, this risk aversion is further compounded by the lack of institutional support and the prevalence of informal economic activities, which create an environment of uncertainty and limit entrepreneurs' willingness to take risks (Peng & Walid, 2022; Messikh, 2022; Ahras, 2020).

The socio-cultural embeddedness of economic action in Algeria highlights the complex interplay between economic rationality and social obligations. Entrepreneurs in Algeria operate within a context where familial ties, community expectations, and cultural values play a central role in shaping their economic behavior. Ownership is not just an economic concept but a deeply social and symbolic one, tied to the entrepreneur's identity and social status. Fear of failure and the lack of trust in formal institutions further constrain entrepreneurial growth, reinforcing risk-averse behavior and limiting access to external resources. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and interventions that support entrepreneurship in Algeria. Such efforts must take into account the socio-cultural realities of the Algerian context, including the symbolic meaning of ownership, the pervasive fear of failure, and the importance of trust and social capital. By addressing these issues, policymakers and stakeholders can create an environment that fosters entrepreneurial innovation and growth while respecting the cultural and social values that shape entrepreneurial behavior.

### 3. Methodology

This study examines the interplay between Algerian entrepreneurs and their socio-cultural environment, focusing on how these dynamics shape firm growth as a socio-economic activity. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with owners and managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Algeria. The methodology was structured to capture the nuanced relationship between entrepreneurial decision-making, socio-cultural influences, and firm growth trajectories.

#### 3.1. Sample Selection

The sample consisted of 12 owners and managers of private SMEs located in Algiers and its surrounding regions, including Blida and Tipaza. Purposive sampling was used to select enterprises that met two key criteria:

- a. Enterprise Size:** SMEs were defined as enterprises employing between 1 and 250 workers, consistent with the classification used by the Algerian Ministry of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises. This range ensured diversity in firm size, from micro-enterprises to medium-sized businesses, enabling a comprehensive exploration of growth dynamics.
- b. Central Role of Owners and Managers:** The study focused on SMEs where the owner held a majority stake (over 50% of shares) or had full authority to represent the enterprise in family-owned businesses. This criterion ensured that interviewees had significant influence over strategic decisions, particularly those related to growth.

Access to participants was initially challenging due to concerns among SME owners about potential links to government agencies, such as tax authorities or labor inspectors. To address this, a snowball sampling technique was employed, where initial participants referred the researchers to other potential interviewees. This approach facilitated access to a relevant and diverse sample.

#### 3.2. Theoretical Framework and Data Saturation

The study was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, which determines the point at which additional data collection no longer yields new insights relevant to the research questions. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the 10th interview, with two additional interviews conducted to confirm that no new information was emerging. This approach aligns with Eisenhardt's recommendation that saturation is often reached after analyzing between 4 and 10 cases (Eisenhardt, 1989), ensuring both efficiency and rigor in the data collection process.

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using an interpretative approach, focusing on the meanings and perspectives participants attributed to their actions and decisions. The analysis aimed to uncover the socio-cultural factors influencing entrepreneurial behavior and firm growth, emphasizing the interplay between individual agency and broader environmental contexts.

The analysis process involved three key steps:

- a. **Transcription and Translation:** Interviews were transcribed and, where necessary, translated from French and Arabic to English, as 11 out of 12 interviews were conducted in French. This ensured the data were accessible for analysis while preserving the original context.
- b. **Thematic Coding:** Data were organized and coded thematically, guided by the study's research questions. Key themes included the role of socio-cultural norms in entrepreneurial behavior, challenges to firm growth in the Algerian context, and strategies employed to navigate these challenges.
- c. **Interpretative Analysis:** The coded data were analyzed interpretatively, focusing on participants' perspectives and the socio-cultural meanings they attached to their experiences. This approach provided a nuanced understanding of how Algerian entrepreneurs perceive and respond to their socio-cultural environment.

The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality for all participants. Given the sensitivity of topics such as perceptions of government regulations and socio-cultural constraints, particular care was taken to protect the identities of interviewees and their enterprises.

The methodology employed in this study was designed to provide a deep, qualitative understanding of the socio-cultural factors influencing firm growth in Algeria. By focusing on the perspectives of SME owners and managers, the study highlights the complex relationship between individual agency and socio-cultural context, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Algerian entrepreneurs. The use of theoretical saturation and interpretative analysis ensured the findings were both rigorous and contextually grounded, contributing to a broader understanding of firm growth as a socio-economic activity in Algeria.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The Meaning of Ownership and Its Impact on Firm Growth

One of the key findings of this study is that Algerian entrepreneurs view their firms as personal property rather than purely economic entities. This perception of ownership reflects the entrepreneur's social identity and status, which are closely tied to their firm (Dittmar, 1992). For many entrepreneurs, the firm is not just a source of income but a symbol of their social standing and a means of achieving social mobility. As one entrepreneur explained, *"My business is not just a way to make money; it is a part of who I am. It represents my place in society and my ability to provide for my family."*

This perception of ownership has significant implications for firm growth. Entrepreneurs are often reluctant to take on external partners or loans, fearing a loss of control over their firms. This reluctance limits their ability to pursue growth opportunities that require external financing or partnerships. For example, one entrepreneur stated, *"I cannot accept any kind of partnership. I will never share what I own with strangers. It's like asking me to share my home with outsiders. I want to keep full control over my business."* This sentiment was echoed by other entrepreneurs, who expressed a strong preference for maintaining sole ownership of their firms.

The reluctance to share ownership is also reflected in the entrepreneurs' attitudes toward external financing. Many entrepreneurs are cautious of taking out loans from banks, as they fear losing control over their firms if they are unable to repay the loans. Instead, they prefer to rely on informal sources of financing, such as loans from family and friends. As one entrepreneur explained, *"I only borrow money from people I trust, like family or close friends. I don't trust banks or strangers."* This reliance on informal networks highlights the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in accessing formal sources of financing and support.

#### **4.2. Fear of Failure as a Barrier to Growth**

Fear of failure emerged as a significant barrier to firm growth among Algerian entrepreneurs. Many entrepreneurs expressed concerns about the uncertainty and risks associated with expanding their businesses. This fear is compounded by the lack of a supportive institutional environment, which makes it difficult for entrepreneurs to access the resources and information needed to pursue growth opportunities.

One entrepreneur explained, *"I don't know what the future holds for my business. The market is unpredictable, and there are no clear rules. I prefer to stay as I am rather than take the risk of expanding."* This cautious approach to growth reflects the broader socio-cultural context in which Algerian entrepreneurs operate, where the fear of failure is deeply ingrained.

The fear of failure is also linked to the entrepreneurs' perceptions of their social responsibilities. Many entrepreneurs feel a strong sense of obligation to their families and communities, and they fear that the failure of their businesses would have far-reaching social consequences. As one entrepreneur stated, *"If my business fails, it won't just affect me. It will affect my family, my employees, and everyone who depends on me. I can't take that risk."* This sense of social responsibility further reinforces the entrepreneurs' reluctance to take risks and pursue growth opportunities.

#### **4.3. Trust Networks and Their Role in Entrepreneurial Decision-Making**

The study also found that trust networks play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior in Algeria. Entrepreneurs rely heavily on family and close friends for advice and support, reflecting the importance of strong social ties in Algerian society. This reliance on close social networks contrasts with Granovetter's argument about the strength of weak ties, suggesting that in Algeria, strong ties play a more significant role in entrepreneurial activities.

For example, one entrepreneur stated, *"I only borrow money from people I trust, like family or close friends. I don't trust banks or strangers."* This reliance on informal networks highlights the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in accessing formal sources of financing and support.

The importance of trust networks is also evident in the entrepreneurs' decision-making processes. Many entrepreneurs prefer to seek advice and guidance from their social networks rather than from formal institutions or professional advisors. As one entrepreneur explained, *"I trust my family and friends to give me good advice. They know me and understand my situation. I don't trust outsiders to*

*have my best interests at heart.*" This preference for informal sources of advice reflects the broader lack of trust in formal institutions, which is a significant barrier to firm growth in Algeria.

#### **4.4. The Role of Social Status and Cultural Norms**

In addition to the factors discussed above, the study found that social status and cultural norms play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior in Algeria. Many entrepreneurs view their businesses as a means of achieving social status and gaining respect within their communities. As one entrepreneur explained, *"In Algeria, success in business is not just about making money. It's about gaining respect and recognition from your community. If you are successful, people will look up to you and treat you with respect."*

This emphasis on social status has important implications for firm growth. Entrepreneurs are often more concerned with maintaining their social standing than with maximizing profits or expanding their businesses. As a result, they may be reluctant to take risks or pursue growth opportunities that could menace their social status. For example, one entrepreneur stated, *"I would rather have a small, stable business that allows me to maintain my social standing than take the risk of expanding and potentially losing everything."*

Cultural norms also play a role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior. In Algeria, there is a strong cultural emphasis on family and community, and entrepreneurs often feel a sense of obligation to support their families and communities through their businesses. As one entrepreneur explained, *"In Algeria, family comes first. If you are successful in business, you are expected to help your family and your community. That is just the way things are."* This sense of obligation can limit entrepreneurs' ability to pursue growth opportunities, as they may be more focused on meeting the needs of their families and communities than on expanding their businesses.

### **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the importance of socio-cultural factors in shaping entrepreneurial behavior in Algeria. The perception of firm ownership as personal property reflects the deep-rooted cultural values and social norms that influence entrepreneurs' decision-making processes. This perception limits their willingness to take risks and pursue growth opportunities, as they prioritize maintaining control over their businesses.

Fear of failure and a lack of trust in formal institutions further constrain entrepreneurial activity. The uncertain and unpredictable business environment in Algeria exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for entrepreneurs to plan for the future and take calculated risks. The lack of trust in formal institutions also limits entrepreneurs' ability to access resources and support, further hindering their growth prospects.

These findings are consistent with the theory of embeddedness, which presumes that economic actions are deeply rooted in social structures and relationships (Granovetter, 1985). In the case of Algerian entrepreneurs, their economic decisions are influenced by their social networks, cultural values, and perceptions of their role within society. This socio-cultural embeddedness shapes their attitudes toward firm growth and their willingness to take risks.

The study also highlights the importance of addressing socio-cultural barriers to foster a conducive environment for entrepreneurship in Algeria. Policies aimed at promoting entrepreneurship should take into account the cultural values and social norms that influence entrepreneurial behavior. Efforts to build trust in formal institutions and create a more stable and predictable business environment are essential for encouraging entrepreneurs to pursue growth opportunities.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the broader literature on entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of socio-cultural factors in shaping entrepreneurial behavior in developing economies namely Algeria. The findings reveal that Algerian entrepreneurs view their firms as personal property rather than purely economic entities, a perspective that significantly influences their growth aspirations. Fear of failure and a lack of trust in formal institutions further constrain their ability to pursue growth opportunities. These factors collectively act as barriers to firm growth and limit the aspirations of entrepreneurs. The findings emphasize the need to address these socio-cultural challenges to create a more supportive environment for entrepreneurship in Algeria.

To foster entrepreneurship and economic development, policymakers must focus on building trust in formal institutions by improving transparency and efficiency, particularly within tax authorities. Encouraging risk-taking through financial and technical support programs, such as grants, low-interest loans, and training initiatives, could help mitigate the fear of failure. Additionally, promoting the formalization of informal businesses by simplifying registration processes and offering incentives would contribute to a more predictable and transparent business environment. While strong social ties provide essential support to entrepreneurs, efforts should also be made to strengthen weak ties and foster connections between entrepreneurs and external stakeholders, such as through networking opportunities and collaborative platforms.

By addressing these socio-cultural challenges, Algeria can create a more supportive environment for entrepreneurship, enabling business owners to overcome barriers to growth and contribute more effectively to economic development. This, in turn, could lead to greater innovation, job creation, and long-term prosperity for the country.

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