











ORIGINAL

Innovation of SMEs in Ecuador: An Approach from Socio-emotional Wealth and the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Innovación de las PYMES en Ecuador: Un Enfoque desde la Riqueza Socioemocional y el Uso de Inteligencia Artificial

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ecuador face constant challenges to stay competitive in an environment of digital transformation. Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a key tool to optimise processes, while socioemotional wealth influences decision-making and the work environment. This study analysed how the combination of both factors impacts the innovation and competitiveness of Ecuadorian SMEs, identifying strategies to improve their performance in the market. A mixed methodology was applied, combining surveys of 150 workers with interviews of 10 selected SME managers. The surveys, conducted using Google Forms, assess the perception of AI implementation and the importance of socio-emotional values. The interviews, carried out by Zoom, allowed us to delve into strategies, best practices and challenges in the integration of technology and emotional management. The results showed a positive trend in the adoption of AI, highlighting its impact on process optimisation and productivity improvement. It is also confirmed that socioemotional richness influences team cohesion and strategic decision-making. However, barriers such as lack of training and resistance to change were identified. Finally, strategies were proposed to balance technology with emotional well-being and strengthen business competitiveness.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Socio-Emotional Wealth; Business Innovation; Competitiveness; Smes in Ecuador.

RESUMEN

Las pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYMES) en Ecuador enfrentan desafíos constantes para mantenerse competitivas en un entorno de transformación digital. La inteligencia artificial (IA) se ha convertido en una herramienta clave para optimizar procesos, mientras que la riqueza socioemocional influye en la toma de decisiones y el ambiente laboral. Este estudio analizó cómo la combinación de ambos factores impacta la innovación y competitividad de las PYMES ecuatorianas, identificando estrategias para mejorar su desempeño en el mercado. Se aplicó una metodología mixta, combinando encuestas a 150 trabajadores con entrevistas a 10 directivos de PYMES seleccionados. Las encuestas, realizadas mediante Google Forms, evalúan la percepción sobre la implementación de IA y la importancia de los valores socioemocionales. Las entrevistas, efectuadas por Zoom, permitieron profundizar en estrategias, buenas prácticas y desafíos en la integración de tecnología y gestión emocional. Los resultados evidenciaron una tendencia positiva en la adopción de IA, destacando su impacto en la optimización de procesos y la mejora de la productividad.

Asimismo, se confirma que la riqueza socioemocional influye en la cohesión del equipo y en la toma de decisiones estratégicas. Sin embargo, se identificaron barreras como la falta de capacitación y resistencia al cambio. Finalmente, se propusieron estrategias para equilibrar la tecnología con el bienestar emocional y fortalecer la competitividad empresarial.

Palabras clave: Inteligencia Artificial; Riqueza Socioemocional; Innovación Empresarial; Competitividad; PYMES en Ecuador.

INTRODUCTION

In Ecuador, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a fundamental role in economic development, generating employment and promoting sustainable growth. However, they face multiple challenges in remaining competitive in a globalised environment.

Socio-emotional wealth, the values, emotions, and relationships that influence business decision-making, has become a key factor in their success. On the other hand, adopting artificial intelligence (AI) has improved efficiency and innovation. This study explores how the combination of these elements can strengthen the competitiveness of Ecuadorian SMEs, contributing to their sustainability and growth in the current market.⁽¹⁾

According to Abril et al.⁽²⁾ in their study on incorporating sustainable innovation values into business management, companies can achieve sustainable competitive advantages by effectively managing their internal resources. In the context of Ecuadorian SMEs, the combination of artificial intelligence and socio-emotional wealth represents a strategic resource that can boost innovation and improve competitiveness. AI allows for process optimisation and enhanced decision-making. At the same time, socio-emotional wealth strengthens team commitment and cohesion, generating an advantage that is difficult for competitors to replicate and contributing to business sustainability.⁽³⁾

Gallizo et al.⁽⁹⁾ establish that Disruptive Innovation Theory explains how new technologies transform business models and challenge established companies. Adopting artificial intelligence in Ecuadorian SMEs represents a disruptive change by improving operational efficiency, reducing costs, and personalising services. However, its implementation faces challenges such as resistance to change and a lack of technical knowledge. SMEs that successfully integrate AI into their strategies can differentiate themselves in the market and compete with larger companies, consolidating their position in a dynamic business environment.⁽⁴⁾

In their theory of Family Business, Habbershon and Williams (not included in the references) highlight the impact of socio-emotional wealth on business sustainability and management. In Ecuadorian SMEs, where many companies have a family structure, decision-making is influenced by values such as trust, loyalty, and team cohesion. These factors are essential for fostering innovation and adopting new technologies such as artificial intelligence. Combining AI and socio-emotional wealth balances modernisation and tradition, promoting sustainable growth and long-term business continuity.⁽⁷⁾

Research on artificial intelligence (AI) in SMEs has demonstrated its positive impact on process optimisation and operational efficiency. Ferreira et al.⁽⁸⁾ found that AI facilitates the automation of repetitive tasks, improves data-driven decision-making, and reduces operating costs. Similarly, studies such as those by Wamba et al. (not included in the references) highlight how using AI in predictive analytics and customer management increases business competitiveness. However, despite its benefits, the adoption of AI in SMEs faces barriers such as a lack of training and technological resources.⁽⁹⁾

On the other hand, socio-emotional wealth has been recognised as a key factor in business resilience and sustainability. Llanos et al.⁽¹³⁾ point out that companies with substantial socio-emotional capital are more likely to make strategic decisions aligned with family and community values, reinforcing long-term stability. Subsequent research, such as that by Binz et al. (not included in the references), shows that socio-emotional wealth influences innovation and organisational commitment. Furthermore, Collaguazo et al.⁽⁶⁾ argue that companies with high levels of socio-emotional capital prioritise business continuity over short-term profits, strengthening their resilience to economic crises.

Despite these advances, the relationship between AI and socio-emotional wealth in SMEs remains under-explored. While AI optimises productivity and competitiveness,⁽²⁰⁾ socio-emotional wealth ensures a cohesive work environment that facilitates technology adoption.⁽²¹⁾ This intersection is fundamental to understanding how combining technology and human values can strengthen innovation in Ecuadorian SMEs. Future studies should address this synergy to develop integration strategies that maximise the positive impact on business competitiveness.

To guide this research, the following question is formulated: How do socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence influence innovation and competitiveness in SMEs in Ecuador? The overall objective of this study is to analyse how the combination of socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence impacts innovation and

competitiveness in SMEs in Ecuador, identifying strategies to improve their market performance.

The combination of socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence positively impacts the innovation and competitiveness of SMEs in Ecuador. The integration of these factors facilitates the adoption of innovative strategies, optimises decision-making, and improves their market performance, allowing for greater adaptability to changes in the business environment.

METHOD

Research approach

This study adopted a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive view of the impact of socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence on the innovation and competitiveness of SMEs in Ecuador. The quantitative approach allowed for the collection of measurable data on the implementation and effects of these variables in companies, while the qualitative approach facilitated a deeper understanding of entrepreneurs' perceptions, experiences, and strategies. This combination enabled a holistic analysis, ensuring that the findings reflect both general trends and contextual factors that influence the performance of SMEs in the market.

Type of research

The research was descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive phase focused on identifying and characterising socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence use in Ecuadorian SMEs, exploring their presence, application, and degree of integration into business processes. The explanatory phase analysed how these variables influence companies' innovative and competitive capacity, determining cause-effect relationships and explaining the mechanisms through which they generate impact. This approach made it possible to document the current state of SMEs in Ecuador and understand the key factors that favour or limit business innovation in this context.

Research design

A non-experimental, cross-sectional design was used, as the data were collected simultaneously without manipulating the study variables. This design was appropriate for analysing phenomena in their current state and concluding trends and correlations without altering business dynamics. As a cross-sectional study, it facilitated the identification of patterns and relationships in a constantly changing economic and technological environment, providing relevant information for strategic decision-making in SMEs. In addition, this approach allowed us to capture the perceptions of entrepreneurs and employees about socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence in their immediate organisational context.

Population and sample

The study population comprised Ecuadorian SMEs from various productive sectors, including commerce, manufacturing, services, and technology. Intentional sampling was used, selecting 10 SMEs that had incorporated or were interested in adopting strategies based on socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence.

The sample included 150 workers, who were given structured surveys, and the managers of the 10 SMEs, who participated in semi-structured interviews. Including these two groups allowed for a balanced view between strategic decision-making and operational execution, ensuring that the data reflects the realities of businesses with different technology and innovation adoption levels.

Data collection techniques

Multiple techniques were used to collect data, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative information to be obtained:

- Structured surveys targeting the 150 SME employees. These were administered via Google Forms and designed to assess the level of integration of socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence in business strategy and their impact on competitiveness.
- Semi-structured interviews with the managers of the 10 SMEs via the Zoom platform. These interviews provided insight into the strategy implemented, identified good practices, and helped to understand the perceived barriers and opportunities.
- Documentary analysis of previous studies, business reports, and economic databases to contextualise the findings within the current SME landscape in Ecuador.

Data analysis techniques

- Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, which allowed us to identify patterns, correlations, and significant differences between companies with different levels of integration of socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence. Data analysis tools were used to assess the relationship between these variables and innovation and competitiveness performance.

- For qualitative data, content analysis was applied, identifying key themes in the discourse of SME managers. This allowed for the generation of analysis categories and the extraction of conclusions based on business experience.

This methodological triangulation ensured the validity and reliability of the results, providing useful information for formulating business strategies and policies to support innovation in SMEs.

RESULTS

This study analysed the impact of combining socio-emotional wealth and artificial intelligence on innovation and competitiveness in SMEs in Ecuador. The results reflect the level of AI adoption in these companies, the role of socio-emotional wealth in strategic decision-making, and their combined impact on business innovation. Based on these findings, strategies are presented to improve the competitiveness of SMEs, as well as the validation of models that integrate technology and socio-emotional values into organisational management.

Survey applied to workers

A structured survey was administered to 150 employees of the selected SMEs using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The survey was conducted through Google Forms and aimed to assess employees’ perceptions of using artificial intelligence and socio-emotional wealth in the organisation.

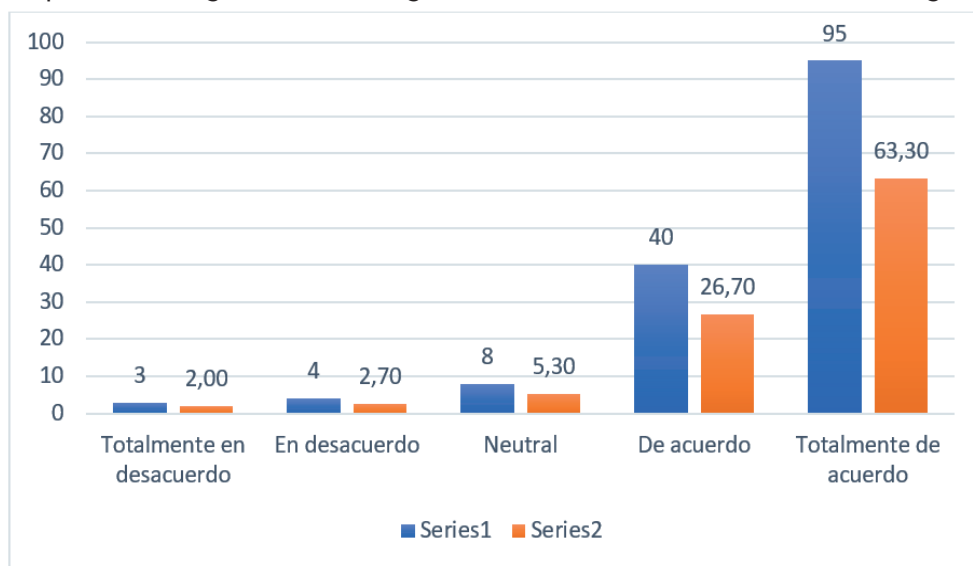


Figure 1. Implementation of AI tools to improve productivity in SMEs

Most respondents (63,3 %) strongly agree that implementing AI tools improves productivity, while only 2 % strongly disagree. Overall, 32 % of responses agree or neutral, suggesting a positive perception of AI’s effectiveness in increasing work productivity (figure 1).

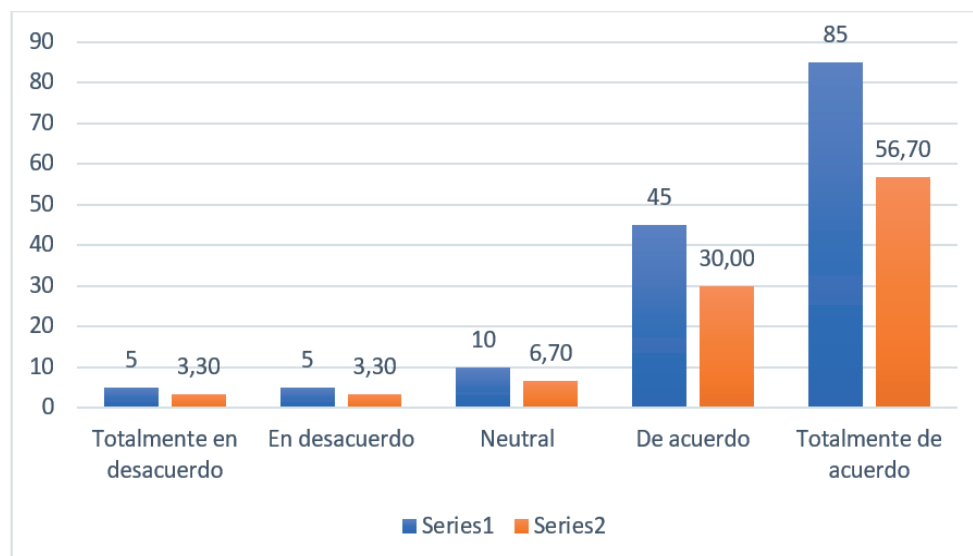


Figure 2. Optimisation of administrative and operational processes with AI

In figure 2, 56,7 % strongly agree that AI improves productivity, while 30 % agree. However, 6,6 % are neutral, and 6,6 % are divided, reflecting a majority positive trend towards AI integration, although some doubts or scepticism remain.

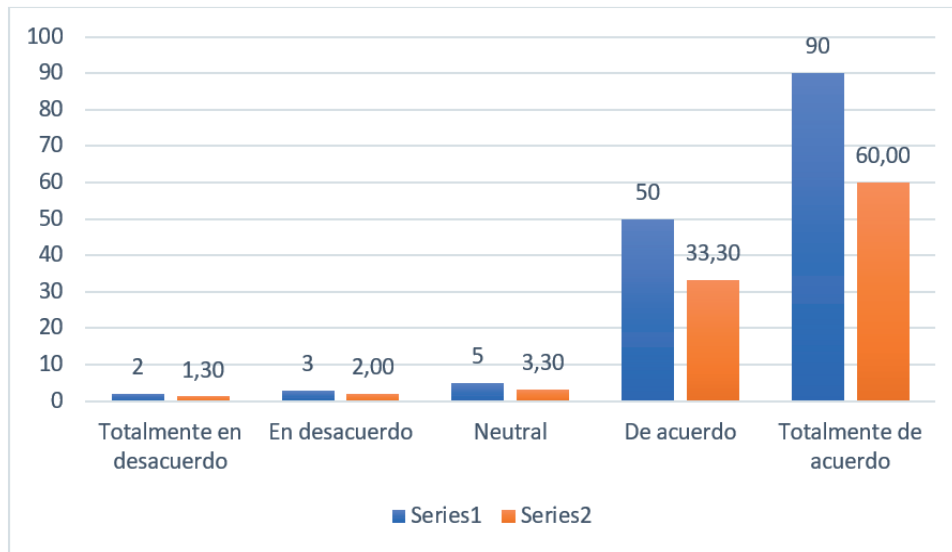


Figure 3. Influence of socio-emotional values on the work environment

60 % of respondents completely agree that socio-emotional values have a positive influence on the work environment, while only 3,3 % disagree. With 33,30 % of respondents agreeing, this highlights the importance of emotional and social factors in improving work dynamics, with a clear trend towards their positive impact (figure 3).

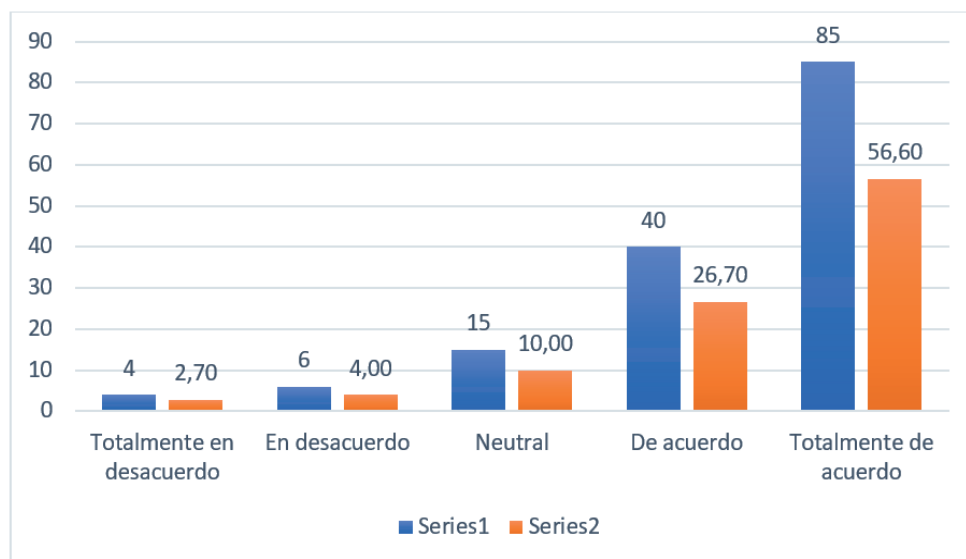


Figure 4. Strengthening innovation with AI and socio-emotional wealth

The majority (56,6 %) believe that AI and socio-emotional wealth strengthen innovation, while 26,7 % agree. However, 10 % remain neutral, indicating that, although there is a favourable trend, some still do not see a clear link between these two areas, suggesting a need for greater integration and clarity in their relationship.

43,3 % of participants consider training in AI and social-emotional management to be extremely important, while 36,7 % agree. 20 % of respondents remain neutral, indicating that, although the majority value training, there is a segment that does not perceive its immediate relevance, which may point to a need for greater awareness and training.

The vast majority (65,3 %) believe that the combination of AI and socio-emotional wealth positively impacts business competitiveness, while only 2 % disagree. This trend demonstrates a strong perception that both factors are key to organizations’ growth and competitive success in today’s environment.

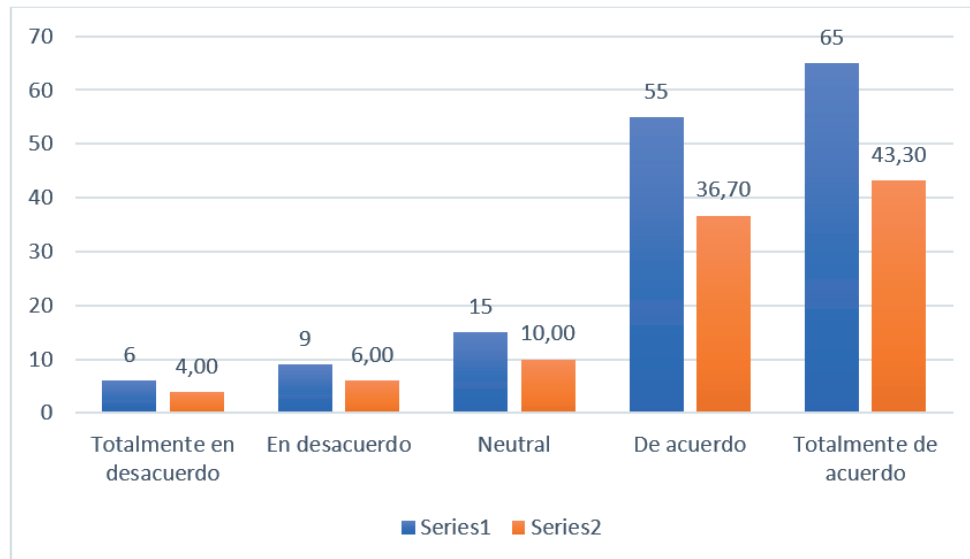


Figure 5. Importance of training in AI and social-emotional management in SMEs

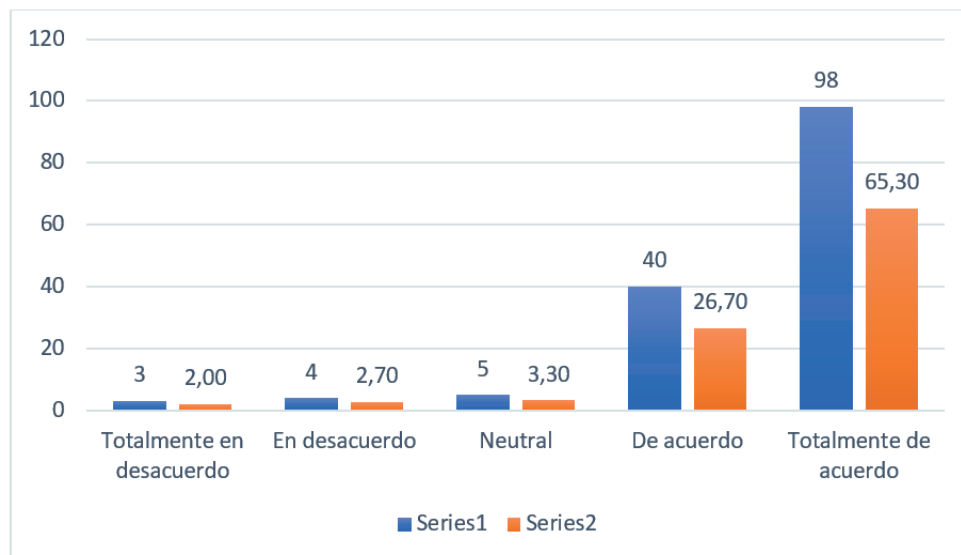


Figure 6. Impact of AI and socio-emotional wealth on business competitiveness

Results of the Interview with SME Executives in Ecuador on Innovation, AI, and Socio-Emotional Wealth

In the context of innovation and competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ecuador, the combination of artificial intelligence (AI) and socio-emotional wealth plays a crucial role in their development and adaptation to the current business environment. Through interviews with executives from 10 SMEs, we explored how these tools and values influence business strategies, decision-making, and operational efficiency improvements. The results reveal the tangible benefits of adopting AI and the importance of cultivating an emotionally healthy environment to foster innovation and progress. Below are the results of the interview.

1. Level of artificial intelligence adoption

The executives interviewed stated that adopting artificial intelligence (AI) in their companies is in the early stages of the integration process. The areas that have benefited the most are customer management and the automation of internal processes, such as billing and customer service. Some mentioned that AI has significantly improved decision-making efficiency, allowing data to be processed more quickly and accurately.

2. Main barriers to adopting AI in SMEs

The main barriers mentioned were the cost of implementation, lack of knowledge about the tools available, and resistance to change from some employees. Many executives agreed that training is essential, but Ecuador's access is limited. They also pointed to the lack of adequate infrastructure as a significant obstacle to the full integration of AI into daily operations.

3. Influence of socio-emotional wealth on strategic decision-making

Interviewees indicated that the socio-emotional wealth of their teams plays a key role in strategic decision-making. They highlighted that a collaborative and positive work environment facilitates innovation and growth-oriented decisions. Mutual trust and respect within the team contribute to a favourable climate for risky and proactive choices.

4. Socio-emotional values are essential for an innovative work environment

Empathy, trust, and open communication were mentioned as essential for fostering an innovative and productive environment. Managers point out that a team that feels listened to and valued is more willing to propose innovative ideas and collaborate actively. Resilience and flexibility were also key to maintaining creativity and adaptability in the face of market changes.

5. Impact of AI on internal process efficiency

AI has improved operational efficiency in companies, especially in areas such as customer management, demand forecasting, and data analysis. Managers mentioned that implementing AI tools has reduced customer response times and optimised data-driven decision-making. The integration of AI software has streamlined information gathering and analysis, improving planning and internal operations.

6. Improved competitiveness thanks to AI

Executives reported that, after integrating AI, they have noticed improvements in competitiveness, especially in terms of agility and the ability to anticipate market trends. The main benefits have been reduced operating costs and improved customer service quality. They also mentioned that the ability to personalise services through AI has strengthened customer relationships and increased customer loyalty.

7. Importance of AI training and social-emotional skills

Training in AI and social-emotional skills is seen as crucial for companies' long-term development. Executives agreed that investing in continuous training, not only in technical aspects but also in the emotional well-being of the team, is essential. To promote this, some companies implement workshops, online courses, and talks on emotional intelligence and digital skills.

8. Strategies for balancing technology and emotional well-being

Strategies include creating a flexible work environment and emotional well-being programmes like mindfulness sessions and coaching. Team-building activities have also been organised to help strengthen interpersonal relationships within teams. Some executives mention that encouraging employees to participate actively in technological decisions helps them feel more comfortable with change.

9. Relationship between AI and socio-emotional wealth in innovation

Managers believe that combining AI and socio-emotional wealth is essential to foster innovation. While AI provides technological tools that optimise processes, socio-emotional wealth ensures that the team feels motivated and aligned with the business vision. The collaboration between technology and human values creates an environment conducive to creativity and the implementation of innovative ideas.

10. Effective business management models to strengthen the competitiveness of SMEs

Regarding business management models, executives suggested that management based on open collaboration, emotionally intelligent leadership, and the appropriate use of technology is most effective. An approach that combines technology, such as AI, with empathy and personal development for employees can increase the competitiveness of SMEs while promoting a healthy and productive work environment.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the results obtained in this study shows a favourable trend towards the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in Ecuadorian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and recognition of the importance of socio-emotional wealth in the workplace and business competitiveness. These findings are consistent with studies analyzing technology integration and human values in business management.

First, implementing AI tools in Ecuadorian SMEs is perceived as a key factor for productivity and operational efficiency. 63,3 % of respondents strongly agree that AI improves productivity, a result that coincides with research such as that of Amrani *et al.*⁽¹⁾, who argue that AI-driven automation can significantly increase business efficiency by optimising processes and reducing operating costs.

Likewise, the majority of respondents rated the optimisation of administrative and operational processes

through AI positively (56,7 % strongly agree and 30 % agree), suggesting that technology is having a tangible impact on business management. Research such as that by Caicedo et al.⁽⁵⁾ has highlighted that AI optimizes operations and improves decision-making by enabling more accurate and agile data analysis.

On the other hand, socio-emotional wealth was identified as an essential factor in the workplace, with 60 % of respondents strongly agreeing that it positively influences team cohesion and productivity. These results support the findings of Moreno et al.⁽¹⁵⁾, who argue that emotional intelligence in business leadership is a key determinant of organisational success. In addition, interviews with executives revealed that values such as empathy, trust, and open communication are fundamental to fostering innovation, which is consistent with the conclusions of Ramos and Salazar⁽¹⁸⁾ on the importance of positive emotional culture in business performance.

Regarding strengthening innovation through the combination of AI and socio-emotional wealth, 56,6 % of respondents strongly agreed, demonstrating a trend towards integrating technology and human factors as a driver of innovation. A study by Collaguazo et al.⁽⁶⁾ suggests that companies that balance digitalisation and human leadership gain sustainable competitive advantages, which aligns with the perception of the executives interviewed.

Another relevant finding was the importance of training in AI and socio-emotional management, with 43,3 % of participants considering it crucial. This coincides with the research by Paiva et al.⁽¹⁷⁾, which highlights the need for continuous training in digital and emotional skills to ensure that companies adapt to the technological era.

Finally, 65,3 % of respondents validated the impact of AI and socio-emotional wealth on business competitiveness, who perceive a positive influence on their companies' growth and sustainability. This finding is in line with the study by Rivera et al.⁽¹⁹⁾, which argues that the adoption of AI in conjunction with a strong organizational culture can improve competitive advantage and business resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of artificial intelligence and socio-emotional wealth positively impacts innovation in Ecuadorian SMEs. The results show that adopting AI has optimised administrative and operational processes, while socio-emotional values have strengthened the work environment. Previous studies highlight that integrating both dimensions enhances creativity and strategic development in companies.

Implementing AI has improved SMEs' competitiveness by reducing costs and optimising customer service. However, barriers such as a lack of training and implementation costs limit its adoption. Previous research in Latin America highlights similar challenges, indicating that training and access to finance are key to business digital transformation.

Socio-emotional values play a crucial role in strategic decision-making. Trust, empathy, and open communication are essential for fostering collaboration and innovation. This coincides with studies highlighting the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership in business success and organisational adaptability in dynamic environments.

Training in AI and socio-emotional skills is essential to improve SME performance. Managers recognise the need for ongoing training programmes to integrate technology without affecting team well-being. Scientific literature suggests that combining technical and socio-emotional skills with a holistic approach to learning increases organisational efficiency and talent retention.

Practical strategies for balancing technology with employee emotional well-being were identified, such as participatory leadership and promoting a flexible work environment. These strategies allow AI to be implemented without generating resistance, fostering an environment conducive to innovation. Previous research has shown that combining AI with a positive organisational culture drives competitiveness and sustainable business growth.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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