


Chapter 11

The Role of Sustainability Certifications in the International Marketing of SMEs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of sustainability certifications—particularly B Corp—in supporting the internationalization of European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While often seen as regulatory or environmental tools, certifications also serve as strategic marketing assets, enhancing brand credibility, signaling ethical commitment, and connecting with conscious consumers. Through a comparative case study of Fairphone and Pastoret, two B Corp-certified SMEs, the chapter analyzes how certification influences six dimensions: regulatory harmonization, ethical branding, storytelling, supply chain access, community engagement, and institutional trust. Drawing on academic literature and corporate materials, the study shows that certifications help SMEs build stakeholder trust and support market differentiation in international contexts. Yet, it also highlights the limitations of certifications amid a saturated and confusing labeling landscape, stressing the importance of credible standards and authentic communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainability has moved from a peripheral consideration to a core component of business strategy, particularly within the European Union. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), traditionally considered slower to adopt sustainability practices, are increasingly subject to regulatory, social, and market pressures that demand greater ethical commitment, transparency, and accountability (Adomako & Tran, 2022; European Commission, 2023). This shift reflects not only compliance demands but also a broader transformation in the logic of value creation, where sustainability serves as a strategic lever for competitiveness, especially in the context of internationalization.

Among the diverse instruments available to SMEs to signal their commitment to sustainability, B Corp certification has emerged as a particularly relevant and holistic approach. Unlike sector-specific ecolabels or environmental seals, B Corp provides a comprehensive, organization-level assessment of social and environmental performance, governance, and stakeholder engagement (Diez-Bustos et al, 2021; Honeyman & Jana, 2019). For SMEs operating across borders, it functions as a hybrid governance tool and a marketing asset, enabling alignment with ESG expectations while reinforcing purpose-driven brand positioning (Carvalho et al., 2022; Beerkens, 2023).

Despite growing scholarly interest in sustainability certifications, existing research tends to focus either on consumer responses to ecolabels (Siraj et al., 2022; Janssen, 2023) or on corporate compliance mechanisms. Less attention has been paid to how certifications like B Corp influence international marketing strategies, particularly for European SMEs navigating global markets characterized by information asymmetries, greenwashing concerns, and cultural diversity.

This chapter seeks to address that gap by exploring how B Corp certification supports the internationalization of European SMEs from both a marketing and institutional perspective. Drawing on the comparative analysis of two certified companies (Fairphone, a Dutch electronics firm, and Pastoret, a Spanish artisanal dairy brand) it examines how these SMEs leverage B Corp to build legitimacy, engage ethically conscious consumers, access new markets, and participate in sustainability-oriented value networks. The chapter draws on a qualitative case study methodology, outlined in detail in Section 3.

The chapter is structured into six thematic sections. First, it reviews the literature on sustainability certifications as signaling mechanisms and marketing tools. Second, it outlines the evolution and classification of certifications, focusing on B Corp's institutional role. Third, it analyzes the strategic benefits and challenges of B Corp for SMEs. Fourth, it presents a conceptual framework linking certification to international marketing outcomes. Fifth, it develops two case studies to illustrate

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