Understanding international CSR in SMEs

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates international corporate social responsibility (CSR) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While international CSR is key to firm internationalization, hardly any research has been conducted on international CSR in SMEs. Drawing on an interpretive approach, we reveal four distinct understandings of international CSR which entail different CSR practices: international CSR as a driver of international performance; as necessary for international distinctiveness; as a promoter of successful international collaboration; and as a catalyst for change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. Our study contributes to the development of the nascent literature on international CSR in SMEs and to stakeholder theory.

KEYWORDS

International CSR, stakeholder theory, interpretive research, SMEs

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Introduction

International corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become common practice in today's interconnected world and has been adopted by a wide variety of organizations. By engaging in international CSR, firms can benefit society in general, address the needs of specific groups of international stakeholders, and enhance their own chances of sustainably succeeding in foreign markets (Kolk, 2016; Zhao et al., 2018; Zhou & Wang, 2020). Following suit, international business research has devoted increased attention to themes related to CSR and stakeholder management (Buckley et al., 2017; Kolk, 2016; Rathert, 2016). Despite such proliferation, gaps in understanding remain. In particular, we have limited knowledge of how managers perceive and practice international CSR. While this gap exists regardless of firm size, hardly any studies have been conducted on international CSR in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Specifically, only a handful of studies exist in the SME setting, and they focus solely on environmentally responsible practices (Arora & De, 2020; Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2019; Chan & Ma, 2016). Prior research attests that CSR is understood and practiced differently in SMEs compared to their larger counterparts (Perrini et al., 2007; Russo & Perrini, 2010). Consequently, we cannot assume that the managerial perceptions and practices identified in the multinational enterprise (MNE) context would be relevant for SMEs. Furthermore, international CSR poses additional challenges to firm managers, since foreign cultures and institutions must be factored in (Buchanan & Marques, 2018; Jamali, 2010). Thus, we also cannot necessarily expect that SME managers will perceive and practice CSR internationally in exactly the same way as in their home market.

Therefore, this study aims to provide insights into the managerial understanding of international CSR in the SME setting. Specifically, we address the following research question: How do SME managers perceive and practice international CSR? In this study, international CSR refers to CSR activities conducted internationally aimed at international stakeholders. We anchor our arguments in stakeholder theory. While we acknowledge that notable differences exist between stakeholder theory and CSR (Dmytriyev et al., 2021), consensus between the two exists in that they focus on integrating social considerations into business operations and relationships with stakeholders (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017; Freeman et al., 2020). CSR practices directed at stakeholders are particularly important since the sustainability and proliferation of a firm's operations depend on its relationships with its stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2020; Freeman, 2010). By embedding CSR in their interactions with stakeholders, managers can improve their relationships and boost joint value creation (Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Hillenbrand et al., 2013). Furthermore, similar calls for research to illuminate managers' understanding and their role in stakeholder management and shared value creation are echoed by stakeholder theorists (Freeman et al., 2020; McVea & Freeman, 2005; Tantalo & Priem, 2016).

Since we currently have a very limited understanding of the topic under study, situated at the intersection of the international business and CSR fields, in the specific SME setting, we embraced a qualitative research design. Specifically, we opted for an interpretive approach, relying mainly on 45 in-depth managerial interviews (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson, 2003). This approach is particularly appropriate to illuminate our research question, since it unveils collective frames of reference and discloses how managers create, enact, and interpret reality.

Our contribution is twofold. First, we contribute to the nascent literature on international CSR in SMEs. By jointly investigating distinct international responsible practices (for example, social, environmental, ethical, human rights) and multiple international stakeholders, we set the foundations of the literature on international CSR in SMEs, where the few studies that exist on corporate responsibility focus solely on environmentally responsible practices (Arora & De, 2020; Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2019; Chan & Ma, 2016). We disclose four qualitatively distinct understandings of international CSR, which entail different ways of practicing CSR in SMEs. These are CSR as a driver of international performance, as a facilitator for championing international distinctiveness, as a promoter of successful international collaboration, and as a catalyst for change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. We show that the interpretations of international CSR of the participating managers are primarily shaped by managerial worldviews but are also shaped by inherent resource scarcity and foreign culture specificities. These understandings are based on personalized stakeholder engagement, are nuanced, and integrate, to different extents, three main types of considerations: altruistic (for example, genuine care for society at large and for firm stakeholders), business case (for example, tangible and intangible benefits, such as profit, reputation, credibility, and empowerment), and sustainable development considerations (for example, positive transformation, the betterment of society, and environmental protection). Thus, we also add to the existing literature on CSR in SMEs by revealing that SME managers frequently embrace values beyond profitability in their CSR endeavors (Fassin et al., 2011; Niehm et al., 2008).

Second, we contribute to stakeholder theory by revealing that managers perceive that they can enhance shared value creation with international stakeholders by adopting a personalized "names-and-faces" approach to international stakeholders. Regardless of whether they go beyond creating economic value or not, SME managers perceive that the way to attain shared value creation is by developing and maintaining individualized relationships with international stakeholders (McVea & Freeman, 2005). Furthermore, we address calls for research to explore the relationship between smaller firms and their value chain stakeholders (Darnall et al., 2010) by showing that, indeed, SME managers maintain a close, hands-on relationship with such key international stakeholders. In addition, some of the managers who participated in this study, who pursued enhancing shared value beyond economic purposes, tended to act as a connecting fiber between international value chain stakeholders (Tantalo & Priem, 2016) by promoting synergies, well-being, and harmonious development.

The rest of the study is structured as follows. The next section presents the literature review and the theoretical background. We then provide details on the method, including information on data collection and sampling, as well as data analysis. Next, we present our findings. Then, we discuss our findings, highlight our contribution, offer practical implications, and suggest future research directions.

Literature review and theoretical background

CSR and international CSR in SMEs

CSR is a phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention among academic and practitioner audiences (for example, Mariani et al., 2021; Pisani et al., 2017; Risi et al., 2022; Soundararajan et al., 2018). However, while attempts to define CSR abound, no general agreement exists among academics and other interested parties on a particular CSR definition (Sheehy, 2015). Consensus exists, though, in that CSR is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses multiple concerns (social, environmental, ethical, legal, human rights) and takes into account multiple stakeholders (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Aguinis, 2011; Maignan et al., 1999; Testa et al., 2022; Van Marrewijk, 2003; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). In this study, we adopt the definition provided by the European Commission since it explicitly highlights the multidimensionality of CSR. Specifically, CSR is understood as "a process to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders" and is aimed at maximizing value creation for stakeholders and society at large and at identifying, preventing, and tackling possible adverse effects (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).

Organizational characteristics can constrain SMEs' engagement in CSR practices, and, as a result, the bulk of the literature focuses on instrumental or strategic motivators (and results) for CSR engagement (Soundararajan et al., 2018). Such motivators include, but are not restricted to, enhancing performance/efficiency and cost savings. For example, Li et al. (2016) noted that competitive advantage was the main motivator for CSR adoption by Chinese and Finnish SMEs. Similarly, Santos (2011) remarked that increasing employee motivation and cost reduction as well as improving client relationships were among the main motivators for SMEs' engagement in CSR practices. In a similar vein, studies in SMEs show that, indeed, adopting CSR has a beneficial impact on firm outcomes. For instance, Nejati et al. (2017) found that a strategic approach to CSR enabled Malaysian SMEs to increase their financial performance and reputation; Moneva-Abadía et al. (2019) reported a positive association between CSR and firm competitiveness, as well as performance and innovation; and Høivik and Shankar (2011) found that by engaging in CSR initiatives at the cluster level, SMEs can benefit from a reduced resource cost. Other studies, however, reported that managers of small businesses are motivated to engage in CSR practices by their personal moral values and can embrace values beyond profitability (Fassin et al., 2011; Massoud et al., 2020). For instance, Panwar et al. (2017) identified paying back into society as a main driver for managers of small businesses to engage in social practices whereas Niehm et al. (2008) highlighted community support as a driver of CSR practices in family businesses. Thus, although studies on CSR practiced by SMEs in their home market exist, there is a certain lack of agreement on how CSR is perceived and practiced in this context.

However, firms extend their CSR initiatives to foreign markets (Pisani et al., 2017; Rathert, 2016). While a plethora of studies exist on domestic market CSR, international CSR, comparatively, is much less explored. Hardly any research has been conducted on international CSR in the SME context. In this study, international CSR refers to the CSR activities conducted by SMEs internationally, directed toward their international stakeholders. So far, only a few studies have been conducted on international CSR in SMEs, and they relate solely to environmental practices. For example, Chan and Ma (2016) investigated the managerial perceptions of environmental orientation in internationalized SMEs. This survey-based research shows that top executives' environmental beliefs and SMEs' efforts to scan developed markets contribute to the development of an environmental orientation, which, in turn, leads to proactive environmental strategies and enhanced corporate export performance. Arora and De (2020) investigated the antecedents and outcomes of the environmental sustainability practices of exporting SMEs. They found that SMEs generally engage in environmental sustainability practices to succeed in exporting. Bıçakcıoğlu et al. (2019) found that a green business strategy positively influences the export financial performance of Turkish SMEs. Furthermore, they also showed that environmental orientation and cost leadership moderate this relationship. While these studies attest to the importance of adopting environmentally related CSR practices for attaining export success, we are yet to find out how managers perceive and practice international CSR in a more holistic manner, including other concerns besides the environmental one, such as social, ethical, or human rights concerns.

Some of the CSR activities carried out internationally may be similar to the CSR activities conducted by SMEs domestically. In fact, drawing on the large firm international CSR literature, we note that MNEs may emulate domestic CSR practices in foreign markets to the potential detriment of international stakeholders, whose specific characteristics and needs are ignored (Filatotchev & Stahl, 2015; Husted & Allen, 2006; Jamali, 2010). However, prior literature warns against transposing the CSR principles and approaches used by multinational corporations to the SME context (Freisleben, 2011; Morsing & Perrini, 2009). MNEs and SMEs are different types of firms, with different characteristics, and this is commonly reflected in their CSR practices. For example, different from the large firm context, CSR in SMEs is strongly influenced by managers' values and cognition (Burton & Goldsby, 2009). SMEs are also strongly embedded in the communities where they operate (Perrini et al., 2007; Russo & Perrini, 2010), thus facilitating gaining knowledge of the needs and preferences of international stakeholders. Relatedly, owner-managers care for the dependents of the business (employees), treating them as family members, and they use informal and personalized relationships to address their stakeholders (Spence, 2016). Furthermore, international CSR poses extra challenges to SMEs since issues related to foreign cultural and economic differences must be acknowledged and carefully taken into account (Buchanan & Marques, 2018; Jamali, 2010). Such additional challenges must be met with the already limited resources SMEs have available.

In sum, the CSR literature has generally found that SMEs espouse instrumental or strategic approaches to CSR, driven by performance goals and cost reduction. A few studies, however, show that SMEs can embrace values beyond profitability in their CSR efforts. While the mainstream CSR literature is clearly fragmented, very limited research exists on international CSR in SMEs. Such research commonly investigates the environmental dimension of CSR in relation to export performance. Therefore, we are yet to discover how managers perceive and practice international CSR in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon.

Stakeholder theory

Stakeholders are, according to Freeman (1984, p. 25), "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organization's objectives." To survive, grow, and be successful, firms have to create value with internal and external stakeholders (employees, suppliers, customers, community, and financiers). Stakeholder theory focuses on co-creation and trade with stakeholders in a complex and uncertain world (Freeman et al., 2018, 2020). It is embedded in a "humanistic conception of business as a vehicle for human cooperation to realize outcomes otherwise not attainable" where the alignment of values, norms, and ethics between the firm and its stakeholders is essential "for effective and efficient flourishing within and among organizations" (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 7). In accordance with the tenets of stakeholder theory, a firm is understood as a set of relationships, vital for its existence, with groups that have a stake in the business (Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010; Walsh, 2005). Such stakeholders have generally been classified either as primary or secondary (Buysse & Verbeke, 2003; Buzzelli, 1991; Darnall et al., 2010). Primary stakeholders are those that have a direct economic stake in the firm and include external stakeholders (such as customers and suppliers) and internal stakeholders (such as employees) (Darnall et al., 2010; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). Conversely, secondary stakeholders do not directly participate in the economic transactions of the firm (Clarkson, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Savage et al., 1991); however, they have an important role in driving sustainability and innovation (Holmes & Smart, 2009; Juntunen et al., 2019; Yaziji, 2004). While classifications vary, they generally include societal stakeholders (including communities, support organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)) and regulators (Darnall et al., 2010; Freeman, 1984; Henriques & Sadorsky, 1999).

As sound relationships with stakeholders are crucial for operating any business model (Freudenreich et al., 2020; Hristov & Appolloni, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020), managers should develop and maintain fair and long-lasting relationships with all stakeholders and aim to create the highest possible value for them (Dmytriyev et al., 2021). Scholars agree that much more than solely economic value is created through the organization-stakeholder interaction (Freeman et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2019). For example, managers can lead firms to "proactively engage with stakeholders – to shake them out of complacency so as to cooperatively innovate to create mutual benefits for the firm, society, and the environment" and thus achieve sustainable value creation (Sulkowski et al., 2018, pp. 225–226). Thus, value creation, the core concept put forward by stakeholder theory, depends on the sustainability of relationships with stakeholders and successful joint collaborations.

Drawing on Donaldson and Preston's (1995, p. 67) seminal study, stakeholder theory is essentially managerial, meaning that stakeholder management requires case-specific decision-making, since "simultaneous attention to all legitimate interests of all appropriate stakeholders" is required. While the role of managerial perceptions for value creation has long been recognized by stakeholder theory, gaps in understanding remain. Specifically, Tantalo and Priem (2016) highlighted that we have limited knowledge of how managers create and increase shared value creation with essential stakeholders. They argued that if such synergies are to be achieved, top managers must constantly focus on employees, suppliers, financiers, and communities with the same value-creating mindset typically reserved for customers. Some managers, however, may endeavor to create new unanticipated value for their essential stakeholders. Consequently, according to them, value-creating innovations are enhanced, and managers are more likely to go beyond a stakeholder trade-off mindset and concentrate on augmenting value creation for multiple stakeholder groups, which is essential to the firm. In a similar vein, McVea and Freeman (2005, p. 67) underlined the importance of understanding how value creation can be augmented; they suggested that by adopting a "names-and-faces" approach to stakeholder theory, which entails understanding "stakeholders as human beings with names, faces, and families" rather than as abstract groups, managers can personalize relationships with their stakeholders.

In agreement with Spence (2016), we remark that the "names-and-faces" approach to stakeholder theory is particularly suitable to underpin value creation in the SME context. Prior research also suggests that smaller firms are expected to maintain close relationships with value chain stakeholders (Darnall et al., 2010) and that SMEs would benefit from developing customized relationship management skills for different stakeholders (Tsai et al., 2022). Although, to date, we lack empirical evidence to prove this, given the relatively small numbers of international stakeholders compared to their larger counterparts coupled with their frequently informal approach to networking, SMEs are likely to adopt an individualized, personal approach to (international) stakeholders to enhance shared value creation. This gains particular relevance in the international context where firms often rely on interpersonal, social networks to diminish the liabilities of foreignness (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Zaheer, 1995) and to achieve their goals (Bai et al., 2021; Masiello & Izzo, 2019).

Method

Sample and data collection

Since our purpose is to reveal managerial interpretations and their construed realities regarding international CSR, we embraced an interpretive approach to answer our research question (Leppäaho et al., 2016; Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021). Our choice resonates with calls to implement a qualitative research design to further explicate international CSR (Eteokleous et al., 2016) and with the trend toward using interpretive research to uncover individual interpretation in CSR research (Yakovleva & Vazquez-Brust, 2012; Yin & Jamali, 2016). Following the interpretative tradition, we conducted an exploratory study (Welch et al., 2013). Since we pursue a "hermeneutical translation and clarification of the life-world" of managers of internationalized SMEs (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 36), we relied mainly on in-depth interviews with 45 owner-managers, as they represent knowledgeable informants for our research question. Owner-managers are the key decision-makers in SMEs and thus "have extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes" (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019, p. 1293). Purposeful sampling was used to select participants in line with the criteria detailed below. The target respondents were the owner-managers of internationalized SMEs from the UK that have been internationally active for over three years. By setting a minimum of three years as a threshold for the international activity of the SME, we ensured that sufficient continuity of international operations existed to allow the owner-managers to be aware of their foreign stakeholders and their needs as well as to design and implement CSR practices to address such needs. Since international CSR and international stakeholder management apply to international firms across the board (Chan & Ma, 2016; Pisani et al., 2017; Zhou & Wang, 2020), we included SMEs of different sizes and from different industries, which engage in diverse equity and non-equity foreign market entry modes worldwide. The profile of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample profile

No.	Activity	Position[a]	Size (employees)[b]	Zones Served[c]	Foreign Market Entry Modes
1	Manufacture[d] of wood and ceramic products	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import
2	Architectural and engineering activities	Managing Director	Small	1	Export, Import
3	Paper and paper products	Managing Director	Micro	1	Export, Import
4	Business support activities	Managing Director	Micro	5	Export, Import
5	Manufacture of rubber and plastic products	Managing Director	Small	4	Export, Import
6	Manufacture of electronic products	CEO	Medium	4	Export, Import, Subsidiary, License
7	Manufacture of musical instruments	Managing Director	Medium	3	Export, Import
8	Telecommunications	Managing Director	Micro	5	Export, Import
9	Manufacture of food products	Managing Director	Medium	6	Export, Import, Subsidiary
10	Manufacture of plastic products	CEO	Small	6	Export, Import
11	Creative arts and entertaining activities	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import, Subsidiary
12	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	CEO	Small	3	Export, Import, Subsidiary, License
13	Manufacture of electrical products	Managing Director	Micro	4	Export, Import
14	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	Chief Executive	Medium	5	Export, Import
15	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
16	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	Managing Director	Small	2	Export, Import
17	Printing and reproduction of recorded media	Managing Director	Medium	1	Export, Import
18	Software engineering	Managing Director	Micro	4	Export, Import, Subsidiary

No.	Activity	Position[a]	Size (employees)[b]	Zones Served[c]	Foreign Market Entry Modes
19	Reconditioning and maintenance of transport vehicles	Managing Director	Micro	4	Export, Import
20	Manufacture of metal products	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import
21	Manufacture of aircraft interiors	Director	Medium	3	Export, Import, Subsidiary
22	Sport activities, amusement, and recreation	Managing Director	Micro	4	Export, Import
23	Pipelining supplier, manufacture, and installer	Managing Director	Micro	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
24	Manufacture of electronic products	Managing Director	Small	6	Export, Import
25	Consultancy activities	CEO	Medium	2	Export, Import
26	Manufacture of electronic products	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
27	Architecture and engineering activities	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
28	Architecture and engineering activities	Managing Director	Micro	3	Export, Import, Joint Venture
29	Specialized construction activities	Managing Director	Medium	4	Export, Import, Subsidiary
30	Architecture and engineering activities	Managing Director	Small	2	Export, Import
30	Employment activities	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
31	Manufacture of fabricated metal products	Director	Small	2	Export, Import, Subsidiary, License
32	Manufacture of plastic products	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import
33	Repair and installation of machinery and equipment	Managing Director	Small	6	Export, Import
34	Manufacture of products for engineering education	Sale and Marketing Director	Medium	6	Export, Import
35	Manufacture of furniture	Managing Director	Small	2	Export, Import
36	Manufacture of electronic products	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import
37	Employment activities	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import, Subsidiary
38	Publishing activities	Managing Director	Small	4	Export
39	Manufacture of fabricated metal products	Managing Director	Small	5	Export, Import
40	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	Managing Director	Medium	4	Export, Import, Joint Venture
41	Manufacture of electronic products	Managing Director	Micro	4	Export, Import, Subsidiary
42	Manufacture of plastic products	Financial Director	Medium	4	Export, Import
43	Retailer of audio materials	Managing Director	Small	3	Export, Import, Subsidiary
44	Manufacture of beverages	Managing Director	Medium	4	Export, Import
45	Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products	Managing Director	Small	4	Export, Import

[a]While decision-makers in SMEs are typically also their owners/founders, the formal position of the interviewee is presented in this table.

[b]For SMEs, we follow the definition provided by the European Commission (2003), particularly in terms of the number of employees (>9 micro, 10–49 small, 50–249 medium).

[c]The foreign zones served are Europe, North America, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Australia.

[d]Most manufacturing firms also design and supply their products.

The FAME (Financial Analysis Made Easy) database, which contains information for UK and Irish firms, was used to initially identify potential candidates for this study. We used the SME definition provided by the European Commission (2003), also adopted in the UK, and chose the SMEs in order to be compliant with the number of employees criterion. The websites of the companies were then consulted to ensure that the firms were compliant with the SME definition and the internationalization criterion. In terms of CSR engagement, we did not have an a priori understanding regarding whether and to what extent the SMEs engaged in international CSR. However, we note that CSR has increasingly become a key feature of international business (Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011; Pisani et al., 2017) and that internationalized firms engage at least in mandatory CSR in order to be able to trade their goods and services internationally. We employed the data saturation criterion to decide when to stop collecting data (Saunders et al., 2018). Specifically, in line with Bowen (2008) and Grady (1998, p. 26), "When the researcher begins to hear the same comments again and again, data saturation is being reached." Data collection took place between April and December 2019. The final sample includes 45 owner-managers who run diverse, internationalized SMEs. Similar to Stoian et al. (2018), we chose a semi-structured interview protocol, which focused on the managerial perceptions and practices of international CSR. Open-ended questions allowed interviewees to elaborate on their interpretation of international CSR. Interviewees were also encouraged to provide real-life examples from their own experience. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews, which lasted between 40 and 90 min. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Next, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. In line with typical ethics procedures for qualitative research, to maintain the anonymity of the respondents and their firms, data were anonymized before analysis, and code names were given to the participating managers (M1, M2, M3, and so on).

We followed quality criteria procedures suitable for interpretive research (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). For example, multiple secondary data sources were collected to triangulate the interview data in an effort to illuminate the phenomenon under study, and different voices and perspectives were considered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gehman et al., 2018). Specifically, the empirical data were triangulated with materials made available by the interviewees, archival data, company websites, and publicly available social media data (Shepherd et al., 2020). Furthermore, we ensured credibility through multivocality by permitting the voices of the SME managers to be heard. We also pursued transferability by the use of thick description. We embedded our analysis both in the context (of international CSR-related practices in internationalized SMEs) as well as in the cognition, sensemaking, and actions of the participants (Welch & Piekkari, 2017).

Data analysis

A full dataset containing the 45 interviews as well as data collected from other sources was compiled before conducting the analysis. NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, was instrumental for data management and coding. It helped increase the efficiency and robustness of the data analysis. We followed Gioia et al. (2013) for coding the data. First, we read through the transcripts a few times to become well-acquainted with the entire dataset. In vivo style codes were developed in this step. We assigned codes to sections of the text when we identified a certain phenomenon in the transcripts. We read through the pages of text several times to stimulate theorizing and to avoid confirmation bias. To compare and contrast data across informants, we employed comparative methods (Glaser, 1978, 2002). In this way, we identified 18 first-order codes: cost decrease, efficiency increase, improved international customers' attitude toward the firm, international sales growth, adoption of international standards beyond compliance, ensuring international supply chain partners adhere to international standards, moral duty, doing no harm, fair treatment of international stakeholders, care about respecting principles, harmonious and sustainable development internationally together with international stakeholders, knowledge sharing with international peers and customers, work-life balance improvement for international employees, quality of life enhancement for the international communities where they are embedded, respecting the environment in foreign countries, recycling and reuse of materials and products related to exporting, innovation in products and processes in line with environmental considerations, and stimulating international peers and supply chain partners to drive and adopt environmentally friendly innovations. The next step of our analysis involved conducting axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We proceeded to aggregate the first-order codes into more abstract second-order concepts in an attempt to link the initial categories with the existing literature and theory. In line with Gioia (2021), in this step, we sought explanatory themes/concepts that could offer a deeper understanding of managers' experiences. Thus, we generated nine second-order themes, namely, cost saving, improved international results, international standards, good international citizenship, fairness and principles, helping international partners succeed, socially driven change internationally, environmental preservation, and environmentally driven change internationally. In a final step, we further collapsed the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (Clark et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2013). The final result of this iterative process was five overarching dimensions, which we named: international CSR understood as a promoter of economic orientation internationally, international standards orientation, ethical orientation internationally, social orientation internationally, and environmental orientation internationally. A summary of our coding strategy is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding structure

First-order codes	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Cost decrease	Cost saving	Economic orientation internationally
Efficiency increase		
Improved international customers' attitude toward the firm	Improved international results	
International sales growth		
Adoption of international standards beyond compliance	International standards	International standards orientation
Ensuring international supply chain partners adhere to international standards		
Moral duty	Good international citizenship	Ethical orientation internationally
Doing no harm		
Fair treatment of international stakeholders	Fairness and principles	
Care about respecting principles		
Harmonious and sustainable development internationally together with international stakeholders	Helping international partners succeed	Social orientation internationally
Knowledge sharing with international peers and customers		
Work-life balance improvement for international employees	Socially driven change internationally	
Quality of life enhancement for the international communities where they are embedded		
Respecting the environment in foreign countries	Environmental preservation	Environmental orientation internationally
Recycling and reuse of materials and products related to exporting		
Innovation in products and processes in line with environmental considerations	Environmentally driven change internationally	
Stimulating international peers and supply chain partners to drive and adopt environmentally friendly innovations		

Table 3 displays representative quotations that provide empirical evidence for our coding strategy.

Table 3. Representative quotations for the coding frame

Dimension	Theme	Representative quotations
Economic orientation internationally	Cost saving	"It is nice to save carbon; that's what we all must be doing, but the main driver in the industry is to save money. … The real reason for us doing that work is to save money." (M4)
		"At a certain cost, below £100,000 a year, by spending £30,000 or £40,000 to put in a capacitator, we are gaining increased electric energy efficiency, which is good for the environment … within 18 months you've actually got that pay-back … big or small, there is always a financial gain." (M17)
	Improved international results	"We are very much aware of the environmental opportunity in corporate responsibility and in terms of innovation. … All our footwear doesn't contain any animal products in its chemistry. That's a very good position to be in as far as environmental products are concerned." (M16)
		"Some of the products that we make are very energy efficient, and one of the reasons that they're popular and they sell is because they enable the end users to use new energy labels on their products." (M6)
	International standards	"We have ISO14001. With that in mind, we've obviously taken a lot of measures internally to protect the environment." (M35)

Dimension	Theme	Representative quotations
International standards orientation	Good international citizenship	“We’re only a small company. We spend in the region of £30,000 a year on compliance and toy safety standards. The European Union standards are changing this year and we will have to retest all our products.” (M10)
		“We don’t put anything in the walls that would have any adverse effect, that would cause deterioration.” (M27)
		“We set up a small group of six employees who are tasked with identifying how we can become more environmentally friendly. … We have identified and we have saved a lot.” (M34)
Ethical orientation internationally	Fairness and principles	“We’re interested in animal welfare and people welfare too. … As a matter of principle, we will only work with certain chemicals.” (M12)
		“What would your children think about this? When they go to school and hear about the environment and when they learn about chemicals and how much it costs to produce them and how bad they can be, and what about losing water? [What will you say] when they come home and say to you: ‘Should we be doing something about this? What are we doing for the future?’” (M5)
Social orientation internationally	Helping international partners succeed	“We want to make sure that all the distributors know how other companies are finding it successful to sell the products so that they can take the best of what everybody else is doing and apply it to their market. Roll that out across those 23 different territories. … We find that those longer-term, sustainable relationships are built where we interact with that distributor at all levels from direct service and accounts to technical.” (M32)
		“I think, particularly as you sell internationally, you’ve got to put the effort into assuring the customer that no matter what happens, you’ll back the creditor not just in the immediate post-sell period but in a year’s time, in two years’ time, in three years’ time. They need to be sure that you are going to be around. … For high technology, they have to be sure that you are going to back your product up and train people to get the best out of it.” (M24)
	Drive social change internationally	[Support aimed at driving social change and helping local communities where they have operations] “We do manage to support specific local charities say within Tanzania or other African countries. … At the moment, we have a lot of local staff working for us in Tanzania, 30 or 40 people.” (M37)
		“Business is not for profit: business is not to make the shareholders wealthy; it is to support the stakeholders and the community in which they work.” (M9)
Environmental orientation internationally	Environmental preservation	“We have a guy who goes in a boat to Ireland to collect trees that have been washed up on the beach. He cuts the trees up into the way we like, and we make them into soundboards.” (M7)
		“In our market, the budget can change quite significantly, and so a US university might have a lot more money to spend than for example a Kenyan university. So one thing we are looking at doing is a trade-in solution that we can buy back or exchange old equipment for new one. Then we can use that to generate a reconditioned market for example in Kenya where perhaps their budgets don’t stretch far enough. The intention there is that we can do recycling and make sure that the product is not just put in the bin.” (M34)
	Environmentally driven change internationally	[We provide] “an environmentally friendly product because it’s about either stopping a water leak, which is wasting water or monitoring your usage of water, which again saves water.” (M23)
		“The challenge for our industry, which is something we want to lead on, is finding the next generation of solutions using bioplastics or organic polymers. … so that we can be the first or one of the first companies to bring to the market the renewable solution rather than the single-use plastic solution.” (M32)

Once the coding process was completed, we noted that while some overlaps may exist, the 45 SME managers studied can be classified into four main conceptualizations. Specifically, 13 managers mainly adopt an economic orientation internationally; nine managers are particularly preoccupied with international standards and ethics and to some extent show an environmental orientation internationally; 10 managers mainly embrace a social orientation internationally, but also show concern for environmental preservation; and 13 managers understand CSR as social and environmental orientation internationally, being particularly keen to drive positive change. We named these groups: (1) international performance, (2) international distinctiveness through international standards adoption and ethical behavior, (3) successful international collaboration, and (4) change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. It is important to note here that while three of the groups prioritize social, ethical, and/or environmental orientations, they also keep in mind the economic dimension. In addition, while certain orientations prevail in each understanding, elements of each orientation could be found to a certain extent in the conceptualizations.

Next, to enhance multivocality (Alvesson et al., 2008), following Alvesson (2003), we considered these four conceptualizations in terms of the eight metaphors typical for a reflexive approach. Reflexivity encourages working with the empirical data in a flexible way, remaining open to embracing distinct theoretical underpinnings, and listening to the alternative voices of research subjects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). As Alvesson (2003) recommended, we discuss our data in terms of four quotations presented in Table 4, which are representative of the four understandings.

Table 4. Representative quotations for the four understandings

Understandings	Representative quotations
International performance	"Big or small, there is always a financial gain. There might be an upfront cost to doing something for the environment that's needed; maybe you're going to reduce the chemicals used in the printing making process and you're going to take that down to a very low percentage, but in order to do that, you have to invest in some skills, and you might have to do a little bit of investment in that bit of technology. But it doesn't take more than a year or two years for that new technology to be delivering." (M17)
International distinctiveness	"The first use of that pulp, it shouldn't be coming from deforested land, it should be coming from sustainably managed forests. It should come without chlorine bleaching, it should come from areas of the world which are not using child labor, it should come from areas which are not on a disputed land. … When we find opportunities with new suppliers, whether that be in Europe or South America, or the Far East, we ask them various questions. … Do they have ISO certification? Do they have BRC certification? Do they have FSC and PESC and SFI? So these are all certifications which will prove to us that they have a stamp of analysis from the relevant authority, which says they are a responsible producer of a material we're interested in. And that, for us, then gives us the green light to go forward with our commercial and technical discussions." (M3)
Successful international collaboration	[About international distributors] "We want to make our partners successful, and everything we do, as far as we can, has to be legal, and it has to be commercially viable, but everything we do within those parameters is about making our partners successful; … that's our driver … to make our partners successful, and then our success follows from that, so we don't take a view that we want to be successful and hope our partners are, too. Our attitude is very much about making the partners successful." (M34)

Understandings	Representative quotations
Change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization	"The challenge for our industry, which is something we want to lead on … is finding the next generation of solutions using bioplastics or organic polymers. … We'll do our best and lead on it, but we want everybody in our supply chain to challenge themselves about what they're doing and see if they can equally drive innovations and solutions." (M32)

Note. BRC = British Retail Consortium; FSC = Forest Stewardship Council; PESC = Provider Enrolment Specialist Certificate; SFI = Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

The first metaphor, local accomplishment, refers to the interview and its context. Following this metaphor, the four statements can be understood as expressing the "truth" about the international CSR practices of the SME as well as the values and beliefs of the interviewees. They can also be understood as linked to their particular contexts: an interview with business school academic staff for research purposes. The second metaphor, establishment and perpetuation of a storyline, discloses that the four groups of interviewees, while providing substantially different answers as far as their meaning is concerned, may assume these types of statements as suitable for the research project conducted by the interviewer. Identity work, the third metaphor, reveals that the interviewees, who are the top managers of their respective SMEs, perceive themselves as embodying distinct aspects of CSR as follows: financial, standards/ethical, collaborative, and change/sustainability aspects. The fourth metaphor, cultural script application, shows that the managers follow their respective scripts when talking. According to the first manager, representative of the first group, international environmental CSR can be conducted by their company, as it leads to cost savings and, ultimately, to financial gains. The second manager underlines that international standards and ethics are key for international operations. The third manager highlights the importance of supporting and ensuring the well-being of international partners. The fourth manager stresses the relevance of accepting challenges in order to innovate and drive positive change and sustainability internationally. Moral storytelling, the fifth metaphor, shows that the interviewees' statements make a positive impression, albeit in different ways. The first manager argues that environmentally friendly practices support financial performance. The second manager promotes international standards and ethics. The third manager prioritizes the well-being and welfare of international stakeholders, while the fourth manager advocates positive change and sustainability. The sixth metaphor, political action, discloses that the position of the interviewees is politically correct and legitimate. Construction work, the seventh metaphor, reveals that the interviewees construe international CSR differently. The first manager perceives CSR as a vehicle for cost reduction, which ultimately leads to enhanced international performance. The second manager interprets international CSR as a driver of the adoption of international standards and ethical behavior internationally, which, in turn, enhances international reputation and credibility. The third manager understands international CSR as a means to support international stakeholders and enhance joint collaboration. The fourth manager considers international CSR as an engine for positive change, sustainability, and empowerment. The eighth metaphor, play of the power of discourse on CSR and its benefits for society, stakeholders, and the firm, is clearly illustrated by the statements of the four managers. Here again, marked differences exist between their interpretations.

Findings

Our analysis identified four qualitatively distinct understandings of international CSR, which entail different ways of practicing CSR. While a degree of overlap exists between these perceptions, they are rooted in different motivations and interpretations of the role of businesses in society. Tensions emerge among the four understandings.

International performance

Managers who adhere to this understanding perceive international CSR as vital for international performance, mainly considering its economic dimension. As revealed by our interviews, these are individuals who are motivated by fast international growth and product diversification. They perceive that CSR enhances financial performance (Choi & Wang, 2009; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019) by facilitating access to foreign customers and by saving costs. They practice international CSR by addressing international customers who are considered essential for international sales.

Cost considerations are crucial for this group. Managers are aware of possible cost savings resulting from integrating CSR concerns in their production and business operations (Høivik & Shankar, 2011; Kesidou & Demirel, 2012; Stout, 2012; Walker et al., 2019), particularly in relation to the environment:

> The environment is a really easy thing to invest in, in my book, because it always results in a cost saving, always. (M17)

Consistent with Brammer et al. (2012), this group perceives strategic intent as the prime driver of environmentally friendly practices. These managers typically understand value creation in economic terms, linked to international customers. Hence, they strive to deliver products/services to the best of their ability to these customers:

> At first, people think you're just there to try and make money out of them but our best relationships, our best clients are the ones where we get them to realize that we're added value to them. … We just say to them, 'We can take all the headache off you doing that, and you get to add us to your package, and you can make money on it.' So you're value added to them rather than a cost, and that's how we developed. (M29)

To some extent, this group frames relationships with international customers as market pricing where cost-benefit ratios are frequently computed (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2016). Yet, while their relationships may be mainly transactional, in practice, managers show care for their international customers. As such, they commonly maintain close relationships with international customers, at least with the most important ones:

> With [our main international customer] we have a three-weekly conference call where we discuss ongoing issues, things that are changing, things that are improving, work that's coming

> in, work that's planned, so we talk to them every three weeks. … We try and listen to our customers all the time and if they want changes that they think will help them. (M39)

In sum, this group has a business case approach to international CSR. These managers understand CSR as an opportunity to decrease costs and achieve enhanced international results. As a result of such perceptions as well as resource limitations, this group adheres only to CSR beyond compliance if benefits to the firm are evident. Commonly, they address only one group of international stakeholders: international customers. To boost international sales and economic value creation, managers adopt a personalized approach to international customer relationships.

International distinctiveness through international standards adoption and ethical behavior

Managers in this group understand international CSR as critical for the distinctiveness of the SME in international markets. Their approach to international CSR generally entails adopting international standards beyond compliance and behaving ethically in relation to international stakeholders. These managers are generally motivated by a sense of duty which makes them ensure their activity causes no harm (Crilly et al., 2016); thus, they not only offer high standards of health and safety and environmental protection (Yin & Jamali, 2016), but also create an ethical and responsible reputation for their firm (Lin-Hi & Blumberg, 2018; Panwar et al., 2017). They take pride in exceeding compliance in their CSR practices and voluntarily engage in environmentally responsible practices (Tatoglu et al., 2020) as much as their resource endowment allows (Brammer et al., 2012; Soundararajan et al., 2018).

Exceeding compliance is frequently embedded in the business-values of the managers in this group (Fassin et al., 2011; Uecker-Mercado & Walker, 2012):

> As a matter of principle, we will only work with certain chemicals [we will not use some specific chemicals] because they are poisonous, both to aquatic [life] and to people. Some of our competitors do use that. … But we don't use that as a matter of principle. … Whether there's legislation or not. (M12)

However, they are aware that voluntary engagement in ethical practices and adhering to international standards allows their firm to achieve differentiation internationally and to alleviate possible liabilities of foreignness (Zaheer, 1995):

> We try to exceed the regulations because that's what makes us different. International standards that apply to us … are ISO 9001, which is a quality standard, ISO 14001, which is the environmental standard, and ISO 18001, which is the health and safety standard. We've got all those three. We've also got what we call an IPPC license. This is issued by the Environment Agency for any companies that have more than 30,000 liters of toxic solutions on site. (M40)

Consistent with prior international CSR research (Gifford et al., 2010; Panwar et al., 2017; Pisani et al., 2017), practicing CSR allows SMEs run by managers in this group to gain reputation/credibility on international markets while they benefit their customers:

> We make a really good quality product that saves energy, that saves chemicals, that saves water, and at the same time, lasts for a long time as well. (M5)

Overall, managers in this group generally understand international CSR as a duty of the firm to be a good international citizen as well as to motivate international supply chain partners to do the same. They take pride in voluntarily adhering to the highest international standards and acting in alignment with their moral principles. At the same time, they are cognizant that such an attitude can increase their credibility and reputation internationally. While their international CSR initiatives benefit primary as well as secondary stakeholders, such as international suppliers and customers as well as society at large and international communities, respectively, their international CSR activities are mainly restricted to adhering to health and safety, environmental, and industry-specific international standards as well as respecting their ethical principles.

Successful international collaboration

For this group, CSR means successful international collaboration. They perceive international CSR to enable not only economic but also social and sometimes environmental performance (Arora & De, 2020; Muller & Kolk, 2010; Tang & Tang, 2012) for their international stakeholders as well as their firm. These managers understand the role of businesses in society to exceed mere economic value creation. They perceive CSR as a vehicle for creating social welfare while the success of their stakeholders and their own is, according to them, deeply entwined (Freeman et al., 2020; Maak et al., 2016; Porter & Kramer, 2011). In practice, these managers are particularly preoccupied with the welfare of international primary stakeholders, especially their international business partners, with whom they work closely and establish durable bonds (Darnall et al., 2010). They show perseverance, patience, and deep understanding of foreign cultures in addressing the needs of international business partners.

From the onset, managers of this understanding deem it important to build durable relationships where trust and synergies can flourish and success can be achieved by all the parties involved (Freeman et al., 2020; Tantalo & Priem, 2016):

> Commitment to relationships, that is something that has been very important; a commitment to good relationships at every level should be inside the business and outside the business. To make relationships and win-win scenarios in business as much as possible, that's the priority. (M7)

Managerial discourse substantiates Freeman et al.'s (2020) and Bridoux and Stoelhorst's (2016) views that economic and social values should be considered jointly as complementary to one another. Furthermore, these managers perceive that investment in stakeholders' well-being is likely to benefit both the stakeholders and the firm in the long run. Therefore, they invest in joint development:

> Every two years, we have an agent conference where we invite all of our partners from around the world to come, and we host them for three days. … We encourage them to interact with each other so that they can share experiences and learn from each other. (M34)

This group develops and maintains intimate, personalized relationships (McVea & Freeman, 2005) with their international value chain stakeholders (Darnall et al., 2010), which allow them to tailor-make their initiatives to address the specific requirements of each international stakeholder:

> [In Taiwan they were asked] 'Would you be willing to do a core brand with my company?' His company produced 99.9% pure gold flakes. What they wanted to do was to put gold into whisky because they said that it helps to smooth the whisky. If you go to China, they have some of their beliefs about using gold in medicine and stuff like that are a bit different perhaps to our views, but it's very strong. So, we said, well it's not something that we would do in Europe. We can do something if it's only for Taiwan. (M44)

Overall, while managers in this group prioritize the social dimension of international CSR, they also consider its environmental (and economic) dimensions and place particular emphasis on international primary value chain stakeholders. However, their small size prevents many of these SMEs from addressing international secondary stakeholders. Given their foreign culture knowledge and close relationship with international business partners, these managers can address the individual requirements of the most relevant international stakeholders in key foreign markets.

Change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization

Managers in this group understand international CSR as a springboard for change, which allows SMEs to bring positive transformations to society and the environment internationally. They show sustained initiatives and commitment to tackling environmental and societal change (Sulkowski et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2016). Similar to the previous group, they espouse a dual or triple bottom line approach. However, these managers are motivated by initiatives for the betterment of society and environmental preservation, and they aim to be the force behind these changes. The managerial worldview corroborates prior theoretical notions put forward by Porter and Kramer (2011) who suggest that contributing to the well-being of stakeholders ultimately drives the betterment of society. When practicing international CSR, these managers encourage/require their international stakeholders to implement work-related changes that enhance their work-life balance and to adopt innovations that can lead to social and environmental change, thus benefiting society at large.

For instance, managers in this group understand that implementing a flexible work schedule and providing the necessary facilities for childcare enhance the work-life balance of employees and contribute to the well-being of future generations. In practice, this translates into designing and implementing CSR practices that address their international employees:

> [In] West Africa, we have a crèche which is not actually used as a crèche; it is used for nursing mothers. We also encourage them to disappear for part of the day if they need to [for childcare]. [This is] born out of a genuine need which is not necessarily recognized by regulations. (M9)

Environmental and economic considerations are perceived to go hand-in-hand. Managers of this understanding proactively adopt environmental concerns in production and business operations (Rueda-Manzanares et al., 2008; Torugsa et al., 2013) and champion environmentally friendly products. Thus, this group promotes change that is expected to benefit people and the environment in the medium to long-term:

> We'll do our best and lead on it [finding the next generation of solutions], but we want everybody in our supply chain to challenge themselves about what they're doing and see if they can equally drive innovations and solutions. (M32)

Consensus exists among managers in this group in that their environmental standards and principles must be shared by their international supply chain partners.

To some extent, our analysis corroborates prior findings from the CSR literature (Arora & De, 2020; Chan & Ma, 2016) in that environmentally friendly products also appear to promote international involvement and success:

> The start of our export was environmentally driven; we produced, and we still do, the market leader in printmaking inks. It's called caligo. … The beauty of the caligo range is you still print with the clarity of an oil-based ink, but at the end of the day, you use washing up liquid, and so it protects hands. We got a number of environmental awards for that in the 1990s. (M45)

In sum, this group shows a rather holistic approach to international CSR. These managers consider multiple CSR dimensions internationally, and both international primary and secondary stakeholders (international suppliers, international customers, international employees as well as international communities) are addressed. Nevertheless, this group focuses mainly on bringing positive environmental and social change internationally, while less attention is paid to other CSR concerns. This conceptualization, similar to the others, espouses personalized international stakeholder relationships and emphasizes creating synergies and joint value creation.

Table 5 presents a summary of our analysis, and Figure 1 graphically illustrates our findings corresponding to the managerial understandings.

Figure 1. Graphical illustration of the main characteristics of the understandings

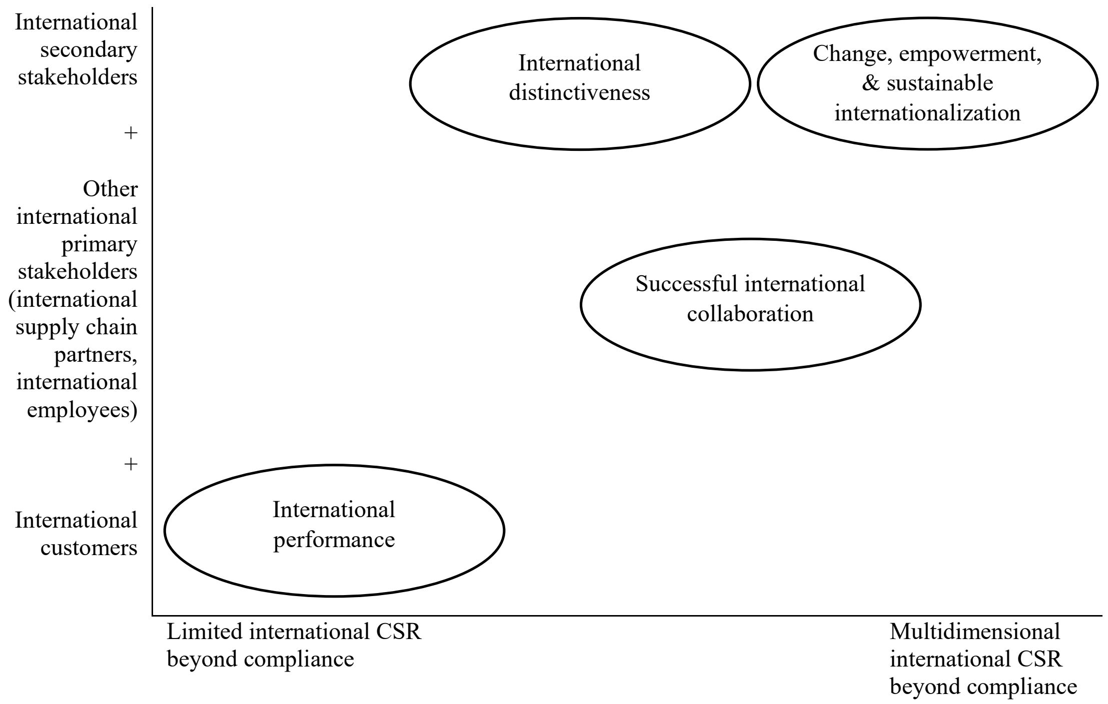

Table 5. Characteristics of the four understandings

Understanding of international CSR	International performance	International distinctiveness	Successful international collaboration	Change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization
Perceive international CSR as a vehicle for:	Profit and growth	International positioning	Win-win collaborations	Positive change and sustainability
Practice international CSR:				
Main focus	Economic dimension	Standards, ethical, and environmental dimensions	Social and, sometimes, environmental dimensions	Social and environmental dimensions
Type of CSR	Compliant mainly	Voluntary (and compliant)	Voluntary (and compliant)	Voluntary (and compliant)
Stakeholder addressed	International customers	International customers and suppliers (indirectly society at large and surrounding communities)	International customers, suppliers, agents/distributors, and other business partners	All or most relevant international stakeholders including society at large
Stakeholder interaction	Instrumental, product/sales-related, personalized	Interactive, international standards – and ethics-related, personalized	All encompassing, at multiple levels; intimate and personalized	Focused on driving change and meeting the needs of stakeholders in a sustainable manner, personalized

Discussion

Understanding how managers perceive and practice international CSR is key to firms' international activity. Our analysis revealed that managers substantiate four distinct understandings of international CSR which entail different ways of practicing CSR: international performance, international distinctiveness, successful international collaboration, and change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. These understandings reflect their worldviews and perceptions of the role of businesses in society. They directly affect the way in which their SMEs engage in international CSR. Before discussing in detail these four understandings, we remark that the way in which they practice international CSR is, in part, a consequence of their perceptions, but is also frequently limited by the lack of time and financial resources, which is typical for SMEs.

Similarities, but also marked differences exist between managerial interpretations. Managers who understand business as a vehicle for economic growth (international performance) and perceive that CSR initiatives translate into increased financial performance (Choi & Wang, 2009; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019; Nejati et al., 2017) prioritize the economic dimension of CSR and adopt an economic cost-benefit logic (Maak et al., 2016). Social and environmental standards or ethical concerns beyond compliance are addressed only if they are perceived to enhance economic results. Conversely, the group that perceives international CSR as a driver of international distinctiveness is proud and eager to engage in voluntary CSR related to ethical considerations and international standards. This is, in part, due to a sense of duty, since managers in this group want to ensure they cause no harm (Crilly et al., 2016) and demonstrate genuine care toward their stakeholders (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Grayson, 2006), but it is also because it can enhance the reputation and credibility of the firm (Lin-Hi & Blumberg, 2018; Panwar et al., 2017) internationally. Consequently, besides economic value creation, they often focus on the environmental CSR dimension (Yang et al., 2019; Sharma, 2000) to the extent that their limited resources allow it. Managers who understand businesses as promoters of welfare for society (successful international collaboration) adopt a dual or triple bottom line approach to international CSR and focus on creating shared value which extends beyond economic purposes with international stakeholders. As opposed to the performance-centric understanding, these managers have a more comprehensive, more long-term view of international CSR. By applying a prosocial cost-benefit logic (Maak et al., 2016), they can naturally incorporate environmentally friendly concerns in their relationship with international stakeholders such as international partners, customers, and suppliers. Their understanding aligns well with the tenets of the CSR literature and stakeholder theory (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Maak et al., 2016; Tantalo & Priem, 2016), since these managers advocate for addressing the social and environmental concerns of international stakeholders, thus ultimately enhancing shared value creation. Similarly, managers who understand CSR as a catalyst for change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization focus on the social and/or environmental dimensions in addition to the economic one. Nevertheless, their focus is on impactful change (Barnett et al., 2020). They understand business as an engine for transformation and are committed to drive and diffuse positive social and environmental change across their stakeholders and society at large (Sulkowski et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2016). However, in more pragmatic terms, they also perceive international CSR to empower SMEs (and their international stakeholders) to make their voices heard in the international arena.

Juxtaposing our findings with the definition of CSR adopted in this study, we note that while some of the understandings encompass multiple CSR dimensions and/or multiple groups of international stakeholders, none cover all the aspects put forward by this definition. Specifically, managers who perceive CSR as a driver of international performance typically consider the economic benefits brought by international CSR and address solely international customers. Managers who substantiate the other three understandings, while they are cognizant of the economic benefits CSR practices may bring, focus mainly on other dimensions. The group that prioritizes international standards and ethics addresses both international primary and secondary stakeholders. Conversely, the third group focuses mainly on social and occasionally environmental concerns and commonly addresses international primary stakeholders, such as international business partners and customers. Although managers who substantiate the second and third understandings mention environmental concerns, their international CSR practices mainly relate to preserving the environment and recycling or repurposing products sold to international customers. Partially due to their specific sectors, but also as a result of resource constraints, only limited attention is paid to engaging in eco-innovation (Tsai & Liao, 2017; Pujari, 2006). The understanding that comes closest to embracing a holistic approach to CSR is the one focused on change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. This group has a truly multidimensional approach to CSR generally considering its social, environmental, economic, and standard/ethical dimensions and addressing both international primary and some international secondary stakeholders, such as international communities where they operate. However, managers in this group also recognize certain limitations to their approach, which could be alleviated by an even closer collaboration with international value chain stakeholders (Darnall et al., 2010).

Going back to the definition of CSR adopted here, we remark that none of the understandings explicitly considers human rights considerations internationally (Obara & Peattie, 2018; Wettstein, 2012). However, before moving forward, we note that a few of the managers did mention that, by default, they offer equal opportunities regardless of gender and race and that they do not condone child labor or modern slavery internationally. A possible explanation for not explicitly embracing the international human rights CSR dimension could be that some of the SMEs are solely exporters, producing in the UK and selling their goods and services abroad. Thus, they would not deal directly with human rights issues internationally. Another explanation could be that managers adopt the same approach to human rights (for example, equal employment opportunities and treatment; no child labor or modern slavery), as they do in the domestic market. Therefore, they take such practices as the default rather than considering them as specific international CSR activities. Furthermore, managers in none of the four groups appear to prioritize a broad range of international secondary stakeholders. In particular, stakeholders such as international regulators and NGOs (Darnall et al., 2010; Freeman, 1984; Henriques & Sadorsky, 1999) are rarely mentioned by the managers interviewed. It could be inferred that unlike MNEs, which are under increased scrutiny from both host governments and NGOs who expect them to act as good corporate citizens (Husted & Allen, 2006; Vachani et al., 2009; Yang & Rivers, 2009), the SMEs considered in this study, given the limited size of their international activity, are less scrutinized. Thus, their managers do not deem it particularly important to prioritize such international stakeholders and instead prefer to allocate their scarce resources to addressing key international stakeholders, such as international value chain partners.

Unlike most of the studies conducted on CSR in SMEs, we found that managers perceive CSR as stakeholder engagement and that their understanding includes unique combinations of altruistic, business case, and sustainable development considerations. While a personalized approach to international stakeholders is embraced by the managers interviewed, most managers perceive the social and environmental dimensions to be essential for their activity and understand CSR as an engine to diffuse environmental and health and safety standards as well as to spread well-being and positive change. While such initiatives are rooted in genuine care for stakeholders (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Grayson, 2006) and a desire to drive positive change (Sulkowski et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2016), pragmatically, they also perceive certain intangible benefits, such as enhancing the firm's reputation, credibility, and empowerment. The voluntary engagement in CSR practices allows SME managers to champion internationalization, drive innovation in their niche industries, promote the introduction of social changes and environmentally friendly products as well as set the rules of the game in interaction with international partners. In alignment with prior CSR literature (De Colle et al., 2014; Rathert, 2016), by promoting international norms and standards, SME managers can fill in gaps in international regulations and can guide the establishment of a sustainable international supply chain. However, the ability of most SMEs, from all four groups, to practice international CSR is limited by their inherent resource paucity. Consequently, while managers often voluntarily engage in international CSR, they tend to focus their efforts on one/few group(s) of stakeholders, on specific dimensions of CSR, or on a few key foreign markets. While similar to other studies (Belas et al., 2022; Yin & Jamali, 2016), we identified different perceptions among the groups, we note that the size of the firm does not have a clear bearing on managers' understanding and way of practicing international CSR. Although many of the SMEs and particularly those smaller in size and in production-related sectors highlight the resource limitations as a barrier for further deepening their engagement in international CSR, their current conceptualization of CSR and way of engaging international stakeholders does not seem to be significantly different from that of managers in the larger SMEs considered.

Regardless of their understanding of international CSR, most of the managers interviewed consider establishing and maintaining personalized relationships with their stakeholders essential for successfully addressing these stakeholders and enhancing joint value creation (Freeman et al., 2020; McVea & Freeman, 2005) in economic, social, environmental, and ethical terms. Drawing on Darnall et al. (2010), we note that, indeed, SMEs generally have close relationships with their international value chain stakeholders. This is, in part, due to the informality and flexibility of SMEs, but is also a result of a proactive effort to maintain sustainable business relations and enhance value creation. Furthermore, building on Tantalo and Priem (2016), our analysis shows that some managers who subscribe to the international distinctiveness, the successful international collaboration, or the change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization understandings, perceive they can increase shared value creation and ensure its future proliferation by creating synergies and joint development across their stakeholders. Thus, they adopt a hub role, stimulating and facilitating knowledge sharing and learning together with and among their international stakeholders.

Overall, our study makes two contributions: to the nascent literature on international CSR in SMEs and to stakeholder theory. First, we extend the research on the international CSR-related practices of SMEs (Arora & De, 2020; Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2019; Chan & Ma, 2016) by providing insights into multiple international CSR dimensions, including economic, social, environmental, and ethical considerations. We reveal four qualitatively distinct understandings of international CSR, namely, CSR as a booster for international performance, as a driver of international distinctiveness, as a promoter of successful international collaboration, and as a catalyst for change, empowerment, and sustainable internationalization. We show that SME managers have nuanced understandings of international CSR, shaped by their worldviews and, to some extent, by foreign culture specificity, and they are limited by resource constraints. These understandings lead to close relationships with international stakeholders, which can include specific altruistic, business case, and sustainability-related considerations. Thus, we reveal that SME managers frequently perceive and practice international CSR for values beyond profitability (Fassin et al., 2011; Niehm et al., 2008), such as altruistic or sustainability considerations.

Second, our study adds to stakeholder theory. Specifically, we reveal that regardless of whether the SME managers considered here focus solely on economic value creation or adopt a more holistic approach to shared value creation, their manner of creating and enhancing shared value is to build and maintain personalized relationships with international stakeholders. They perceive close, trustworthy relationships as key to their international activity. We thus substantiate McVea and Freeman's (2005) "names-and-faces" approach to shared value creation, and we provide empirical evidence that confirms that SME managers build close relationships with international supply chain partners (Darnall et al., 2010) as a means to foster societal and environmentally friendly innovation and to promote sustainable joint development. The managers considered here understand and address in their practices the personal and foreign culture specificity of international stakeholders (for example, by organizing joint development programs with international business partners aimed at knowledge sharing and learning from each other's experiences, and by promoting welfare by improving the work-life balance and health of international employees and international communities), as a means to increase shared value creation and improve the durability of business collaborations. Hence, we address stakeholder theorists' calls for future research (Freeman et al., 2020; Tantalo & Priem, 2016) by providing a further explanation for what drives shared value creation (in the international SME context). We also address explicit calls for research into the relationships between smaller firms and their value chain stakeholders as expressed by Darnall et al. (2010). Furthermore, building on the work of Tantalo and Priem

(2016), we note that some managers assume a hub role in promoting synergies and sustainable shared value creation across their international stakeholders.

Practical implications

Our study has relevant managerial implications. Drawing on our analysis, many of the SMEs considered can successfully balance the economic with the social, environmental, and standards/ethical dimensions of CSR and engage in shared value creation with international stakeholders. Mindful that this will be possible only if their inherently limited resources allow it, we recommend managers to carefully consider how it would be feasible to expend beyond simple economic value creation and embrace other CSR dimensions in a harmonious way which would drive sustainable win-win collaborations and positive change internationally. Our study shows that some of the managers focus solely on international primary stakeholders, generally ignoring international secondary stakeholders. While not directly engaged in the economic transactions conducted by the SMEs, international secondary stakeholders play an important role in potentially reducing a firm's liabilities of foreignness as well as promoting innovation and sustainable internationalization. Hence, we encourage SME managers to take into account international secondary stakeholders, such as the international communities where they have activities, international regulators, and NGOs in their international CSR practices. We also encourage managers to adopt an individualized approach to stakeholder relationships to enhance the strength of the relationships and increase shared value creation. Furthermore, we advise SME managers to promote knowledge sharing and learning related to social well-being practices and environmentally friendly activities among their stakeholders. Both the SME and its international stakeholders can benefit from an increasing awareness of and familiarity with such practices.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is not without certain limitations. First, since, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to investigate international CSR in the SME context in a comprehensive way, we aimed to capture a broad picture of this phenomenon. Thus, we allowed for diversity in our sample including SMEs from different industries. However, we note that subtle differences may exist, in both perceptions and practices, across SMEs in different sectors. We recommend scholars to conduct comparative research in international CSR of manufacturing and service SMEs as well as high- and low-tech firms. Second, our study is cross-sectional, and the data collection was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage future studies to conduct longitudinal studies in the post-COVID-19 environment, since they can update and enrich our understanding of the evolution of CSR perceptions and practices over time. Third, given the qualitative nature of our study, we cannot generalize its findings beyond the research conducted here. We call for future research to adopt a quantitative research design in the study of international CSR in SMEs, allowing generalization to larger populations. Fourth, this study considered only UK SMEs. Future studies could be conducted in other geopolitical settings in developed and emerging markets. Fifth, in this study, we considered the standpoint of SME managers. Future research could contrast managerial understanding with that of international stakeholders, such as members of the international community, employees, and consumers (González-Rodríguez et al., 2015; Niehm et al., 2008; Shen & Zhang, 2019). Sixth, in this study, we developed an individual-level analysis, as it is appropriate for understanding managerial perceptions and practices. Future work could conduct individual-level studies underpinned by insights at the country level. In other words, we call for comparative studies conducted in different country settings in order to account for the influence of cultural embeddedness on managerial interpretations of international CSR. Seventh, this study revealed that although most SMEs considered and addressed multiple international stakeholders, international secondary stakeholders have been relatively ignored. We believe it would be interesting to delve deeper into this issue and investigate whether secondary stakeholders exert pressure on foreign SMEs, and if so, what is the SMEs' response? Finally, while stakeholder theory was particularly useful to explain international CSR in the SME context, our findings also reveal the importance of having a close, personalized relationship with international stakeholders. Thus, we believe it would be fruitful for future research to use network or social capital theory to complement stakeholder theory to explain the international CSR practices adopted by SMEs.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, this study represents an initial effort to investigate international CSR in the SME setting in a comprehensive way. By revealing four different understandings of international CSR among SME managers, which entail distinct CSR practices, our study contributes to the nascent literature on international CSR in SMEs. We also add to stakeholder theory by showing that SME managers perceive that creating and increasing shared value creation is contingent on building durable, individualized relationships with international stakeholders. We hope that our study will serve as a springboard for research on international CSR in SMEs.

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