

Corporate Social Responsibility in SMES: Mapping Adoption Trajectories and Thematic Evolution through Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract. *This paper offers a thorough bibliometric study of the adoption of corporate social responsibility (CSR) by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Using a combined sample from the Scopus and Web of Science databases consisting of 1,156 articles, the article examines the development of the field based on intellectual, geographical, and thematic perspectives. The findings indicate that CSR has progressed from normative and philanthropic constructs towards strategic and performance-oriented ones, which emphasize sustainability. The analysis also identifies two primary research trajectories in CSR related to SMEs: (1) incorporation of CSR within the firm's strategy and (2) the CSR–performance relationship, both of which demonstrate theoretical maturity. The thematic structure highlights the presence of a stable CSR sustainability core, a mature performance-oriented stream, and an emerging cluster dedicated to decision making and contextual factors. We contribute to the literature by highlighting these underlying tensions that influence the theoretical evolution and splintering of research. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the benefits of bibliometric mapping in providing an accessible, large scale, and transparent evidence synthesis for consumers of research, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of language bias, publication lag in citations, and data normalization. Overall, the findings provide a basis for future multi-method research that explores how SMEs institutionalize responsible and sustainable practices, using data to drive the research.*

Keywords: CSR adoption, SMEs, bibliometric analysis, sustainability, performance, thematic mapping.

Introduction

In the last twenty years, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has transitioned from being a fringe notion to becoming at the forefront of management and sustainability research, at least in respect of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Although early literature considered CSR in SMEs mainly as a moral or charitable extension of the values of the entrepreneur, undertaken through informal phenomena, rather than the formalized strategies (Jamali et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Spence, 2007). More recently, notions of CSR enactments have focused on CSR as a strategic resource associated with innovation, competitiveness, and long term survival, especially in terms of sustainability and the triple bottom line (Bansal & Song, 2017; Elkington, 1998; Hart & Dowell, 2011). In line with this shift, recent research has begun to examine the financial implications of ESG disclosure in SMEs. Momtaz & Parra (2025) find that transparent ESG reporting is positively

associated with financial performance, suggesting that sustainability disclosure may enhance investor confidence and capital access even for smaller firms. Recent empirical evidence from emerging economies further reinforces this instrumental perspective. For instance, Thanh et al. (2021) show that CSR engagement in SMEs positively influences firm performance through enhanced innovation capacity, improved operational efficiency and strengthened stakeholder trust, suggesting that responsible practices can operate as tangible strategic assets rather than symbolic commitments. Consequently, we see the literature moving along a spectrum from normative accounts of ethical responsibility and stakeholder proximity to instrumental notions about CSR as a factor of performance and competitive advantage (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Jamali & Karam, 2018).

The simultaneous evolution has resulted in a field that is both rich and fragmented. Qualitative studies suggest the micro-foundations of CSR in SMEs - Owner-manager values, informal governance, and other locally embedded stakeholder relationships (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Murillo & Lozano, 2006; Spence, 2016), and an expanding field of empirical studies examine CSR and sustainability initiatives and their relationship to environmental management systems, eco-innovation and financial performance (Cantele & Zardini, 2018; Iraldo et al., 2009; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017). The contributions identified in these studies demonstrate different theoretical lenses in the existing literature—stakeholder theory, resource-based view, institutional theory, responsibility leadership theory—that illustrate why and how SMEs adopt CSR practices (Freeman et al., 2010; Hart & Dowell, 2011; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). More recent work has explicitly linked CSR adoption in SMEs to dynamic capability development. Sarwar et al. (2023), drawing on the dynamic capabilities framework, demonstrate that CSR initiatives enhance competitiveness by fostering organizational learning, adaptability and strategic reconfiguration, thereby strengthening SMEs' long-term positioning in turbulent environments. But precisely because of these contributions, it seems increasingly difficult to get a coherent, field-level view of how SMEs adopt CSR practices—was it CSR practices of the past or do we shape the future, and how have theorists constructed the CSR in SMEs literature, and where are the gaps. This conceptual plurality has been further documented by Zaman et al. (2025), who show that sustainability in SMEs is interpreted through heterogeneous lenses—ranging from compliance-driven environmental management to broader strategic and socio-economic transformation—thereby reinforcing the need for integrative syntheses.

For instance, current overviews of the CSR in SMEs literature have provided valuable but partial knowledge. Narrative reviews and systematic reviews typically discussed particular dimensions, such as motivations or barriers, or country context, and have generally relied on relatively narrow corpora (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Jenkins, 2006; Spence, 2007). Other syntheses have examined CSR in SMEs in the context of larger discussions on sustainability or business ethics and have not considered isolated adoption processes—implementation, institutionalization and strategy (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Bansal & Song, 2017). Recent systematic reviews have also highlighted the growing relevance of non-financial reporting in SMEs. Lisi et al. (2024), in a comprehensive review, emphasize the conceptual ambiguity surrounding reporting practices in smaller firms and call for greater integration between sustainability disclosure, governance structures and strategic orientation. Similarly, Martins et al. (2022) provide a systematic review of sustainability research in SMEs and identify a progressive shift from descriptive accounts of responsible behavior toward more analytically grounded examinations of drivers, barriers and performance implications. In more recent years, bibliometric studies have mapped a CSR or sustainability literature, but they rarely focus or narrow in to studies of SMEs as an organizational

context or develop a systematic manner to link quantitative studies to theorists framing logic (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). So we still do not have a comprehensive view of the CSR–SME literature that captures multiple interrelated lenses, (i) how CSR–SME literature has grown and become globalized, (ii) the intellectual bedrock and key contributions, and (iii) how key empirical concepts—the normative vs. instrumental, ethics vs performance, local vs global—are framed thematically.

This research contributes to filling that void by employing a hybrid bibliometric–qualitative investigation of CSR adoption research in SMEs. Instead of utilizing bibliometrics strictly descriptively, or merely to provide a picture of the CSR and SMEs ‘intellectual structure’ and dynamics, we leverage bibliometrics as an informed theory tool to uncover the intellectual structure, but also the tensions underlying the field. Aligning a consolidated dataset consisting of 1,156 papers – published in Scopus and Web of Science – we employ quantitative mapping (of scientific production, geographical and author distribution, most prominent documents, and thematic clusters) with qualitative readings of the most substantial contributions in the field, thus establishing a basis for connecting observable patterns, such as publication growth, author or country specialization, or keyword co-occurrences, to any theoretical debates surrounding why, and how, SMEs incorporate CSR, and ultimately sustainability to their business models (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021).

Consequently, our primary objective is not simply to generate measures of research but to reconstruct the intellectual structure and the dynamics of consolidation for the associated area of interest. More specifically, the paper responds to three intertwined research questions:

- How has scientific production on CSR adoption in SMEs changed over time and space (in countries)?

By exploring annual production patterns and aggregate outputs on a yearly basis for countries, we can demonstrate how CSR–SME research has progressed from a marginal topic to a recognized stream, and importantly how this progress has been influenced by varying institutional and regional contexts.

- Who or what authors and documents have situated themselves as significant/central in structure?

What documents and theoretical orientation/prior theorizing have furthermore centred themselves into the positioning of centrality? Through investigating the scholarly output of prolific authors in the field, and their most globally cited articles, we will identify the major research communities and conceptual advancements informing understandings of CSR in SMEs, such as sustainability-oriented, performance-oriented and ethics-oriented streams of research.

- What does the thematic map of the field tell us about the coexistence of instrumental and normative logics of CSR adoption in SMEs?

Through the use of a thematic map and qualitative review of key articles in the field, we identify how key themes such as sustainability integration, performance outcomes and decision making are organized and are in harmony or dissonance, and what emerging or under-developed themes, such as socio-economic impacts, micro-foundations or responsible digitalization, are represented in the field.

By anchoring the inquiry in these two questions, the study clearly articulates how its empirical objectives connect to the main theoretical tensions that have emerged in the literature. The first question situates the analysis within the wider context of the institutionalization of CSR and sustainability as research and policy priorities (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Fernando & Lawrence, 2014). The second and third questions work together to address the fragmented concepts

that exist in the field by mapping and analyzing the organizing principles of the stakeholder perspectives, resource-based perspectives and institutional perspectives, while identifying the tensions between performance-oriented and ethics-oriented accounts of CSR relevance and importance (Elkington, 1998; Hart & Dowell, 2011; Jamali & Karam, 2018). The paper argues that bibliometric mapping is an appropriate methodological contribution as it implicitly reveals not only who publishes and where, it also shows how knowledge advances in different theoretical logics that either align, intersect or compete in CSR-SME scholarship (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

This paper makes three contributions to the CSR-SME literature: it provides a consolidated cross-database bibliometric map of CSR-SME; it provides an articulation of the intellectual structure of CSR-SME using a hybrid, bibliometric-qualitative design; and it clarifies how instrumental and normative logics co-exist to shape how the thematic evolution of CSR-SMEs occurs and what future trajectories will look like.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the hybrid bibliometric-qualitative methodology in detail, including the selection of databases, search methods, cleansing the data, assessing the quality of the metadata, procedures to work against coverage, language, period and disciplinary biases. Section 3 reports the results, with a focus on scientific production over time, geographical locations of scholars, premier authors in the field with the most globally cited articles, and thematic mapping of the field. Section 4 critically engages with these findings in relation to the existing conceptual debates concerning CSR in SMEs - particularly around tensions of the instrumental and normative logics, alongside institutional and geographic diversity, and emerging research agendas like responsible digitalization, resilience and sustainable finance. Section 5 provides a summary of the contributions of the study, implications for scholars and policy makers, and future directions for empirical and comparative inquiries.

Methodology

Research design

In this study, a hybrid bibliometric–qualitative design has been implemented to analyze the progress, foundational intellectual contributions, and subsequent thematic areas of CSR research in SMEs. The analytical pathway involved three stages:

- development of a consolidated dataset from Scopus and the Web of Science (WoS),
- data cleaning, harmonization, and completeness assessment of metadata, and
- bibliometric mapping followed by qualitative content analysis of the most enthusiastic papers.

This design aligns with standard approaches to theory-informed bibliometric studies (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Data Sources

Two key bibliographic databases—Scopus and the WoS Core Collection—were chosen as they constitute the most thorough and rigorous data source for researches into management, sustainability, and organizational studies (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016).

Utilizing both databases decreases known coverage and discipline-biased datasets, since Scopus tends to include more journals with a wider scope while WoS is more discerning with its coverage (Archambault et al., 2009; Falagas et al., 2008). Therefore, collating the two enables a robust and balanced coverage of the CSR–SME research.

Search Strategy

The search strategy was developed iteratively to maximize both sensitivity and specificity. Three conceptual dimensions guided the query formulation: CSR and sustainability, adoption, implementation, and institutionalization processes, SMEs and related organizational forms.

Scopus query:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (csr OR "Corporate Social Responsib*" OR "Corporate Sustainab*" OR "Corporate Citizenship" OR ESG OR "Responsible Business Practic*" OR "Social Responsib*" OR "Environmental Practic*" OR "Ethical Practic*" OR "Sustainability Practic*" OR "Business Ethics" OR "Triple Bottom Line")

AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Adoption Process" OR trajector* OR implement* OR diffus* OR "Maturity Model*" OR evolut* OR stage* OR integrat* OR institutionaliz* OR embed* OR assimil* OR uptake OR path* OR journey OR transition*)

AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (SME* OR MSME* OR SMME* OR SMB* OR "Small and Medium Enterprise*" OR "Small and Medium sized Enterprise*" OR "Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise*" OR "Small Business*" OR "Small Firm*" OR "Small scale Business*" OR "Family Business*" OR "Family Firm*" OR "Owner managed Firm*")

AND NOT TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Large Firm*" OR Multinational* OR "Big Compan*" OR "Large Enterprise*" OR "Large Corporation*" OR MNE* OR "Transnational Corporation*")

- Initial results: 1266 documents
- Filters applied: Subject Area (Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; Economics), Document type (Article, Review), Language (English and French)
- Final dataset: 783 documents (exported as BibTeX)

Web of Science query:

((TS=(CSR OR "Corporate Social Responsib*" OR "Corporate Sustainab*" OR "Corporate Citizenship" OR ESG OR "Responsible Business Practic*" OR "Social Responsib*" OR "Environmental Practic*" OR "Ethical Practic*" OR "Sustainability Practic*" OR "Business Ethics" OR "Triple Bottom Line"))

AND TS=("Adoption Process" OR trajector* OR implement* OR diffus* OR "Maturity Model*" OR evolut* OR stage* OR integrat* OR institutionaliz* OR embed* OR assimil* OR uptake OR path* OR journey OR transition*))

AND TS=(SME* OR MSME* OR SMME* OR SMB* OR "Small and Medium Enterprise*" OR "Small and Medium sized Enterprise*" OR "Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise*" OR "Small Business*" OR "Small Firm*" OR "Small scale Business*" OR "Family Business*" OR "Family Firm*" OR "Owner managed Firm*"))

NOT TS=("Large Firm*" OR Multinational* OR "Big Compan*" OR "Large Enterprise*" OR "Large Corporation*" OR MNE* OR "Transnational Corporation*"))

- Initial results: 1399 documents
- Filters applied: Research Area (Business Economics), Document type (Article, Review Article), Language (English and French)
- Final dataset: 760 documents (exported as BibTeX)

All database queries have been executed, and all bibliographic records have been exported during August 2025, leading to the publication total for 2025 reflecting only a partial year; thus, it cannot be considered a complete annual output of publications. Therefore, any perceived drop in

publication counts for 2025 must be viewed as an artifact of data collection rather than a real decrease in research output.

Data Cleaning and Merging

The Bibliometric data is processed using the bibliometrix R-package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The R environment provides sufficient transparency, reproducibility, and analytic flexibility that is vital to the methodology of bibliometric studies. The Scopus file included 783 documents, but 8 were incomplete (missing author, year, or journal), which were automatically omitted by the software, resulting in a total of 775 valid entries. The WoS file did not have any incomplete documents and contained a total of 760 complete documents.

The two datasets were merged in RStudio via the mergeDbSources () function, which merges bibliographic records while keeping them identifiable. To eliminate duplicates, auto-detection was done by referencing DOI and title-author combinations, which had a total of 379 duplicates lost, thereby yielding a total of 1156 unique documents in the database.

The newly merged dataset was then recorded in .xlsx Excel format to provide transparency, then re-imported into Biblioshiny for exploratory analysis. This process is also consistent with good practices in bibliometric studies advocating for the mixing of Scopus and WoS databases for better coverage and reliability (Archambault et al., 2009; Falagas et al., 2008).

Metadata Quality Assessment

Prior to conducting the analysis, a metadata quality assessment was completed. Essential fields, including the title, author, year, source, and language, showed 0% missing values, while the affiliation, DOI, and author keywords contained less than 5% missing. Fields such as Cited References and Science Categories were missing values because of the limitations of the exporting capabilities of new databases; the nature of these fields are such that they would not align with the geometry of the dataset.

In conclusion, the dataset was considered appropriate for structural and thematic analysis.

Risk of Bias and Limitations

There are several potential biases that may affect bibliometric and qualitative analysis. These biases and how we triaged them to mitigate bias are shown here:

Database coverage bias: Differences in journal inclusion policies between Scopus and WoS may bias the representation of the field. This risk was somewhat mitigated by combining both sources.

Language bias: Limiting our search by language to English and French may have excluded CSR–SME research that is published in other languages. However, English is the most dominant language in CSR–SME research, so this limitation probably has a limited impact.

Temporal and citation bias: Older publications generally accumulate more citations and therefore are overrepresented in "most-cited" rankings of articles. To account for this dynamic, citation influence was considered alongside thematic centrality and thus, not considered a proxy for theoretical superiority or value.

Disciplinary bias: CSR–SME research is embedded in multiple fields, including management, sustainability, ethics, and entrepreneurship. Because there is a difference in indexing provisions across fields, this will affect coverage. Again, merging databases somewhat mitigates this gap.

Metadata limitations: There are limitations in metadata in that there are not cited references, which does not allow for co-citation analysis. This was addressed through qualitative reading of papers.

Single-coder bias in the qualitative component: Although coding took place by only one analyst, we engaged in stability checks through multiple coding passes and there is an explicit audit trail to accompany the findings.

All of these mitigations contribute to the interpretive validity of the findings, but they do not negate the possibility of structural bias, as inherent in any bibliometric review.

Reproducibility and Transparency

All search strings, export files, cleaning scripts (bibliometrix), and the final merged dataset have been archived to ensure reproducibility.

Only a targeted set of visual outputs—annual scientific production, country scientific production, most relevant authors, most globally cited documents, and thematic map—are reported to maintain analytical focus and interpretive clarity.

Results

Evolution of scientific production

The evolution of annual scientific production offers a first indication of how research on CSR adoption in SMEs has matured over time. Figure 1 shows that publications remained sporadic and numerically modest until the early 2000s, confirming that the topic long occupied a marginal position in CSR scholarship that was predominantly focused on large corporations (Jamali et al., 2009).

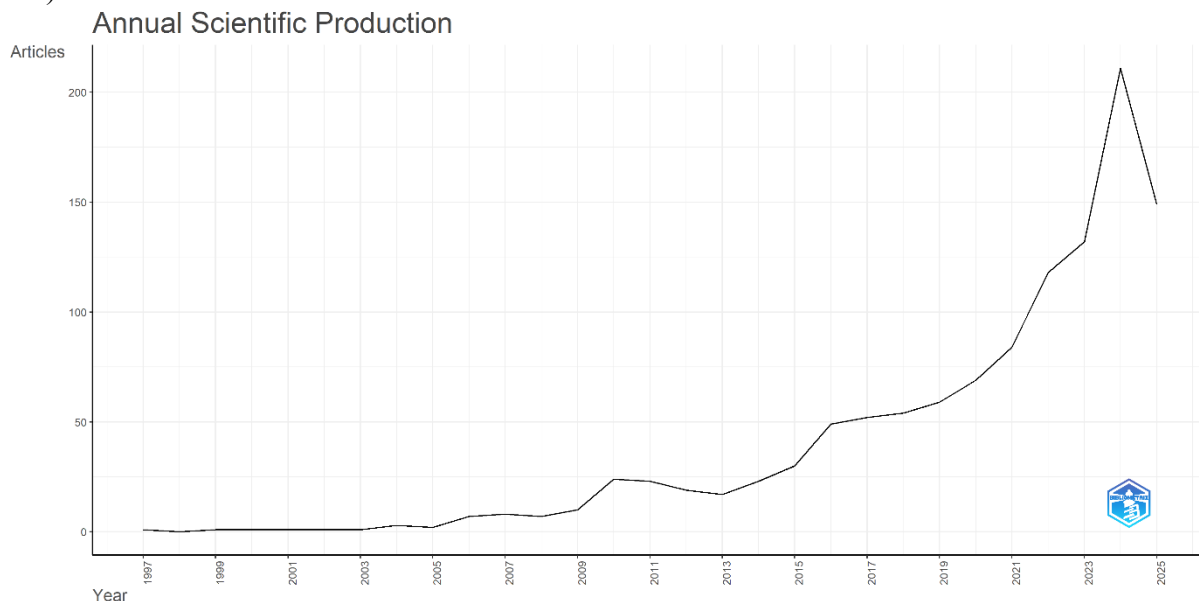


Figure 1: The evolution of scientific production

Source: Biblioshiny.

Since approximately 2010, the curve begins to emerge clearly exponential in nature. This breakpoint aligns with the increase of CSR and sustainability research observed by Aguinis and Glavas (2012), and the institutionalization of sustainability agendas worldwide. The noticeable

increase after 2015 is similarly consistent with concerns regarding the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, leading scholars and policymakers alike to study how SMEs integrate social, ethical, and environmental concerns in their business strategies (Fernando & Lawrence, 2014; Sinkovics et al., 2014).

Collectively, these trends indicate that CSR in SMEs has evolved from an emerging research niche to an established stream of research. In addition, these rapid publications in the literature legitimizes deploying bibliometric mapping techniques to comprehend an ever-fragmented body of work (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

The observed decline in 2025 is not evidence of a reduction of research activity. The bibliographic data since it was sourced in August 2025 reflects a partial count of publication (for 2025) and should therefore be viewed as an artifact of the way that data was collected, rather than evidence of decreased interest in the research topic of CSR adoption by SMEs.

Geographical distribution of research activity

The scientific production by country (Figure 2) indicates a mixed but heavily European-centered field. Italy (299 articles), Spain (238), and the UK (220) are the primary contributors. These are followed by China (201) and the USA (176). France (131), India (123) and Malaysia (89) are also significant contributors to the academic output, while countries like Australia, Portugal, Germany, and Indonesia contribute between 60 and 80 documents altogether. North African countries continue to be marginal in scientific output, with just 46 total publications: Morocco (20), Tunisia (19), Egypt (6), and Libya (1).

Country Scientific Production

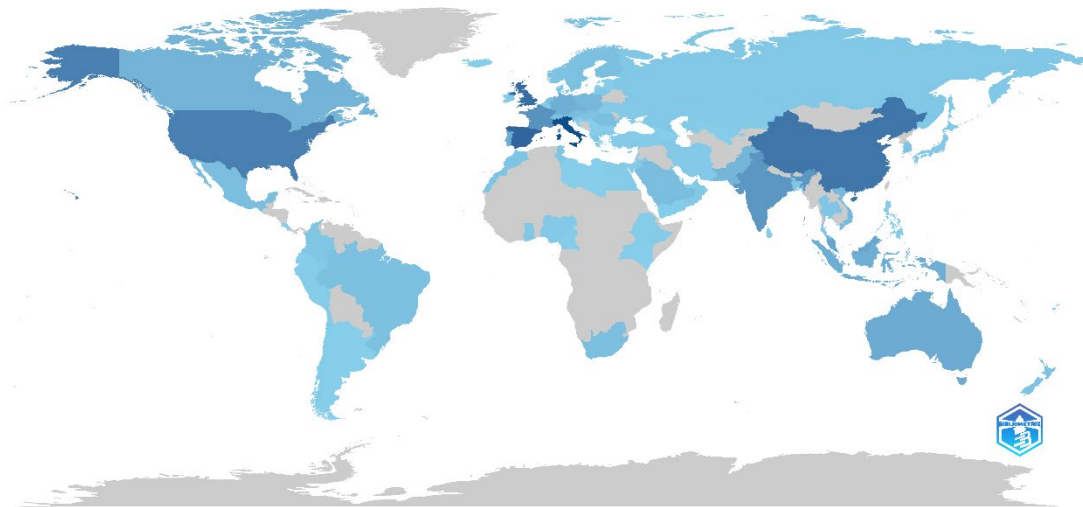


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of research activity

Source: Biblioshiny.

The predominance of Southern European countries supports earlier findings that Italy and Spain emerged as fertile grounds for CSR and sustainability research for SMEs, primarily in the areas of environmental management systems, eco-innovation, and the strategic integration of CSR (Diez-Martin et al., 2019; Iraldo et al., 2009). The contributions from the UK and US reflect their

historical prominence on CSR theory, to which they contributed notably through stakeholder and corporate governance approaches (Freeman et al., 2010).

First, the strong emergence of China and India signifies increasing interest in countries defined as emerging economies, where SMEs are likely to be important motors of industrialization and employment. Studies done in these countries often highlight a hybrid type of socio-economic arrangement with regulatory pressure, market-based incentives, and socio-cultural expectations in the adoption of CSR principles (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Wang et al., 2016). The presence of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., Czech Republic) also reflects the diffusion of CSR discourse through regional policy transfers and adaptation to local institutions (Belas et al., 2021).

Overall, the geographic distribution reflects an international and geographically dispersed nature of CSR research related to SMEs, with European and Asian clusters being more active within academia. These differences in institutional contexts enhance the field but lead to difficulties with cross-border comparisons, a point that will be highlighted further in the discussion.

Most relevant authors and research communities

The most relevant authors (Figure 3) provide a proxy for the intellectual communities structuring the field. Belas J. (11 articles), Testa F. (8) and Ahmad N. (7) appear as the most prolific contributors, followed by Berger-Douce S., Metzker Z., Tang Z., and Iturralde T. with 6 publications each. A second group—including Hasan M. and Iraldo F.—has produced 5 articles.

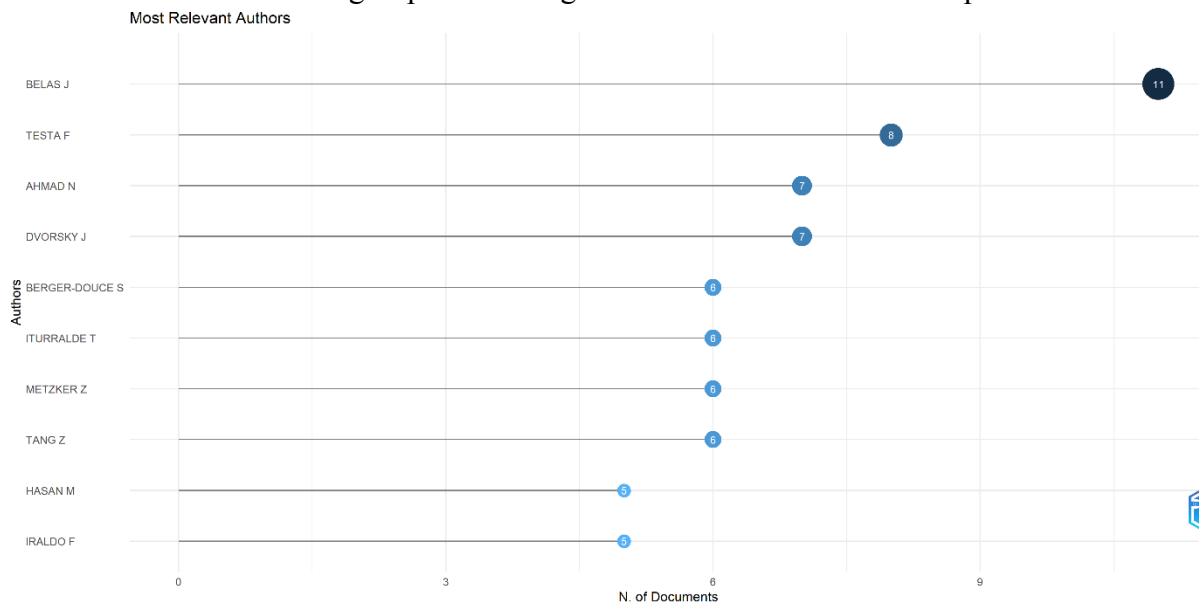


Figure 3: Most relevant authors

Source: Biblioshiny.

This configuration indicates that the field is not dominated by a single “star” author but organized around several geographically dispersed clusters. For example, Testa and colleagues have extensively examined environmental management systems, eco-innovation and the drivers of environmental practices in SMEs, often mobilizing institutional and stakeholder perspectives (Testa et al., 2011, 2018). Ahmad’s work has focused on CSR in emerging economies, highlighting how responsible practices contribute to SME competitiveness and strategic positioning (Ahmad et al., 2020; Ahmad & Ramayah, 2012).

In Central and Eastern Europe, Belás et al. have investigated how CSR adoption interacts with financial performance, risk perception and stakeholder trust in SMEs (Belas et al., 2021). Berger-Douce, working on French SMEs, shows that CSR is often implemented incrementally, shaped by owner-manager values and local institutional arrangements (Berger-Douce & Deschamps, 2012). Such contributions echo Spence's argument that SME responsibility is embedded in relational proximity, resource constraints and entrepreneurial values (Spence, 2016).

The dissemination of productive authors around Europe and Asia demonstrates that CSR implementation in SMEs is a multi-community domain, characterized by polycentric author networks instead of hierarchical author networks (Donthu et al., 2021; Merigó & Yang, 2017). This fragmentation reinforces the importance of an integrative synthesis that has the potential to unite perspectives grounded in multiple institutional and cultural settings.

Conceptual foundations: analysis of the most globally cited documents

The ten most globally cited documents (Figure 4) constitute the conceptual backbone of the literature on CSR adoption in SMEs. A qualitative reading of these articles reveals three complementary but partially tensioned streams: (i) sustainability-oriented strategy and innovation, (ii) performance-oriented CSR, and (iii) responsibility as a normative and relational process.

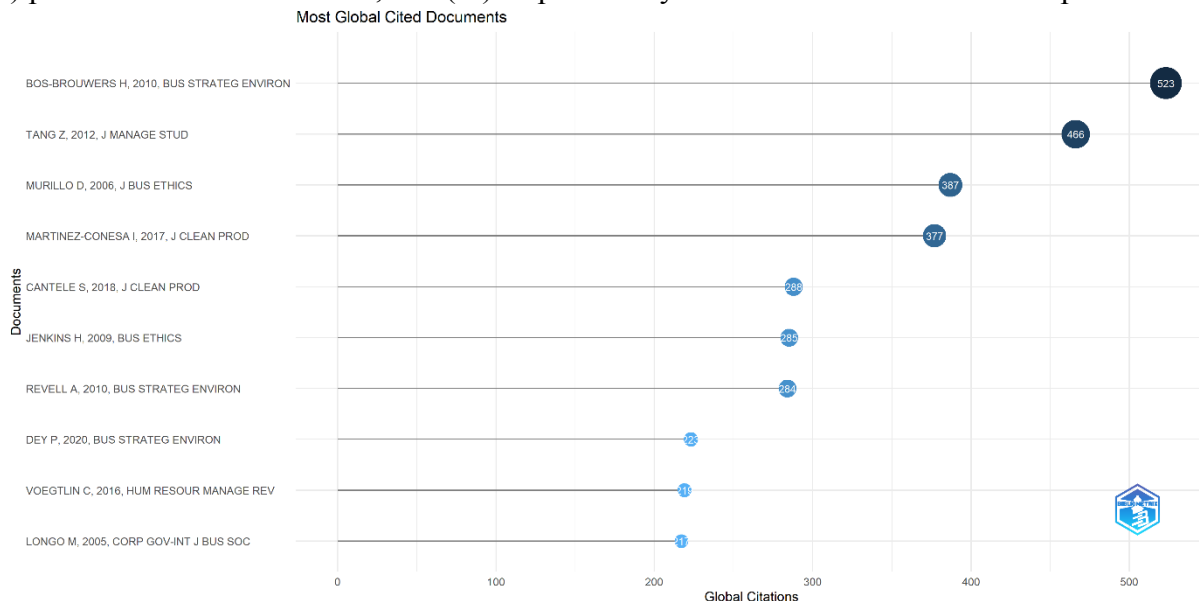


Figure 4: Most globally cited documents

Source: Biblioshiny.

Bos-Brouwers, the most frequently cited article (523 citations), theorizes CSR in the context of SMEs as an innovation-based strategic posture rather than a peripheral activity in business (Bos-Brouwers, 2010). Her analysis led to further studies connecting CSR and sustainability capabilities to competitive advantage (Hart & Dowell, 2011; Klewitz & Hansen, 2014). Substantial support for thinking about CSR in the context of SMEs has come from Martínez-Conesa et al., and Cantele & Zardini, who both demonstrate empirically that integrating CSR principles into innovation and knowledge-focused processes resulted in positive environmental and economic performance, especially when long-term strategic planning included CSR (Cantele & Zardini, 2018; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Tang et al. make a seminal contribution by conceptualizing CSR as a dynamic capability that contributes ultimately to firm performance through consistent, proactive and complementary CSR initiatives (Tang et al., 2012). By merging stakeholder theory with a resource-based view, they present a rigorously specified causal mechanism, through which CSR can contribute towards financial outcome. Some subsequent work in SMEs has often invoked this argument to better encapsulate CSR as a strategic investment rather than purely moral obligation (Bansal & Song, 2017). Revell et al., and Longo et al., add to this stream by providing insight how environmental and social initiatives interact with competitiveness, market positioning and stakeholders' expectations in small businesses (Longo et al., 2005; Revell et al., 2010).

Murillo & Lozano (2006) and Jenkins (2006, 2009) emphasize the micro-foundation of CSR in SMEs by foregrounding informal structures, owner-manager values and close stakeholder relationships. Their qualitative analyses identify how CSR is often emergent, relational, and contextual, by demonstrating how entrepreneurs act as moral actors and boundary spanners between business and community (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007; Spence, 2016). Further work by Dey et al. explores how institutional pressures and supply chain relations to shape CSR practices in SMEs and illustrate how these organizations operate within global production networks (Dey et al., 2020).

Last, Voegtlin & Greenwood (2016) change the focus to responsible leadership and human resource management, and argue that CSR is rooted in internal governance, participation and sense-making. Their cross-level review of responsible leadership in human resource management connects managerial individual behavior to organizational and institutional outcomes.

Across these ten seminal contributions, a liberal amount of theoretical pluralism can be discussed in the literature as there are perspectives from the institutional, stakeholder, resource based, and leadership perspectives are discussed and sometimes with a instrumental logic that focused on performance, as well as sometimes in a normative ethics focused accountability perspective. This ends up informing the thematic arrangement described in the next sub-section.

Intellectual structure: thematic configuration of the field

The thematic map derived from keyword co-occurrences (Figure 5) synthesizes the intellectual structure of the field along two axes—centrality (relevance) and density (development)—following Cobo and colleagues (Cobo et al., 2011). Three main clusters emerge.

The first and most dominant cluster, located in the bottom right quadrant, consists of the terms SMEs, sustainability and corporate social responsibility. This cluster, referred to as “basic themes”, represents the fundamental concern in the field - how to integrate social and environmental considerations into the strategies and operations of SMEs. The positioning suggests a relatively high degree of connectivity with other topics, with some opportunity for conceptual refinement. This topic resonates with ongoing debates around the intersection between CSR and sustainability and the triple bottom line paradigm (Elkington, 1998; Hahn et al., 2014).

The second cluster (which is located in the upper-central positioning) links corporate social responsibility (CSR) with performance. This cluster reflects a well-established performance stream investigating the benefits of adopting CSR standards on financial and non-financial performance. Research in this cluster provides support for a positive impact of CSR on performance, through innovation, on stakeholder engagement, and learning capabilities (Hart & Dowell, 2011; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017; Surroca et al., 2010). The placement of this cluster as developed but not fully dominant represents the persistent tension between instrumental and normative interpretations of CSR that surfaced in the most frequently cited documents.

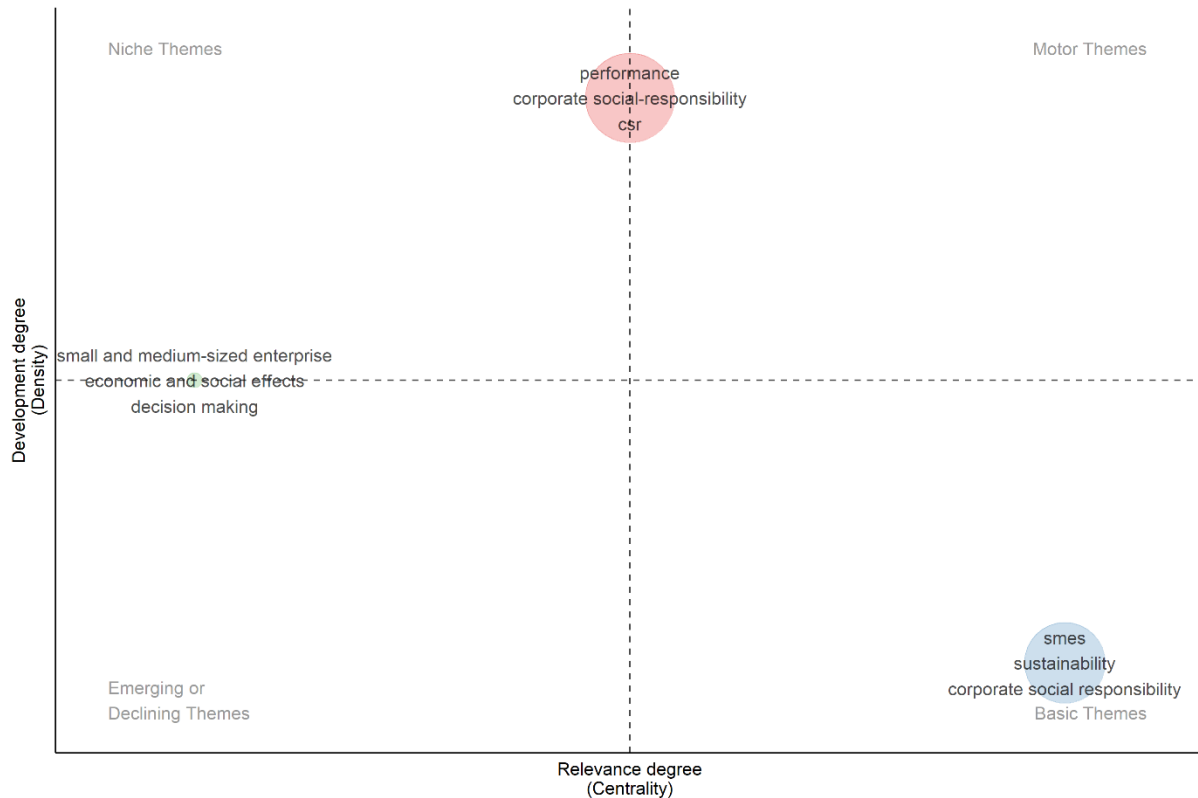


Figure 5: Thematic map

Source: Biblioshiny.

This smaller third cluster is in the lower-left quadrant, linking small and medium-sized enterprise, economic and social effects, and decision-making. The low centrality and moderate density suggest an emerging or marginal agenda for research that is studying the behavioral and socio-economic implications of CSR decisions within SMEs. Questions central to a direction of inquiry in this cluster would concern how owner-managers engage in trade-offs between priority decisions related to responsibility (i.e., CSR) and the survival of the firm, how CSR decisions facilitate or hinder local development, and how contextual factors, such as institutional voids or community expectations, shape decision processes (Ahi & Searcy, 2015; Bocken et al., 2014; Hahn et al., 2014).

In summary, the thematic map suggests that the field is cohesive, but evolving along two primary axes:

- Integration of CSR and sustainability in SMEs as a baseline concern, and
- Linkages between CSR adoption and organizational performance as an emerging stream of empirical inquiry

The relative absence of niche themes that are clearly defined suggests that, at this stage of the research, research is more directed toward consolidating shared conceptual frameworks than toward distinctive specialization. This arrangement allows for future studies to more clearly articulate the micro-level processes, institutional contingencies, and long-term trajectories of CSR adoption in SMEs.

Discussion

The bibliometric results of this research highlight how the research community has developed, improved and diversified over the last 20 years with respect to CSR Adoption in SMEs. The current study demonstrates the dynamic and evolving nature of the theoretical concepts and tensions found in this area and highlights the important future directions that will shape and inform this area of study.

Conceptual Dynamics and Theoretical Tensions

This thematic map illustrates that the conceptual heart of this area of study has been built around three interrelated elements that support each other: integration of CSR and SMEs, sustainability focus, and performance results. While these three clusters appear to be conceptually aligned, a closer inspection shows that they actually represent two distinct yet competing theories that have defined this area of research for the last 15 years:

The instrumental logic: CSR as a driver of performance: The research stream of "performance-CSR" aligns with a motor theme. Through extensive research, many of the authors within this stream conceptualised CSR as a strategic asset that drives innovation, competitiveness and/or better financial performance (Bansal & Song, 2017; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017). This perspective of CSR being used as a competitive advantage or source of innovation or financial gain has been supported by:

- Stakeholder theory, contends that corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributes to legitimizing a corporation's existence and enabling it to access various forms of resources (Freeman et al., 2010; Surroca et al., 2010).
- Resource-based and dynamic capability perspectives, suggest that responsible corporate practices help improve innovativeness, absorptive capacity, or competitive differentiation among organisations. (Hart & Dowell, 2011; Klewitz & Hansen, 2014).

Therefore, the density and centrality of the CSR-performance cluster in the results indicates that this is an empirically established body of research that has matured through the development of theories to understand CSR as a strategic asset.

The normative logic: CSR as an ethical expectation: In comparison, the seminal research on this topic—such as the papers authored by Jenkins (2009), Murillo & Lozano (2006), and Spence (2016)—is primarily concerned with the ethical, social, and community-based motives behind SME owners' management decisions. These works closely correspond to:

- Business Ethics Perspectives - business ethics place a significant amount of emphasis on the impact of individual's values on CSR, i.e., CSR is embedded in personal values;
- Institutional Theory - CSR is impacted by local norms and legitimacy pressures, as well as how close a stakeholder is to an SME and the related organization. (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Jamali & Mirshak, 2007).

The co-existence of the two types of logic creates a strong contradiction in the area of study, as shown on the thematic map in which the density of themes associated with performance is substantially larger than that of ethical or institutional themes (which appear to be emerging or developing themes of CSR within SMEs). Therefore, it implies there is a lack of theoretical balance regarding the implications of CSR in SMEs.

The dual logics identified above indicate that when an SME considers adopting CSR practices, it is not the same as making an operational choice about how to operate; the consideration

of CSR by SMEs occurs at the intersection of: obligation, values, strategy, legitimacy, and capability building.

The field of CSR should therefore develop new theories that combine all five of these aspects into one theoretical construct, for example, shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) or hybrid stakeholder/institutional frameworks, which include both the ethical imperatives associated with CSR and the strategic incentives related to SME growth.

Geographical and Intellectual Structure of the Field

The country's scientific production shows polycentric intellectual geographies:

- The Southern European countries (Italy and Spain) continue to be at the forefront, as they have well-established academic traditions linking sustainability, innovation and the development of new technologies in SMEs (Iraldo et al., 2009).
- The conceptual basis for sustainability in SMEs emerged from the UK and the US, primarily due to stakeholder theory and business ethics (Freeman et al., 2010).
- China, India, and Southeast Asia represent the fastest-growing interest in CSR development during a time when their economic systems are undergoing institutional transformation, while having limited resources and informal organizations (Ismail, 2009; Wang et al., 2016).

The geographical diversity of the research enhances the richness of the discipline as well as highlights the heterogeneity of institutional logics throughout the world, which may in part account for the simultaneous presence of both normative and instrumental interpretations of corporate social responsibility adoption.

Evolution of Scientific Activity and Intellectual Maturity

A steadily growing body of published work—especially from 2015 onward—indicates:

- That sustainability and SDGs have been taken seriously as international research agendas;
- Small-medium enterprises (SMEs) have been more frequently represented on political agendas; and
- That bibliometric review methodologies used in management research are becoming more widely accepted (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

In contrast, contexts of high scientific production (e.g., Italy, China, and Spain) may create biases towards certain conceptual angles (e.g., institutional compliance, environmental management, innovation), highlighting the need for a more comprehensive cross-country comparison.

Methodological Reflections and Critical Assessment

While bibliometric analysis allows researchers to obtain strong insights into the macroscopic views of the field, the field has four methodological constraints that impact the depth and breadth of the findings.

Language, one problem is that English language databases make up the majority of available research on CSR, so many of the studies related to CSR in non-English speaking countries may not have been captured (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). This is especially critical for SMEs that have CSR practices that reflect their local culture, informal norms, and networks—many of which can only be traced through outlets that publish in the local language.

Time, bibliometric analysis is inherently biased towards older publications because they are given a higher citation weighting than more recent publications (Tahamtan et al., 2016). Therefore, even though there are more current publications with better methodologies, the ranking of most-

cited publications continues to be dominated by conceptual papers from prior decades (Murillo & Lozano, 2006).

Fragmentation, most CSR research publications come from sustainability or environmental management journals (e.g., Journal of Cleaner Production, Sustainability), which skews the CSR research toward ecological interpretations of CSR. As a result, very few socio-relational dimensions of CSR have been well-studied.

Theme ambiguity, there is a significant conceptual core of CSR studies, but there are relatively few specialized themes. This suggests that CSR research is evolving as a field, but not yet evolving into many specialized sub-disciplines, such as CSR accounting, social entrepreneurship and digital responsibility.

Because of these limitations, any bibliometric mapping of CSR should be supplemented by qualitative or systematic approaches that can investigate the deeper causal mechanisms and contextually variable aspects of CSR research.

Prospective Directions and Emerging Opportunities

Responsible digitalization and data-driven CSR: The growing intersection of digital tools (e.g., blockchain, carbon tracking, social impact analytics) with elements of CSR adoption within SMEs, creates a new area for research (Del Giudice et al., 2019).

CSR and post-crisis resilience: COVID-19 exposed the weaknesses of SMEs and underscored how responsible business practices enable SMEs to adapt in the short and long term, develop stakeholder trust, and prepare for future crises. However, the current bibliometric clusters do not address these emerging topics.

Sustainable finance and ESG integration for SMEs: With the internationalization of ESG reporting and green finance, SMEs must now contend with new institutional pressures and opportunities. However, recent evidence suggests that SMEs face significant structural and resource-related barriers when implementing sustainability reporting systems. Setyaningsih et al. (2024) show that limited expertise, cost constraints and regulatory complexity often hinder effective disclosure, despite growing institutional expectations. The absence of a dedicated theme for Sustainable Finance on the thematic map indicates that there is a significant gap in future research on this topic.

Microfoundations of CSR adoption: The identification of microfoundations (i.e., decision-making/socioeconomic effects) of complex SME sustainability leadership behaviors indicate an emerging area of research interest regarding the antecedents behavioral and psychological factors that influence SME sustainability leadership (Hahn et al., 2014). Future researchers should further explore how owner/manager cognition, moral identity, and values affect CSR trajectories.

Cross-cultural and comparative trajectories: The evidence of a polycentric global distribution of CSR identified in this study suggests that further research is required to examine how CSR is adopted by SMEs operating within different institutional regimes, particularly in those regions of the world that are not Western Europe or North America.

Conclusion and Implications

This study endeavors to map and interpret the evolution of research on the adoption of corporate social responsibility in SMEs by combining a stringent bibliometric protocol with qualitative content analysis of the most cited publications. We employ a pooled dataset of 1,156 articles from Scopus and the Web of Science to analyze the temporal dynamics of scientific production, the geographical distribution of contributions, the structural configuration of authors, the literature

corpus, and the thematic map. Our findings confirm that from a marginal, weakly theorized topic, CSR in SMEs has evolved into an increasingly consolidated and complex research domain grounded upon sustainability and performance paradigms.

At the empirical level, we identify four main findings: the steep increase in annual publications post-2010—and especially after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015—highlights that CSR in SMEs is a consolidated research stream rather than a peripheral one (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Fernando & Lawrence, 2014; Sinkovics et al., 2014). Second, based on the geographical distribution, we observe a polycentric structure: Southern Europe (notably Italy and Spain) and the UK constitute the historical backbone of the field, while China, India, Malaysia and other emerging economies are overtaking to become significant contributors (Diez-Martin et al., 2019; Iraldo et al., 2009; Jamali & Karam, 2018; Wang et al., 2016). Third, the analysis on most prolific authors and cited documents shows that the field is built upon several interconnected research communities rather than a unified school, indicating a plurality of institutional, stakeholder, resource-based and leadership perspectives (Bos-Brouwers, 2010; Cantele & Zardini, 2018; Jenkins, 2009; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2012; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016). Finally, the thematic map reveals a thick, but evolving intellectual core based on three clusters: (i) Integrating CSR and sustainability into SME strategy, (ii) CSR-Performance nexus and (iii) nascent work on decision-making, socio-economic effects and the contextualisation of CSR (Elkington, 1998; Hahn et al., 2014; Hart & Dowell, 2011; Surroca et al., 2010).

These findings have notable theoretical implications. The joint presence of a well-developed performance-oriented cluster and a more nascent ethics- and institution-oriented cluster validate that CSR integration by SMEs is grounded on competing logics: an instrumental logic, in which CSR is considered as a strategic resource for enhancing competitiveness, innovation and legitimacy of firms (Bansal & Song, 2017; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2012), and a normative logic, in which CSR is embedded in entrepreneurial values and local stakeholder ties, as moral and relational obligation (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Murillo & Lozano, 2006; Spence, 2016). By spelling out these tensions empirically via citation patterns, thematic mapping and close-reading of key papers, this study argues that the conceptual development of the field turns on attempts to reconcile these logics—most prominently in frameworks like the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998), shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and hybrid stakeholder-institutional approaches (Freeman et al., 2010; Jamali & Karam, 2018). In this sense, the paper contributes to the theorization of CSR in SMEs as a matter located in the middle of ethical, strategic, and institutional adaptation.

There are also practical and policy implications stemming from the findings. That performance-oriented themes are present along with empirical studies that link CSR to innovation and competitiveness (Iraldo et al., 2009; Martinez-Conesa et al., 2017) means the phenomenon should not be seen as a regulatory burden or philanthropic add-on. Instead, policy makers and intermediary organizations (support organizations) can use these insights to create training, certification schemes and financial incentives that help SMEs to translate responsible practices into strategic capabilities. At the same time, the prominence of normative and relational drivers in the most cited qualitative studies (Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Murillo & Lozano, 2006; Spence, 2016) suggest that working with owner-manager values, local stakeholder networks and sectoral associations is preferable to purely top-down regulatory approaches. Finally, the potentially emerging prospective themes signposted in the discussion - responsible digitalization, post-crisis resilience, sustainable finance and ESG integration - imply that in the future public policies supporting CSR adoption in SMEs will increasingly need to be connected to digital tools, supply-

chain transparency and new forms of impact-oriented financing (Del Giudice et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2018).

From a methodological perspective, we argue this paper demonstrates the utility of a hybrid bibliometric-qualitative design for structuring a fragmented literature. By combining Scopus and WoS, systematic data cleaning and metadata assessment, and limiting ourselves to usage of a small number of visual outputs (annual production, country production, most relevant authors, most cited documents and thematic map), we aim to present a transparent and reproducible framework (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). The qualitative analysis of top-cited documents complements this macro-level mapping by showing the mechanisms, contradictions and the theoretical subtleties that cannot easily be derived from metrics alone. Through this, we respond to recent calls for bibliometric reviews that use descriptive statistics as a basis for deeper engagement with the conceptual architecture of the fields they map (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Several limitations must nonetheless be acknowledged. As discussed above, our reliance on Scopus and WoS entails language, disciplinary and temporal biases that undoubtedly under-represent non-Anglophone, practice-oriented or very recent contributions (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Tahamtan et al., 2016), and the lack of cited-reference metadata meant that we could not conduct co-citation or bibliographic coupling analyses, while the qualitative coding of seminal works, was conducted by one analyst. These limitations do not undermine the findings in any sense, only suggest that the present mapping should be understood as a reasoned, evidence-based panorama of the landscape, rather than a comprehensive and definitive view. Follow-up studies might employ bibliometric mapping as complementary to and part of systematic or qualitative literature reviews, longitudinal case studies and mixed-methods designs tracing the paths of CSR adoption in SMEs across sectors, regions and institutional regimes (Hahn et al., 2014; Jamali & Karam, 2018; Tranfield et al., 2003).

In sum, this is an integrated, data-led and theory-informed view of CSR adoption in SMEs. It shows that while the field has much intellectual consolidation around sustainability and performance, it nonetheless grapples with unresolved tensions between instrumental and normative logics, global agendas and local controversies, macro patterns and micro processes. By clarifying these tensions and delineating fruitful directions for scholarly inquiry, the study provides knowledge to support scholars, practitioners and its policymakers seek to better understand—and better foster—the ways SME embed social and environmental responsibility into the heart of their business models and contribute to sustainable development.

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