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Untangling the Origins of Sustainable Commitment: New Insights on the Small vs. Large Firms' Debate

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Abstract: The sustainable development challenge is increasingly being included in entrepreneurs' agendas. Firms are considered responsible for social and environmental effects but are also considered as social actors that can effectively incorporate sustainability solutions into market transactions. The literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in small business has depicted these firms as less involved in sustainability management implementation owing to resource constraints and limited perception of the business case for sustainability. Further, studies on both small business and sustainable entrepreneurship have highlighted the pivotal role of entrepreneurs' values in motivating a more sustainable way of conducting business while, large companies, driven by external pressures, are more focused on a strategic CSR approach than small firms. Starting from these premises, the paper aims to identify the main drivers or barriers of sustainability implementation and to verify any significant differences between small and large-sized companies in their approach to sustainability practices implementation. The study adopts a qualitative research method based on semi-structured interviews addressing 22 participants from Italian firms of different sizes selected for their social and environmental commitment. The findings of the study highlight the existence of some common features among small and large firms, in particular, regarding motivations, entrepreneur values, and business vision, contributing new perspectives to the sustainable entrepreneurship debate.

Keywords: sustainability; small business; sustainable entrepreneur; sustainable business model; corporate social responsibility; large firm

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are defined as independent, non-subsidiary institutions that employ a limited number of employees. However, this number varies depending on the national statistical system. The European Union defines SMEs as those that have less than 250 employees and an annual turnover lower than 50 million euros or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding 43 million euros [1]. These enterprises play a major role in the economic growth of all countries; they account for approximately 90% of the number of firms worldwide and employ about 50–60% of the global workforce [2,3]. In Europe, SMEs represent 99% of all enterprises and in the past five years, they have created around 85% of new jobs and provided two-thirds of the total private sector employment according to the European Commission [4].

In the past decade, topics such as ecosystem degradation and social sustainability have attracted the attention of a considerable number of society members, such as consumers, nongovernmental organizations, and politicians [5]. Currently, people are expressing increased concern about the environmental and social effects of companies and tend to exert significant pressure on them to change their ways of conducting business by adopting a more sustainable way. Among researchers, sustainability practices of large companies were mostly discussed because these companies have high visibility in the community and also because their effects are easily identified [6,7].

Although a single SME does not have a great impact on environmental issues compared with a single large organization, put together, SMEs are responsible for a substantial part of resource consumption, air and water pollution, and waste generation. In Europe, they are estimated to create about 60–70% of industrial pollution [8]. The literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability has usually depicted SMEs as organizations with distinct features that differentiate them from large and multinational corporations, such that theories and tools used to study the latter are not always applicable to the former. In this regard, Jenkins (2004) even challenges the use of the term "corporate" in describing SMEs' approach to social responsibility [9]. Considering the relevance of SMEs to the world economy and the increasing pressure toward sustainability, understanding their approach to sustainability and ascertaining the drivers or barriers that influence their decisions and practices has become important.

In SMEs, entrepreneurs play a pivotal role, and studies have already highlighted the impact of their leadership styles on CSR or sustainability, thus feeding a field of research dedicated to sustainable entrepreneurs [10] or ecopreneurs [11]. Starting from this premise, the aim of the present study is to analyze in depth the approach of sustainable entrepreneurs toward sustainability implementation, by analyzing perceived pressures and drivers, by, in particular, focusing on SMEs and the real or apparent differences between them and large companies.

Thus, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main drivers or barriers of sustainability practice implementation?
RQ2: Are there any significant differences between small- and large-sized companies in their approach to sustainability practices implementation?

To address these research questions, we adopt a qualitative research method based on semi-structured interviews, which we consider the best option for exploring the issue. We conducted the interviews from January to June 2019 and considered a sample of 22 firms.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 is dedicated to a literature review on CSR and sustainability in SMEs and sustainable entrepreneurship. Section 3 describes the research methods, and Section 4 is dedicated to the analysis. Section 5 discusses the main insights and presents some concluding remarks and future research avenues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on CSR and Sustainability in SMEs

The approach of firms toward CSR and sustainability can vary in terms of type of strategic posture, ranging from simple reactive to more proactive ones [12,13]. Several studies try to figure out the factors driving the decision of SMEs to implement more in-depth sustainability practices, identifying as main factors external and internal pressures, expected benefits, and entrepreneur's motivation.

Among the studies attempting to categorize the motivations behind SMEs' pro-environmental management [14,15], Williams and Schaefer [15] cited competitiveness (business competitive pressure), legitimation (pressures from the external business environment, such as by stakeholders and regulation), and ecological responsibility (personal engagement or values of the entrepreneur) as the main motivations behind pro-environmental management. Another study [16] figured out how the environmental pressures driving the adoption of sustainability practices are exerted by the stakeholders in the supply chain, competitors, organizations in the area, and public administration, and how the most powerful pressures are those from the legal environment and organizations associated with the company's location. Relationships with stakeholders are proved to be relevant in pushing small firms to adopt environmental practices—Darnall et al. [17] found that, even if small firms are less likely to implement environmental practices compared with larger companies, the former are more responsive to value-chain, internal, and regulatory stakeholder pressures. In addition, small firms are more resource-constrained than large firms, but when affected by external pressures, they are less likely to invest their scant resources on political resistance, whereas their rapid decision-making process contributes to a quick response to stakeholders' requirements.

Following this field of research, Testa et al. [18] analyzed the drivers of proactive environmental strategies of small and micro firms in Italy by identifying three groups of possible drivers—internal factors, external pressures, and entrepreneur attitude. For internal drivers, they considered reduction of costs, of environmental footprint, and of environmental risk; for external pressures, they distinguished those of public authorities, customers (public and private), and competitors, in addition to the desire to promote a positive organizational image. The findings highlighted that the most powerful driver is the entrepreneur's attitude, followed by external pressures.

Added to external and internal pressures and entrepreneur attitude, perceived benefits are, according to the existing literature, one of the main drivers of sustainability practices implementation.

Several studies have highlighted that positive expectations regarding the benefits of CSR or environmental practices can push small entrepreneurs toward adopting such practices. Hamman et al. [19] investigated the relationships between SME owners' values, practices toward relevant stakeholder groups, and economic value created by cost reduction and/or increase in profits. Among benefits leading to increased economic value, they included increased motivation and satisfaction and lower absenteeism of employees; higher satisfaction and lower price sensitivity of customers; and positive image and reputation in the community.

Added to this, Cordano et al. [20], focusing on a sample of SME wineries in the US, tested the factors influencing decisions to adopt additional environmental management programs and found that the perception of benefits (i.e., costs reduction, increased demand, reputation, improved quality, and competitiveness), the norms perceived by the firm's employees (personal obligation to reduce pollution for minimizing environmental harm), and pressures from internal and external stakeholders have positive effects on such programs.

Awareness was also found to be a driver of sustainability management implementation in SMEs. Johnson [21], for example, found that the following three drivers appear to be relevant: the perception of relative advantage (e.g., in terms of reputation, competitiveness, costs, customer acquisition, and employee motivation), the awareness of tools, and organizational size. These results support other common findings on motivations and setbacks related to sustainability implementation in SMEs. The owner-manager's willingness to engage and promising benefits are drivers, whereas limited awareness and the design of tools suited to large corporations can be considered discouraging factors.

Studying sustainability practices implementation, Brammer et al. [22] distinguished between SMEs, arguing that the world of environmental management in SMEs is multifaceted and should therefore be studied in terms of its differences. In detail, they found that, among motivations, medium firms perceive more benefits related to long-term finances and market position than small firms. Among deterring factors, some authors have considered the obstacles SMEs face in applying CSR and sustainability. The authors of reference [23] found that the most powerful barriers appear to be the cost burden and skepticism about potential increase in profits owing to adopting environment-friendly practices, as well as lack of time and poor infrastructure to support environmental activities (e.g., recycling facilities for waste management).

Cassells and Lewis [24] analyzed the attitudes, actions, and expected benefits of a group of SMEs in New Zealand and reported that a gap exists between elements that entrepreneurs said are desirable for the environment and the activities that they actually perform. Further, another inconsistency emerged: The most frequently implemented practices appeared to be cost-driven practices, but most of the owner-managers involved were skeptical about the cost savings achievable and were also unsure that environmental improvements can help meet customers' needs. Hsu and Cheng [25] used the innovation diffusion theory to explain factors that prompt Taiwanese SMEs to practice CSR. Their analysis revealed that, among Taiwanese SMEs, managers' ethics and firm culture are drivers of CSR, whereas cost and lack of time and of guidance or benchmarks are barriers.

Further, a study [26] on a sample of 166 SMEs in Queensland proposed a model in which external pressures from stakeholders are assumed to affect environmental awareness and attitudes, which, in turn, affect environmental practices. The authors also suggested that some moderating variables can reduce the force of pressures on awareness and attitudes—owner characteristics, environmental information, and constraints of time and financial resources.

Moreover, qualitative studies have analyzed the peculiarities of SMEs in terms of sustainability management or innovation, mainly in light of knowledge-based or resource-based approaches [27–30]. The most prolific contributions on small business can be found in the "traditional" stream of literature dedicated to CSR in SMEs, which depicts these firms as constrained by many limitations and barriers [31]—lack of time, resources, appropriate information, and support services [32–34]; difficulties in measuring the benefits and maintaining the momentum of activities [35]; or in establishing the business case [36,37]. However, some have argued that these constraints are not really perceived by small firms [38].

Among relevant differences between SMEs and large companies, previous studies cited the relevance of the entrepreneur/CEO values in SMEs, their sense of belonging to the local community, the specificity of human resources management [32], the prevalence of "informal" practices of CSR and the reduced propensity to communicate them externally [35,39] or the difficulties in understanding CSR beyond the specific practices carried out by the firm [40].

2.2. Studies on Sustainable Entrepreneurship

The term sustainable entrepreneurship was initially used to indicate the process of discovering, evaluating, and exploiting economic opportunities that are present in market failures that detract from sustainability, including those that are environmentally relevant [41]. The literature has used different terms to indicate similar concepts, such as environmental entrepreneurship [42], ecopreneurship [43], and green entrepreneurship [44–46].

Several studies have analyzed sustainable entrepreneurship from the perspective of drivers and motivations. Miles et al. [47] asserts that it can be determined by demand-side conditions—such as practices required by consumers and/or governments—or can be a supply-side phenomenon—that is, because managers make a deliberate effort to become more socially responsible and environmentally aware. In both cases, the adoption of sustainable corporate entrepreneurship is highlighted by the combined presence of innovation (in products, processes, strategies, or business models) [10] and that of all three sustainability components—responsible environmental management, social accountability, and long-term economic performance.

From this point of view, sustainable entrepreneurship in more recent studies is considered the possibility to incorporate the principles of sustainable development [48], and thus Sustainable Development Goals [5] within entrepreneurial initiatives [49]; this means passing from generic references to sustainable development, to more precise relationships with planet boundaries [50].

By combining the priority of environmental and societal goals (ranging from low to high range of priority) and market effect (ranging from effects not yet marketable to effects spill over to society and politics at large), Schaltegger and Wagner [10] present a matrix in which sustainable entrepreneurship occupies the highest position with reference to both axis (high priority and effects to society and politics at large). This analysis led to a modified definition of sustainable entrepreneurship, which according to the matrix representation is defined as "in essence the realization of sustainability innovations aimed at the mass market and providing benefit to the larger part of society" [10] (p. 225).

The stress on market acknowledgment is a relevant factor, which links sustainable entrepreneurship with the issue of business case for sustainability [51], that is, the recognition of economic drivers toward sustainability implementation (e.g., cost and cost reduction, risk and risk reduction, sales and profit margin, reputation and brand value, attractiveness as employer, and innovative capabilities).

Conversely, a relevant part of the sustainable entrepreneurship literature has highlighted the relevance of entrepreneurs' motivation, their individual values, and their passion for sustainable business [52,53]. Moreover, studies on ecopreneurs [54] have suggested that ecopreneurial SMEs seek to achieve other goals alongside financial ones and are prepared to go to significant lengths to achieve such goals. Regardless, not all ecopreneurs are equal, and the different combinations of financial and societal purposes can indicate different paths of business model development [11].

As known, entrepreneurship can describe various phenomena [54], but many authors concentrate on the process of a start-up company (e.g., [45]). In this view, entrepreneurs are actors opening a new company, and entrepreneurship is the process of creating and establishing a new enterprise; another aspect of entrepreneurship is the striving for growth [55,56], such that entrepreneurs are viewed as actors enlarging companies and expanding businesses. The different approach of SMEs and large companies toward sustainable initiatives has rarely been addressed in the literature on sustainability entrepreneurship, and in these cases, the small size has been paired with the idea of new business. Hockerts and Wüstenhagen [57] asserted that early in the transformation of an industry toward sustainability, new entrants or "Emerging Davids" are more likely to pursue sustainability opportunities. Eventually, incumbent firms respond to the new entrants and adopt sustainability practices. These "Greening Goliaths" are less progressive but have considerable impact because of their existing market presence. Ultimately, new entrants and incumbents co-evolve, creating incentives and competitive positions that allow both to survive.

By combining sustainability in the SME literature and sustainable entrepreneurship literature, some further insights can be gained by comparing small and large firms already established in the market in their approach to sustainability, to understand whether and how differences highlighted by the CSR literature persist when viewed with sustainable entrepreneurship lenses.

3. Methods

This study aimed to comprehend the approach of SME entrepreneurs toward sustainability implementation by analyzing perceived pressures and drivers and the existence of any real or apparent differences between SMEs and large companies. For this purpose, the study adopts a qualitative research method. That is, to achieve the aims of the study, face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with 22 participants from Italian firms of different sizes (i.e., nine small, five medium and five large firms) selected because of their well-known social and environmental commitment. The firms identified carry out different activities (i.e., seven food and wine production; three chemical, basic material, and plastic transformation; three wood transformation and furniture production; two paper production; two public utilities; and the remaining five—packaging, book printing, building, tannery, and office products). The choice to select and analyze firms carrying out different activities was motivated by the willing to shed light on any specific industry-related differences in sustainability approach. On the other side, trying to get a minimum level of homogeneity we selected firms all belonging to the broad manufacturing sector.

We established an interview protocol to ensure that similar procedures were followed for all firms analyzed [58]. Through the interviews, we addressed the top executives of the sample firms, particularly the chief executive officer (CEO) (that in many cases was also owner/president), the chief financial officer (CFO), the sustainability manager, the communication manager, or the R&D manager. We addressed them because they are the most powerful and influential members of the organization; they set the company's strategy, make high-stake decisions, and ensure the day-to-day operations align with the company's strategic goals. To supplement and triangulate the interview results for enhancing the rigor of the qualitative study [59], we collect directly from the firms interviewed, documents such as annual reports, planning documents, and other relevant information on sustainability activities. We also analyzed the web sites of firms interviewed to get any relevant secondary data.

The interviews lasted from 40 to 75 min and were gathered in the period from January to June 2019. The majority of interviews were conducted by two researchers: one was in charge of conducting the interviews by following the research framework, whereas the other took field notes about interviewees' attitudes. At the beginning of each interview, the aim and nature of the research was explained, and the need to pay attention to their perceptions and experience was underline. During the interviews, the researcher focused the questions on a limited number of core points, to obtain the required information. The open-ended questions enhanced the discussion, and the interviewee's involvement helped to cover all the issues of research interest [60].

The interviews conducted in this way provided several insights about the ideas of sustainability, the motivation and pressures experienced in implementing sustainability practices and the perceptions of related benefits and limitations.

All interview content was stored in a database in which we recorded answers, transcripts, and notes. Next, adopting a content analysis approach, we analyzed the texts through coding [61,62]. More in detail, the coding phase first considered open coding, which permitted identification of the main issues and general content in the analysis data. Following this, through axial coding, the open coding was shaped to identify the relevant categories to determine the enabling factors. Finally, the selective coding was employed to summarize the enabling factors of the core aspects. The analysis and the several related coding phases were managed through Atlas.ti 7.0 software (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany), a well-known support for qualitative studies. Finally, we discussed our results with the interviewees to validate these.

4. Analysis

To understand the approach of sustainable entrepreneurs in small and large firms, some aspects have been considered in detail deepened during the interviews, mainly concerning factors that drive entrepreneurs toward sustainability. Starting from the literature about sustainability in SMEs and about sustainable entrepreneurship, we identified the following different forces acting as determining or hindering factors: (1) pressures from external environment (in particular, from market and customers, or from industry and competitors); (2) expected benefits of sustainability implementation (which act as drivers for the business case for sustainability: reputation, competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, and organizational commitment); (3) entrepreneur's characteristics in guiding strategy practices implementation (with particular reference to entrepreneur's motivation, values, and vision).

As for the first factor identified (pressures from external environment), some relevant differences emerge between SMEs and larger enterprises. Most of the large firms interviewed perceive pressure from the external environment as a key driver for sustainability strategy implementation, and among the external factors, this factor has particular relevance depending on the industry to which the firm belongs. In more detail, when the nature of activity (and hence the industry) is perceived as highly sensitive (e.g., regarding pollution items), firms are driven to pay attention to sustainability issues (i.e., the environment), and the larger the size (and consequently, the relevance for the specific community), the more the firms are expected to act in a sustainable way. Another relevant driver identified from the external environment is the competitors' attitude toward sustainability practices, since large firms consider the best practices implemented by some competitors (that are sometimes located in other countries considered more advanced in terms of sustainable development policies) as good examples to follow. Apart from the industry and competitors' attitude, the market (intended as the demand side of the market) is cited as a force that pushes firms toward sustainability. In fact, the topic of sustainability has gathered momentum within traditional media and social media debates and consumers are increasingly interested in obtaining information about firms' approach to environmental and social issues. In most cases, consumers exert pressure directly; they usually target mass retailers or large multinational players by taking advantage of their bargaining power and dictate specific sustainability requirements to suppliers (related both to internal processes and organization practices and to the product supplied).

The role of external factors in driving sustainability implementation is less significant with reference to SMEs. A small number of SMEs considered in this study pointed out the perception of external pressure, and stated that when it occurred, it was always related to the relationship with particular customers, such as mass retailers, big luxury brands, or a highly exposed industry, which, as already highlighted for large firms, impose specific sustainability requirements. In general, SMEs indicated the prevalence of internal motivations, rather than external ones, toward implementing sustainability practices sustainability.

The second relevant driver identified is the perception of benefits in terms of financial performance or operational success. This driver is usually included in the economic and strategic motivations driving the adoption of sustainability practices, also called "the business case" for sustainability [36,37].

Different from the finding that emerged regarding the external factors influencing sustainability strategies, large enterprises and SMEs both agree on the relevance of the perception of benefits as among the main drivers behind implementation of sustainability practices. Moreover, all the entrepreneurs interviewed struggled to identify direct economic benefits from sustainability, but rather, spoke about intermediate measures of business success, such as reputation, competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, and employee commitment. Nevertheless, despite the general agreement on the relevance of the driver, some relevant differences between large enterprises and SMEs are noteworthy. In more detail, when asked about the benefits they perceived were obtained by adopting sustainability strategies, most of the entrepreneurs of large firms referred to reputational gains, whereas those of SMEs attached more relevance to the role of sustainability as a tool to differentiate themselves from competitors. In fact, if large firms point out that being sustainable means having a reputation of being a trustworthy, honest, transparent, empathetic firm, SMEs recognize the potential contribution of sustainability practices to the reach of strategy differentiation. In particular, according to several small firms, sustainability commitment has been a way to be a first-mover player and a tool that allows them to be recognized as different, most of all from competitors "that do not play a fair game." Moreover, the differentiation arising from sustainability commitment can be, according to small firms, a strong driver toward product innovation.

As regards the measurement of sustainability benefits, entrepreneurs of SMEs and large firms both said that it is difficult to measure the benefits, mainly because of the soft nature of the benefits themselves. In other words, almost all the entrepreneurs interviewed were convinced that their sustainable approach would yield them some beneficial outcomes, but were yet to identify and measure these outcomes. Of note, the perceived difficulty in the measurement of sustainability benefits does not represent a barrier to implementation of sustainability practices; rather, it is merely a factor that does not influence entrepreneurs' attitude toward sustainability. In other words, the drivers of sustainable commitment cannot be identified in the expected results, but can be elsewhere, that is, in internal and personal motivations and in the role played by the entrepreneurs themselves. In fact, despite admitting the presence of external pressures and of economic and success drivers (even if not measurable or difficult to measure), the real determining factor of sustainability implementation for all the different types of firms (regardless of their size) is related to the entrepreneur figure.

As for small firms' entrepreneurs, almost all the interviewees highlighted their leadership role, in which the leader can be defined as the individual who drives the firm, has the vision, and draws the path to follow. In this sense, entrepreneurs perceive the duty of setting the right example, and when the commitment to sustainability is real and recognized by the stakeholders, it can reinforce the entrepreneur's identity and legitimacy. However, from where does such commitment arise? According to small firm entrepreneurs, the drivers of sustainable practices have roots in their inner features, their personal sensitivity, and the values handed down from one generation to another. It is a way of being, which involves not forgetting the importance of value creation but simultaneously maintaining a special focus on something that goes beyond it. The reference to the personal sphere of values is quite explicit among the large firms' entrepreneurs as well, and the only difference is that when they spoke about entrepreneurship, they often spoke about an entire family and not just about themselves. In this case, as regards the sphere of values, they refer to a set of soft elements, such as faith, ideas, and thoughts that build the footprint of the family that runs the business.

In general, and without significant differences related to firm size, the interviews shed light on some specific features that characterize sustainable entrepreneurs. A sustainable entrepreneur is an open-minded, visionary individual, who is curious regarding global events, and is someone who take cares of other people, be they employees, communities, or future generations. Moreover, almost all the entrepreneurs interviewed in this study have a similar idea of business goals—they viewed the firm as a social actor that actively plays to respond to society's needs. In this sense, sustainability is perceived as a tool to definitively overcome the old ideological conflict between capital and labor, or between entrepreneurs and employees; they are different parts of the same entity, and they play different roles but with a unique, larger goal: enhancing people's quality of life.

This way of being an entrepreneur and doing business is strictly related to the time span of the firm's purpose that cannot be limited to the short term (i.e., profit-oriented goal) but that necessarily requires a longer perspective. Only by adopting a long-term perspective can firms create and capture long-lasting value (both financial and social value), and just by creating long-lasting value, firms can have a future.

In summary, according to the entrepreneurs interviewed, a commitment to sustainability allows firms to broaden their borders, both in a spatial way (because of the role firms have in the community of reference) and in a temporal way (because of the time span of a firm's purpose).

The strong emphasis on the entrepreneur role, values, and personal features sheds lights on the other side of the coin: Culture, intended as the set of personal history, education, values, and thoughts, can play a strong and positive role on sustainability commitment, but simultaneously, if the entrepreneur's culture is not consistent with sustainability issues, culture itself can be the main barrier to sustainability practice implementation. To explain further, although some interviewees recognized the costs of implementing some practices or of adopting specific sustainability tools, the general idea emerging from both large and small enterprises is that the main limiting factor is the absence of a consistent business culture. This finding implies that financial or resource constraints are not the real problem (even in small businesses); rather, these are a pretext to abandon initiatives that are not part of an entrepreneur's vision and culture.

The (wrong) perception that some initiatives are expensive is related to the short-term vision that, as already underlined, is not consistent with the time span of firm's purposes, that is, with a culture built around a sustainable approach.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Starting from the literature about sustainability in SMEs and sustainable entrepreneurship, we verify the role of three main groups of factors in influencing sustainability practices implementation (1) pressures from external environment, (2) expected benefits of sustainability implementation and (3) entrepreneur's inner features in guiding strategy practices implementation. Some of the interview results are consistent with those of the literature, but in some cases, they also offer new insights that give room for more in-depth exploration of this topic. In general, the widely cited reference [6] to relevant differences in small and large firms' approach to sustainability has been partially denied by the interviewed entrepreneurs.

As for the first group of factors, (pressures form external environment) the interviews confirm the relevance of the drivers and some significant differences between large firms and SMEs. In particular, large firms perceive more external pressures and pay more attention to reputational concerns than do small firms. By contrast, small firms rarely admit the role of customer solicitation in the decision to implement sustainability practices, but they appear well aware of the strategic role of sustainability in business as a differentiation tool (i.e., the business case for sustainability). The frequent reference to competitive advantage (differentiation advantage) in small firms contrasts with the frequent reports in the literature on CSR in SMEs, such as the difficulty faced by SMEs in establishing the business case for sustainability [36,37]. Conversely, our analysis shows that sustainability implementation could be more embedded in the SME business model than in that of large companies, since the latter are more worried about external pressures and more prone to image-driven initiatives to gain a positive reputation.

As regards measuring the benefits of sustainability (i.e., the second group of factors), all entrepreneurs, without any significant difference between small and large firms, express difficulties or deny the existence of a direct relationship between sustainability practices and financial performance, a finding that is partially in contrast with that of the literature on this topic [17]. This difference gives room for conducting studies aimed at conducting in-depth investigations deepening on the issue of sustainability measurement in entrepreneurial decision-making.

In addition, with reference to the third group of factors identified in the literature (i.e., entrepreneur's values, culture, and business goals) we do not find any relevant differences between SMEs and large firms. Almost all the entrepreneurs emphasized the pivotal role of their values in transmitting the sustainability message within and outside the organization, underlining in this way how their way of being entrepreneurs is the first motivation toward sustainability implementation [10,11,18]: Their sustainability commitment has strong, deep roots in their culture, that is, in their history, values, and way of thinking. The relevance of the entrepreneurs' role also emerged when interviewees were asked to describe possible limitations and constraints related to implementing sustainability practices: interviewees from both small and large firms pointed out the business culture issue, that in some cases, is considered sufficiently powerful to overcome the operating constraints usually referred to by the literature on CSR in SMEs (i.e., limitations of time, cost, resources, and competencies) [23].

This study has several limitations, including the fact that it considers a limited number of firms and the fact that it is focused only on the Italian context. Future research should consider a wider sample of cases, including organizations belonging to different countries to verify how different cultural contexts may influence the results. However, despite these limitations, this study contributes to the sustainable entrepreneurship literature by discussing the size factor outside the classical juxtaposition between "small and new" and "large and old," and it also adds new perspectives about entrepreneurs' role to the literature on sustainability in firms. These new insights would have political, managerial, and research implications. From a political point of view, it seems that initiatives aimed at sharing and spreading the sustainability culture could be effective in both small and large firms. From a managerial point of view, initiatives to integrate these issues in management could be focused on sustainability knowledge enhancement rather than on merely adapting tools conceived for large corporations to the SME context. Finally, future research paths can better address the old "small vs. large debate" by considering the attributes of family firms as well as organizational size.

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