

The impact of certificates on customer perception of the product

Rafał Stańczyszyn^{1,†}

¹Lead researcher

This manuscript was compiled on November 1, 2024

Abstract

Certificates come in different shapes and sizes, each serving a specific purpose. They are meant to inform the client about the product's role, quality, and production standards. This study aims to determine whether the various kinds of certifications from respected authorities enhance consumer trust, loyalty, or satisfaction. Though the study operates within the context of certificates provided by small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), it is not limited to them. Certifications, whether required by law or granted by independent bodies, are designed to signal product quality, reliability, and ethical standards. This study examines how consumers perceive these certifications and what motivates them to choose certified products over non-certified alternatives. The methods used for the study include an online questionnaire completed by 200 participants and face-to-face interviews with five individuals. These approaches were chosen to gather both quantitative and qualitative insights into consumer attitudes toward certifications. The results show that certifications play a significant role in building consumer trust, often leading them to view certified products as higher quality. Many participants indicated a willingness to spend more on products with certifications, particularly when these certifications align with ethical values such as sustainability, animal welfare, or local sourcing. Notably, differences emerged between genders, with women generally placing greater importance on certifications than men. However, confusion surrounding lesser-known or unclear certifications can reduce their effectiveness, which points out the evident importance of clarity and recognition in the context of certificates. Overall, this study highlights the importance of certifications in influencing consumer behavior and emphasizes the need for SMEs to strategically utilize recognized and reputable certifications to enhance their market presence and increase customer loyalty.

Keywords: Certificate, Certification, Quality, Trust, Motivation, SMEs

Corresponding author: Rafał Stańczyszyn *E-mail address:* 234778@buas.nl
Received: November 1, 2024
Rho LaTeX Class © This document is licensed under Creative Commons CC BY 4.0.

1. Introduction

In a capitalist society, companies, including SMEs, aim to gain clients' attention, trust, and loyalty which in the long term leads to the increase of the company's income. One way that is supposed to ensure the quality and attractiveness of the product is to achieve the quality certificate. That is also a method for containing information about the subject of purchase. Whether it was mandatory - demanded by the legal authority, or an extra certificate of quality gained from an independent organization. There are many reasons for the client to give their attention to the products or services certificate some of them appear alone and some in combination, based on the person's subjective experience [3]. The certificates are meant to reduce confusion [3] and grant additional information that would not be as easily verifiable for an average customer in a simple digestible manner so that no specialized research abilities and extra time are needed. The certificate, in our interviewer's opinion, is sometimes seen as a default (supposedly the ones mandated by the government to ensure the safety of the products), as an extra mark of high quality, or as a product that obliges some cultural or ethical standards. Surprisingly in some places because of cultural differences, the population cares about the certification because of reasons such as patriotism [3] or local culture and its uniqueness [2], such as in the case of EU quality schemes. That does not mean they are not overlooked or do not produce confusion [3]. However, in this research, some interviewers found certificates helpful and are ready to spend their money on the certificate version rather than the one without it. This research paper will tackle the question „Do the certifications from respected authorities significantly enhance consumer trust, which leads to increased customer loyalty and satisfaction?” which will be related to the issue of how many people appreciate certificates is there, how much they care for the certificate, what are the reasons, what are their thoughts on them, and whether they merely say that they appreciate the certificates when in reality they do not care about it enough to spend extra time and resources. Furthermore, the relationship between views on certificates and demographic data, such as gender or age, will also

be examined. This knowledge will help SMEs to measure whether it is worth spending resources to gain the certificate and for what kind they should aim for. The research was conducted by examining scientific research papers, counting five interviews of people of different ages, genders, and nationalities, taking their opinions on certification into consideration, and by reviewing a survey in which 200 individuals took part in which they analyzed two questions conforming directly to the objective of this study. The hypothesis of this article is that quality certificates generally increase the client's trust and loyalty, the client cares for them, and SMEs are suggested to obtain them in different forms. No matter if it's gained the certificate of quality or ethical sourcing of the product which increases client's enthusiasm and may lead them to choose this product, even over cheaper alternatives, or if it is a mere safety standard certificate that makes people trust the product enough to buy it in the first place, as this researcher's interviews showed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Quality Certificates in Consumer Decision-Making

This literature review examines the existing research on the role of quality certifications in consumer behavior, highlighting various perspectives on how these certificates influence purchasing decisions.

2.2. The Importance of Quality in Consumer Choices

According to the study of opinions on the quality certificates of Polish and Belgian citizens, the quality of the product was an important factor taken into consideration before purchasing. In the study, when asked the vast majority of respondents (93.5%) admitted that they “definitely” or “rather” take into account the quality of the product when shopping [3]. Another study, this time on the poultry feed industry claims that the perception of product quality influences business success [4]. It is the most important, but not the only factor that the customers look at the studies say [3][4].

2.3. Gender and Age Differences in Awareness of Quality Certificates

Studies on Polish and Belgian customers show that with the increasing age, the quality of the product is becoming more important to the customer. Furthermore, there is a notable gender divide when it comes to awareness and understanding of quality certificates. Women often are more aware of the meaning of the quality certificates than men, which might be partly because Polish women specifically are often motivated to search for the certificate because of moral or ethical reasons. Paradoxically, women in Poland also are often confused by the certificates and labels and tend to distrust non-transparent sources of the certification givers [3].

2.4. Confusion and Skepticism Surrounding Certifications

Distrust of various certificates and labels is surely a present view as well, and not a minor one. Studies show that even if a number of customers are aware of the existence of food quality certificates, they are often not informed enough about their meaning, source, and function. There are some studies referenced that suggest that "respondents simply do not know them, do not understand their message to the full extent or perceive a relatively low quality vs. price ratio for products with quality labels." One respondent in the "Certification Labels in Shaping Perception of Food Quality—Insights from Polish and Belgian Urban Consumers." study mentioned, "I recognize the sign 'Znak jakości Q' (Q Quality Mark) and Poznaj Dobrą Żywność (Try Fine Food); these signs appeared somewhere, but I don't understand what they exactly mean." Moreover, the certificates are sometimes even viewed as a mere means of advertisement and justification of the higher price or greenwashing. However, it's important to remember that the study suggests the reason for confusion might be the trait of some concrete certificates, not certification in general [3] [4].

2.5. Cultural and Ethical Considerations in Certification Perception

As previously highlighted, customer choice is perhaps surprisingly often shown to be influenced by moral or ethical standards, not just economical or rational ones [3]. Some of them are motivated to purchase products that are local or produced in the country of the customer, which is an expression of patriotism and respect for local traditions [3][2]. Others have religious motives in mind and look for halal food products [4]. There is also a number of people who aim for certificates that convey the ecological sourcing of the product. It is supposed to be made with minimal harm to the environment and with minimal exploitation of animals [3] [5]. The fair-trade quality label plays a noticeable role in this field, especially in the coffee industry. It informs the customer that the product was sold under equitable conditions. [5]. In response to some of these sentiments, the European Union established the "EU quality schemes," which aim to protect the uniqueness of products unique to the local culture. [2]. Studies suggest that customers who look for signs such as this are often willing to pay more for the product [1].

2.6. Effective Communication of Quality through Certifications

Despite the challenges associated with certifications, some studies highlight the positive impact that well-designed and transparent certification systems can have on consumer behavior. Research from the Eurobarometer indicates that a significant portion of European consumers, ranging from 33% in 2017 to 41% in 2020, consider quality certificates as crucial factors in their purchasing decisions. These numbers are backed by other studies as well [3]. The certificates that managed to establish a positive reputation on the market also seem to be effective in bringing the attention of customers. The most effective ones are the ones that seem the most understandable, impactful, and trustworthy [1][4].

2.7. Common Factors of Ineffective Certificates

The certificates that are achieved by winning the competition or award are only important for around 24% of the customers [3]. Furthermore, products or the overly frequent presence of certificates might produce confusion and discourage potential clients or make them ignore the certificate in the first place. Similarly, the certificates from lesser-known sources are less likely to produce excitement [3].

2.8. The Role of Quality Certifications in Modern Markets

The certificates serve as a "filter" which helps customers determine the product's value. Studies point out that their effectiveness depends on the recognition of the certification body. The SMEs should aim for well-established and recognizable certificates that tackle ethical subjects and give people the sense that they are doing something higher, that's for the general good while purchasing (not the ones gained by the comparison) [3][4].

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative analysis

The study was conducted using the person-to-person interview method and an online form with a number of questions about the topic of SMEs and their clients generally. The interviews consisted of a series of questions about SMEs' way of providing information to the client. Two of the questions were specifically about the certificates. The team conducted five interviews with individuals diversified by age, gender, and nationality. The interviews were conducted in English or Dutch (and then translated into English). The interviews' goal was to collect people's individual experiences, stories, and feelings in order to get a deeper and more personal understanding of people's approach to certification. Before the interview, the participants were given an information letter that explained the reasons for the interview and how the data would be stored. The interview had 10 questions and a number of sub-questions that were provided if the time allowed. It was supposed to last around 30 minutes, but the duration of time was, in the end, determined by the interviewer. The questions that tackled the issue of the certificate were:

- Are you usually motivated to buy a company's product or use its services because it has a quality certificate? Why or why not?
- Do you think it's worth it for SME owners to spend resources to aim for a quality certificate for their company?

The participants shared their individual experiences, opinions, and thoughts related to the questions.

3.2. Quantitative analysis

The online questionnaire was answered by 200 randomly sampled respondents. To clean the data, the rows of three participants had to be deleted since there were some questions that did not contain an answer from them. Overall, the form contained 66 questions, where 2 asked directly about the person's approach and opinion regarding certificates, which were:

- Q14_1: "Is it worth it for small and medium enterprises to invest in quality marks/certificates?"
- Q14_2: "I've been motivated to buy a product/service because it has a quality certificate."

Both of the questions were, ranked from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree). The purpose of the first question was to encourage the respondent to consider the value of spending resources, such as money, on a certification. This perspective is meant to come from someone who is personally investing their funds, highlighting the risk involved. The answer was expected to be introspective because, typically, people might not think much about whether they truly need a certification. However, the question was designed to prompt them to reflect on whether the certification is worth its cost.

The second question was supposed to determine if the certificates effectively motivated people to purchase the product. Other questions about gender and age were also used during the qualitative data analysis. To research the relationship between trusting SMEs overall and trusting certificates, the question from form Q12- „How often do you verify the credibility of SME-related information before making a decision?”—where possible answers were “Rarely,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” and “Always”—was taken into consideration during the quantitative data analyses.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative data

The quantitative data showed that the answers to the question (Q14_1), whether it's worth it for small and medium enterprises to invest in quality marks/certificates were overwhelmingly positive. More than 3/4 of the questionnaire respondents answered either 4 or 5, where the mean of total responses was around 4.03, and the standard deviation was 0.807545. Histograms helped to reveal which gender or age group responded more positively to that question. The suspicions of a gender divide led to conducting a t-test, which checked the differences between the means, followed by a Chi-squared test where the p-value was approximately 0.0003, which proved significant gender differences in the answers. Then the normality check of questions Q14_1 and Q12 (which indirectly measured trust in SMEs, as it tackled an issue of fact-checking SMEs by the client) was conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which appeared to be not normally distributed since the p-value was below 0.05 (except for the non-significant category “Rarely,” where it was slightly above the threshold at 0.054). Following these results, a Kruskal-Wallis H-test was conducted to compare responses across groups that answered differently for the Q12 question. The test result, with an H-statistic of 3.12 and a p-value of 0.37, showed no significant differences between them. This suggests that trust group, unlike gender, does not significantly affect perceptions of the importance of quality certifications. A similar study method was applied to the question of motivation (Q14_2)—whether respondents had been motivated to buy a product/service because it had a quality certificate—the data also indicated a generally positive response. The mean response was 3.81, with a standard deviation of 1.025, indicating moderate to strong agreement with the statement. The histogram analysis showed similar patterns in terms of gender differences, suggesting that the female respondents were more likely to respond more positively to the question, which lead to further statistical tests. An independent t-test confirmed that gender significantly impacted motivation, with a p-value of 0.03. The Chi-square test supported this finding, showing a significant association between gender and purchasing motivation based on quality certificates ($p = 0.03$). The women seemed to be more motivated by the presence of certifications than men. As with trust in quality marks, the normality test for motivation (Q14_2) indicated a non-normal distribution. The Kruskal-Wallis H-test for motivation across age groups was conducted, resulting in an H-statistic of 6.60 and a p-value of 0.086, which was not enough to confirm that age had a strong influence on motivation to buy, based on quality marks. The correlation between Q14_1 (opinion on certification) and Q14_2 (motivation to purchase) was calculated at 0.50, indicating a moderate positive relationship. This suggests that respondents who believed it was important for SMEs to invest in quality certifications were also more likely to be motivated to purchase products with such certifications.

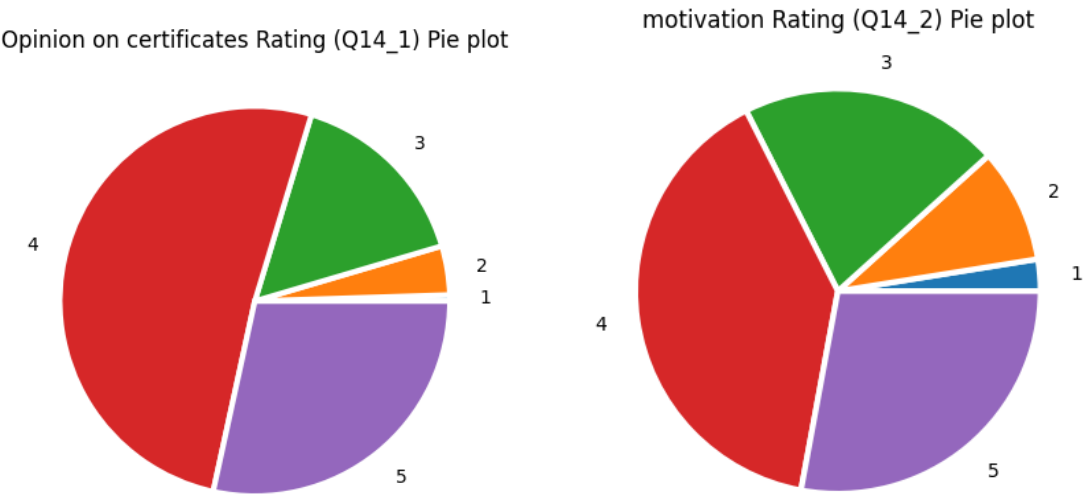
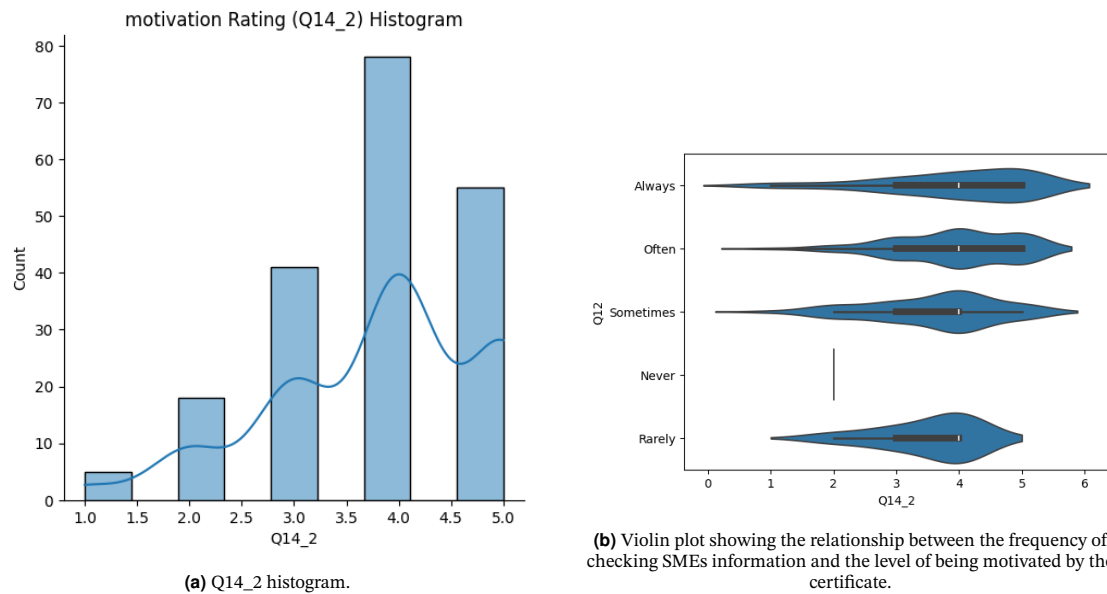
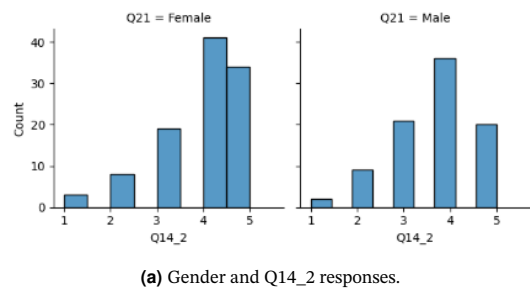


Figure 1. Comparison of the proportions of respondents to Q14_1 and Q14_2 question.



4.2. Qualitative data

The interviews showed relatively diverse views on the certification. The interviewees expressed both trust and distrust in quality certificates, which sometimes were related to the source of certification. One interviewee said, "If I see that a product has been reviewed by The Wall Street Times or something, some major publication made an article on it, then you know that it's probably a better product. So I think it does matter. But if it's just some random quality assurance from some random company, then it means nothing." Another added, "There's no organization that gives a quality certificate; I think it's just fake stuff, and it's just related to how popular the brand is." Contrary to the distrust opinions, there were some more positive opinions on the concept of certifications too: "If there are two bakeries, for example, and on one, you can see the certificate of quality and on the other one not, I would go to the certificate." One person expected the quality certificates as the default, and their opinion was outside of the trust/distrust spectrum. They said, "The basic thing, the last thing you should have is a certificate." The interviewees had many diverse reasons for valuing certificates and were sometimes even ready to pay more because of them. One of them was more ethical: "For animal products, this plays a significant role. I want animals to have had a good life, and if the prices are just slightly higher than for products without certification, I will still choose the certified product." Another focused more on the quality of the product: "A certificate has to be good even if it is more expensive than the certificate." The interviewees' views on whether SMEs should aim for the certificate were related to their own opinions on the topic of certificates. Those who trusted certifications tended to advocate for SMEs to invest in them, while those who were skeptical questioned their actual value. These diverse perspectives have been extracted into key themes in the thematic analysis: trust and distrust in certificates, viewing certifications as a default standard or as something optional, the ethical or quality motivations for certification, and the opinion that certification might be especially beneficial for small companies that aim to build trust. Additionally, attention to the source of certification appeared to be a crucial factor in determining its credibility.

5. Discussion

Both in the qualitative and quantitative research parts of this study trust in the certificates was expressed, correlated with positive opinions on them and valuing the product's quality. However, compared to the form which results suggest common trust in the certificates, respondents who criticized the certificates were overrepresented among the interviewers. The findings of this study noted the phenomenon of distrusting the certificates, finding their purpose confusing, and considering their source, as did previous ones. Both parts of this study once compared to previous studies similarly share, that respondents who were willing to pay more for higher-quality products and admitted to being motivated by the certificates to purchase a product. Contrary to previous research, this study found no significant differences in the perception of certificates between different age groups. The gender difference, however, is confirmed. Personal values, such as caring about the environment, played a role in encouraging people to look for the certificates. The studies agree that certifications can act as trust indicators, but only when the source is recognizable and trustworthy. Our interviews align with the literature in that well-known and reliable certificates are more effective, whereas obscure ones can lead to skepticism.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the significant role that quality certifications play in shaping consumer perceptions. Certifications are widely perceived as valuable, increasing trust in the product and motivating consumers to make purchases. They act as a "filter," allowing people to quickly assess a product's trustworthiness, eco-friendliness, and ethical standards. Even when there is some confusion surrounding certifications, not many people are entirely indifferent to their presence or absence. Clients frequently associate certifications with higher quality, and many are willing to pay more for certified products. Ethical aspects, such as eco-friendliness, animal welfare, and local production, also have a notable influence, offering consumers the opportunity to satisfy their sense of social responsibility. This moral alignment can strongly drive their preference for certified over non-certified products. SMEs should avoid pursuing certifications that are unclear or have a vague meaning, as well as refrain from collecting too many different certifications, which may confuse consumers. Additionally, certifications won from niche competitions may not provide significant gains. Instead, the SMEs are advised to aim for certifications that are well-recognized, clear, and prestigious to enhance consumer trust and market credibility. This approach is particularly beneficial for SMEs aiming to attract female customers, as studies show that women are often more responsive towards certifications reflecting ethical standards and quality. When implemented wisely, certifications are a powerful tool, transmitting essential information in a clear and accessible way. However, their effectiveness depends on being familiar, reputable, and not overwhelming in quantity. There are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. The quantitative analysis contained only two direct questions regarding certifications, which may have constrained the depth of insight. Additionally, despite efforts to minimize bias, participants' answers might have been influenced by the phrasing of questions, leading them to respond more positively towards certifications than they might in real-life scenarios. This potential bias could also have affected interview responses. Overall, the study confirms that quality certifications hold a significant impact on consumer behavior, especially for SMEs. However, their success relies on clarity, reputation, and an alignment with ethical values. These findings show the importance of the need for an intentional and thoughtful approach to certification issues—a strategy that effectively balances consumer expectations with the practical reality of SME marketing. A focus on well-perceived and ethical certifications can lead to increased trust, loyalty, and a competitive advantage in the market.

References

- [1] M.-C. Renard, "Quality certification, regulation and power in fair trade", *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 419–431, 2005. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.09.002.
- [2] E. Commission, *Geographical indications and quality schemes explained*, 2018. [Online]. Available: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes-explained_en.
- [3] J. Kaczorowska *et al.*, "Certification labels in shaping perception of food quality—insights from polish and belgian urban consumers", *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 702, 2021. DOI: 10.3390/su13020702. [Online]. Available: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/2/702>.
- [4] K. Pandanwangi *et al.*, "Does product certification matter? a review of mechanism to influence customer loyalty in the poultry feed industry", *Open Agriculture*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2023. DOI: 10.1515/opag-2022-0160.
- [5] S. M. Philpott and T. Dietsch, *Bird-friendly and fair trade certification: Linking consumers to sustainability*. [Online]. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thomas-Dietsch/publication/255631659_Bird-Friendly_and_Fair_Trade_Certification_Linking_Consumers_to_Sustainability/links/5649643608ae451880aacea7/Bird-Friendly-and-Fair-Trade-Certification-Linking-Consumers-to-Sustainability.pdf.