



## MADE IN ALBANIA FOR THE WORLD: A STUDY OF EXPORT STRATEGIES AND MARKET CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** The internationalization of Albanian products, under the label “Made in Albania”, presents a strategic opportunity for enhancing national economic growth, employment, and global recognition. This paper explores the findings from comprehensive surveys and four focus group discussions conducted with a total of 12 Albanian producers across key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and artisanal goods. The primary aim was to assess current export practices, identify persistent barriers to internationalization, and understand producer perceptions regarding foreign markets. Data revealed that while a significant proportion of producers are active in exports, their strategies often lack formal market analysis and structured planning. Major challenges include difficulties in meeting international quality standards, high logistical costs, limited digital marketing capacities, and a weak international brand image. Producers demonstrated a strong interest in emerging regional markets and emphasized the growing demand for sustainable and culturally distinctive products. The research highlights the need for targeted policy interventions, capacity-building programs, and public-private partnerships to support export growth. Additionally, the study underscores the role of digitalization and strategic branding in enhancing Albania’s competitiveness. Findings contribute to academic discourse on SME internationalization and provide practical recommendations for stakeholders seeking to elevate Albania’s presence in global market.

**Keywords:** Export practices, international markets, Made in Albania, trade barriers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Albanian products into international markets represents a critical opportunity for the country's economic modernization, export diversification, and global competitiveness. Despite Albania’s geographic proximity to key European markets and its rich cultural and natural product base, the internationalization of Albanian producers remains limited compared to regional counterparts (World Bank, 2021). Many firms continue to export

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through unstructured, reactive approaches rather than proactive strategic planning, limiting both market penetration and brand development (Morgan et al., 2021; Lica & Gashi, 2024).

Empirical research shows that country-of-origin perceptions significantly affect foreign consumer behavior, impacting trust, quality assessments, and willingness to purchase (Godey et al., 2012; Costa et al., 2016; Lica et al., 2021; Liça & Gashi, 2023). Albanian products, however, suffer from low international brand awareness and sporadic marketing efforts, which hinders their potential for value-added exports. Meanwhile, trade policies and national development strategies, such as Albania's National Strategy for Development and Integration (2015–2020), emphasize the need to enhance export capacities, promote innovation, and integrate into European value chains.

Understanding the perspectives and experiences of Albanian producers is therefore crucial to designing effective interventions that support export readiness. Focus groups and comprehensive surveys, particularly involving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are essential tools to uncover the real challenges and opportunities producers face (Cuervo-Cazurra & Un, 2023). This paper presents findings from such activities, targeting the identification of current export practices, barriers to internationalization, and perceptions of foreign market dynamics.

By systematically capturing the voices of producers through structured fieldwork, this study aims not only to enrich academic understanding of SME internationalization in emerging economies but also to offer practical policy recommendations for Albania's trade development agenda. In doing so, it seeks to position "Made in Albania" as a globally recognized and competitive label.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from emerging economies has been extensively studied, with researchers emphasizing the critical role of strategic planning, innovation, and brand positioning in export success (Cuervo-Cazurra & Un, 2023). In the context of Albania, however, the literature remains relatively sparse, highlighting the need for localized research to understand the unique barriers and opportunities faced by domestic producers.

One fundamental determinant of international competitiveness is the country-of-origin (COO) effect, which shapes how foreign consumers perceive product quality and trustworthiness. Studies show that a positive COO image can significantly enhance the attractiveness of products, particularly in premium segments (Arghashi & Okumuş, 2022; Costa et al., 2016). Conversely, a weak COO image, as observed with Albanian products, can become a liability, necessitating strategic branding efforts (Godey et al., 2012).

Research by Lica and Gashi (2024) suggests that Albanian firms often lack proactive internationalization strategies, relying instead on ad hoc opportunities. Their study of Albanian manufacturing firms emphasized that few businesses invest in structured market intelligence, export certification, or long-term brand development, elements found crucial by Angulo-Ruiz et al. (2022) for successful expansion into foreign markets.

Another crucial factor identified in the literature is digital transformation. The increasing relevance of digital marketing, e-commerce platforms, and online branding significantly lowers the barriers to market entry, especially for SMEs from developing economies (Dethine et al., 2020; Fahmy & Ragab, 2022). However, Albanian producers often exhibit low digital readiness, which hampers their ability to reach international customers efficiently.

Logistical barriers and infrastructure gaps also emerge as persistent challenges in emerging market contexts (Ghouse, 2020; Chaldun et al., 2024). A study by World Bank (2021) on Albania highlights the inefficiencies in transport and customs processes, which disproportionately affect SMEs aiming to export to Europe and beyond.

In addition, the regulatory environment, including complex certification processes, lack of trade facilitation services, and limited access to export financing, further constrains Albanian exporters. The importance of government intervention in simplifying export procedures and providing targeted support programs is well-documented in international best practices (Ha-Brookshire & Yoon, 2012; Chopra et al., 2024).

According to the literature, successful SME internationalization depends on a combination of factors: positive country branding, digital transformation, access to efficient logistics, regulatory support, and strong export capabilities. However, most studies call for deeper, localized field research to tailor strategies to specific national and sectoral realities, a gap this study aims to address by focusing specifically on Albanian producers' lived experiences and perceptions of international markets (Neupert et al., 2006; Bianchi & Wickramasekera, 2016; Rahman et al., 2017; Calheiros-Lobo et al., 2023).

### **3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group discussions to capture a comprehensive understanding of Albanian producers' export practices, challenges, and perceptions regarding international markets. This approach allowed for triangulation of data, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

The data collection activities, were carried out between January and March 2025. During this period, both an online survey and structured focus group sessions were conducted.

An online survey was developed to gather large-scale quantitative data from Albanian producers across diverse sectors, including agriculture, textile manufacturing, handicrafts, and processed food industries. 127 producers completed the survey. The questionnaire covered areas such as current export markets, perceived market barriers, use of digital technologies, certification processes, marketing strategies, and support needs. The survey was disseminated through industry associations, chambers of commerce, and university networks to maximize reach and sectoral diversity.

To complement the survey results with deeper qualitative insights, four focus group sessions were organized. A total of 12 producers participated in the focus groups. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was moderated by trained facilitators following a semi-structured guide. Participants included representatives from SMEs actively engaged in exports or seeking to enter foreign markets, ensuring a diversity of perspectives from various industries and company sizes. The focus groups explored themes such as:

- Experiences and obstacles encountered during export activities
- Strategies employed for market entry and brand development
- Perceptions of foreign market opportunities and threats
- Adoption and challenges related to digital marketing and e-commerce platforms.

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation methods to identify common patterns and sector-specific differences. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded (with participant consent), transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. Key themes were identified through open coding, followed by axial coding to connect and interpret relationships among emerging topics. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Data was anonymized to ensure privacy and compliance with research ethics guidelines. The integration

of quantitative and qualitative approaches ensured that broad trends could be verified and contextualized with rich, narrative insights, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the Albanian producers' export landscape.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey indicated that 68% of responding producers currently engage in export activities; however, only 23% have a formalized export plan or dedicated personnel handling international sales. This confirms prior studies showing that SMEs in emerging markets often lack structured approaches to internationalization (Chopra et al., 2024). Focus group participants emphasized the absence of long-term planning and a heavy reliance on informal trade relationships, such as personal or diaspora networks. This pattern is consistent with research highlighting the prevalence of reactive internationalization in transitional economies (Arghashi & Okumuş, 2022).

A dominant concern raised by both survey respondents and focus group participants was the difficulty in complying with international standards, such as ISO certifications or EU food safety requirements. For many SMEs, the complexity and cost of certification processes act as major deterrents. Similar trends were observed by Chaldun et al. (2024), who found that SMEs in emerging economies face disproportionate regulatory burdens that undermine export readiness.

59% of surveyed producers reported logistical challenges, including unreliable transportation systems, delayed customs procedures, and high costs of cross-border shipping. These findings align with earlier research highlighting weak infrastructure as a recurring challenge in SME internationalization in Southeast Europe (World Bank, 2021).

While over 70% of producers acknowledged the importance of digital marketing and e-commerce, only 40% were actively using such tools. The gap is even more pronounced among firms led by older entrepreneurs, who reported low confidence in adopting online channels. This "digital divide" threatens to marginalize traditional producers in an increasingly globalized and online-driven trade environment. Studies have shown that digital readiness significantly enhances SMEs' export capacity by lowering information barriers and expanding customer reach (Dethine et al., 2020; Fahmy & Ragab, 2022).

A recurring theme in focus groups was the low international awareness and credibility of Albanian products. Several participants felt that foreign buyers perceived "Made in Albania" as a low-value label, often associating it with informal production practices or inconsistent quality. This confirms broader research on negative COO effects faced by exporters from lesser-known countries (Costa et al., 2016; Ghouse, 2020).

Despite this, producers also identified strong potential in differentiation strategies. High-quality, culturally distinct products, particularly in sectors like artisanal food, organic agriculture, and handcrafts, were seen as having untapped value in niche international markets, particularly among diaspora populations and consumers favoring authenticity.

Although the EU remains a top priority, producers expressed a strategic interest in emerging markets, especially in the Middle East and Western Balkans. These were considered more culturally accessible and less stringent in trade requirements, offering realistic short-term opportunities. This preference mirrors findings from Morgan et al. (2021) on immigrant-owned SMEs exporting to familiar markets to reduce risk.

Unanimously, participants emphasized the need for:

- Capacity-building programs on trade compliance, marketing, and digital transformation
- Access to export financing tools tailored to SMEs

- Trade fair participation, subsidized by the state or donor programs
- National branding initiatives to build international trust.

These needs are strongly aligned with policy recommendations in both Albanian national strategies and international literature advocating for stronger state–business linkages in export ecosystems (Calheiros-Lobo et al., 2023).

*Table 1.* Summary of key findings from survey and focus groups

| Theme                         | Survey results                                                     | Focus group insights                                                         |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Export Activity               | 68% currently export, but few have formal strategies               | Export is often opportunistic and network-driven                             |
| Market Knowledge              | 72% lack access to structured market intelligence                  | Many rely on anecdotal information and informal feedback                     |
| Certification & Compliance    | 65% struggle with international quality standards                  | Need for guidance and training in certification procedures                   |
| Logistics & Infrastructure    | 59% report high transport costs and customs delays                 | Weak supply chain limits reliability and competitiveness                     |
| Digital Presence              | 60% do not use digital marketing or e-commerce channels            | Older business owners less familiar with digital tools                       |
| Perception of Albanian Brands | 74% believe Albanian products are undervalued abroad               | Calls for national branding campaigns to boost recognition                   |
| Government/Policy Support     | Strong demand for capacity-building programs and financial support | Desire for export promotion agencies to play a more active coordination role |
| Emerging Market Interest      | Growing interest in diaspora and Middle Eastern markets            | Cultural familiarity and easier access noted as key advantages               |

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the export behaviors, challenges, and international market perceptions among Albanian producers, based on data collected from surveys and focus groups conducted between January and March 2025. The findings confirm that while many producers are engaged in export activities, these are often unstructured, reactive, and constrained by regulatory, infrastructural, and informational barriers.

The majority of surveyed producers lack strategic export planning, rely on personal networks rather than market intelligence, and face significant difficulties complying with international quality standards. Furthermore, weak digital capabilities and a limited global perception of the “Made in Albania” brand exacerbate the challenges. However, producers demonstrated both interest and potential in diversifying into culturally proximate emerging markets, and in capitalizing on demand for sustainable, authentic products, particularly within the Albanian diaspora and niche organic sectors.

There are several limitations worth noting. First, the sample size for focus groups (12 participants) was limited, which, although sufficient for thematic analysis, may not capture the full diversity of experiences across Albania’s industries and regions. Second, the online nature of the survey may have excluded producers with low digital literacy or limited internet access. Third, the study focused exclusively on producers, without incorporating perspectives from institutional actors, policymakers, or buyers, which could have enriched the systemic analysis of export dynamics.

The findings emphasize the need for an integrated export promotion framework tailored to SMEs. Government institutions, in collaboration with universities and chambers of commerce, should prioritize:

- Training programs on certification and compliance
- Access to subsidized trade fairs and international exhibitions
- Development of digital skills for international marketing.

- Public-private branding initiatives to enhance Albania's product image globally

Support mechanisms must also be regionally inclusive, ensuring that producers in peripheral areas are not excluded from export promotion efforts. Development partners and international donors may consider supporting capacity-building and digitalization projects for export-oriented Albanian firms.

Future studies could expand the scope by:

- Conducting sector-specific deep-dives (e.g., agriculture, textiles, tourism-related goods)
- Including perspectives from institutional actors, trade advisors, and foreign buyers
- Applying longitudinal methods to track the evolution of Albanian producers' internationalization efforts over time
- Examining the impact of e-commerce platforms and B2B portals in enabling access to foreign markets.

Such research would strengthen the evidence base for policy reform and inform a more dynamic and competitive Albanian export strategy. Ultimately, aligning academic inquiry with real-world policy and entrepreneurial practice can elevate the visibility and value of "Made in Albania" products on the global stage.

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