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Sustainable consumption – consumers’ reactions to CSR activities in Hungary

Abstract

The significance of socially responsible consumption as well as the question regarding the knowledge and information that consumers may have about producers of consumer products are increasingly appearing in the literature. In the case of companies, responsible corporate operation and how to transfer this information from company to consumer have become key issues, especially over the last decade.

Socially responsible consumption, which is the incorporation of social and environmental concerns by individuals in their consumption choices, is growing. The aim of this research is to verify the existence of different profiles of socially conscious consumers and to study their social representation of consumption.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, conscious consumption, Corporate Social Responsibility, consumer segments, degrowth, sustainable development.

Introduction

Promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable consumption are parts of the European Sustainable Development Strategy. There are several programmes aiming at shaping the attitude of consumers for promoting sustainable consumption. Targets of these programmes can be facilitating conscious product choice and frugal consumption. Corporate social responsibility and conscious product choice can have a common beneficial effect towards sustainable consumption.

In our research, we have concentrated on two aspects: first, the attitudes that Hungarian consumers have for the activities of socially conscious companies, and secondly, we have examined whether there are separate consumer segments that are receptive to certain areas of CSR.

Sustainability and degrowth

Sustainability has recently become one of the leading political priorities in the EU. An important policy guiding principle of the EU is the involvement of business and social partners, and to “enhance the social dialogue, corporate social responsibility and private-public partnerships to foster cooperation and common responsibilities to achieve

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sustainable consumption and production” (EU 2006). Sustainable consumption and production is one of the seven key challenges in the EU SDS. An objective related to this challenge is to keep development within the carrying capacity of the earth, which can be achieved by decoupling growth from environmental pressures.

Economic growth itself has never been the most important source of human well-being. According to Ayres, technological development is the main driver of development of wealth and also of economic growth (1996). Nowadays, the development of technology mainly serves environment protection and the efficient management of resources. Companies do not only protect the environment as a consequence of external regulators, but environmental care has also become a must for companies to remain competitive (Faucheux–Nicolai 1998).

In recent years, limiting economic growth has become a leading aim of environmentalists. The representatives of the degrowth paradigm desire to halt economic growth in the developed part of the world. The degrowth concept was created by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (Georgescu–Roegen 1995), and has been further developed by Serge Latouche. Degrowth refers to the creation of a society where life is better, there is less work, and consumption is limited (Latouche 2010). Latouche emphasizes the local scale for solutions to most of the problems. The way to diminishing consumption leads through returning to a local economy and the consumption of local products (relocalization). Another important point of the concept is the reduction of energy consumption. Degrowth should not affect the world equally; resources should be redistributed in line with the sustainability concept. Degrowth is defined by Kallis as a “socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilization) of society's throughput” (2011) where throughput refers to materials and energy taken from and waste returned to the environment. The reduction of consumption leads to the use of less energy and less materials as well as the production of less waste, which eventually means a decrease of throughput. “Degrowth is impossible to achieve without a turn towards strong sustainable consumption”, which is defined as an approach that focuses on appropriate levels and patterns of consumption compared to the weak sustainable consumption, which has improving the efficiency of consumption at its focus (Lorek–Fuchs 2013).

Sustainability requires not only a change in the production of goods and services, but also within the concept, a change in consumption patterns. The consumption level of developed countries cannot be compared to that of the third world. There are enormous differences between the consumption of the rich and the poor. About 20% of the world's population is responsible for 80% of the total world consumption. Therefore, taking into account the intention of reaching equity within the sustainability concept, it is obvious that reduced consumption in rich countries would be the way to achieve sustainability (Málovics et al. 2008).

Corporate social responsibility and consumption

The main idea of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept is that companies have other roles in society beyond manufacturing products, providing services and making profit. These roles include society and environmentally driven actions and commercial activities that increase the well-being of the community (Robins 2005). Companies need

to achieve these goals at the same time, one related to profit making and the other to social interests.

The proliferation of corporate social responsibility leads to a cohesive society and a sustainable economic system. Therefore, the European Commission has created a new definition of CSR as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (EU 2011).

The EU also recognized the importance of consumer decisions: “Consumer attention to CSR-related issues has grown in recent years, but significant barriers remain, such as insufficient awareness, the need sometimes to pay a price premium, and lack of easy access to the information necessary for making informed choices. Some enterprises play a pioneering role in helping consumers to make more sustainable choices. The revision of the Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan may provide an opportunity to identify new measures to facilitate more responsible consumption” (EU 2011).

In the last decade, due to regulations and market expectations – beside financial performance reports – statements on CSR have appeared in which the companies report on their social and environmental performance. Several researchers agree that CSR investments and attitudes will eventually help the company to perform better economically. (Metaxas–Metaxas 2010, Granek–Hassanali 2005, Hall 2000, Rondinelli–Berry 2000).

Several researchers argue that the most important stakeholders of the European companies are the employees and so they are the main target group of the CSR activities. Therefore, the CSR activities towards the consumers are of secondary importance and are regarded to be rather PR activities (Dawkins–Lewis 2003).

Doane (2005) argues that CSR is not efficient because the companies imitate the CSR activities of other companies instead of finding their own pattern of CSR. Voluntary reporting of the companies would lead to the recognition of socially conscious companies and it would change the consumption pattern vis-à-vis the consumer. Ultimately, the consumer would drive the change of businesses to perform in a more sustainable manner. Doane is sceptical in this sense because of the imitation of other companies that makes CSR inefficient.

Socially responsible consumer

Definitions in the literature of social responsibility are not consistent. Some sources argue that only environmentally conscious purchases and social responsibility are related to the concept of socially responsible consumption, while others say that reducing the volume of consumption should also be part of responsible consumer behaviour.

The definition of the socially responsible consumer and the importance of research in this area initially arose in the seventies when Anderson and Cunningham separated consumers with high social consciousness according to demographic and social-psychological characteristics in 1972. They stated that socially conscious consumers are consumers who consider not only their own satisfaction but also take into account social welfare when making purchase decisions.

Roberts (1996) defined the socially responsible consumer as “one who purchases products and services perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or who patronizes businesses that attempt to effect related positive social

change”. This definition assumes two dimensions: environmental concern and a more general social concern.

Although consumption in general is in itself harmful to the environment, even those who are committed to sustainable consumption recognize that reduction of consumption or additional costs in order to lower the environmental pressure are not likely (Láng 2003).

Sustainable consumption is interpreted to mean consuming less and a kind of alternative or conscious consumption (Jackson 2004). The authors express that welfare does not depend on the volume of consumption. The expenditure of consumers has more than doubled in the UK in the last thirty years, but life-satisfaction does not show a significant change (Donovan et al. 2003). Various previous research work argues that more and more consumers consider “green” and socially conscious consumption important (Vágási 2000, Pakainé Kováts–Herczeg 1999, Borsi 1997).

Mohr et al. (2001) defined socially responsible consumer behaviour based on the concept of CSR. An approach to define CSR involves an attempt to list the major responsibilities of companies. According to Pepper et al., the pillars of sustainable consumption are as follows: pro environmental, pro social, and frugal (2009). Other researchers (McDonald et al. 2006) also argue the decrease of consumption and the “frugal lifestyle” (Lastoviczka et al. 1999). Webb et al. (2008) distinguish between three possible dimensions of socially responsible consumption: (1) purchases based on the corporate social responsibility activities of the companies, (2) recycling, (3) avoiding and reducing products harmful to the environment. Based on these dimensions, the Socially Responsible Purchase and Disposal (SRPD) scale has been developed. This scale measures four dimensions of responsible purchase: 1) influence of the companies’ CSR performance on purchases, 2) recycling activity of consumers, 3) beside the traditional procurement criteria (price, availability, quality), other concerns related to responsibility emerge (e.g. environmental issues), 4) purchase criteria based on the environmental effects of the products.

Several researchers argue that there is a gap between the attitude and behaviour and also between the values and actions (Young et al. 2010, Spaargaren–Koppen 2011, Öbereder et al. 2011). Young et al. claim that the ‘attitude–behaviour gap’ or ‘values–action gap’ is very much present in 30% of consumers who are concerned about environmental issues but they do not realize this in their purchases. Companies should have an active role in turning consumers socially conscious. For more sustainable consumption patterns, consumers need new ideas and information. The producers and retailers of products have a responsibility in providing the consumer with information and orientation on the possibilities of green consumption. (Hume 2010)

According to analyses of consumer attitude, there is positive motivation and willingness towards socially responsible companies, although, actual consumption is lagging behind. Several researchers, that include analyses of both attitude and consumption, have reached the same conclusion (Devinney et al. 2006, Eckhardt et al. 2010). CSR still has a minor effect on consumption decisions (Mohr et al. 2001).

Previous researches on the effect of CSR on purchasing decisions

There is not a significant amount of research in the literature on the effect of CSR on consumer decisions; however, some research reveals that consumers are attaching more importance to the consumption of responsible products and monitoring the CSR activities of firms. (Carrigan–Attalla 2001, Maignan 2001). Increased attention on CSR has a considerable effect on purchases (Brown–Dacin 1997, Sen–Bhattacharya 2001, Mohr–Webb 2005).

There is a considerable difference between the supply and demand sides of the market. On the supply side, firms are more and more engaging themselves in CSR activities while on the demand side, consumers pay more attention to irresponsible corporate behaviour (Snider et al. 2003). Irresponsible corporate actions have a greater impact on consumers' purchases than responsible behaviour (Biehal–Sheinin 2007, Brown–Dacin 1997, Marin–Ruiz 2007, Bhattacharya–Sen 2004).

The survey methodology

The aim of the survey was to analyse the attitude of Hungarian consumers to CSR. The survey was carried out in Hungary on a sample of 510 respondents. The responses were weighted according to regions, types of settlement, age, sex and level of education and therefore are representative for these variables. Of the research model variables, 11 contained Likert scale questions on consumer opinions about the socially responsible activities of the companies. Based on the survey, latent variables could be created regarding the description of themes of responsible consumption. The awareness of social responsibility was surveyed by nominal scale while the importance of its areas by ordinal scale. The survey contained the following personal characteristics: sex, age, age group, level of education and residence.

The age of respondents was between 18 and 69 years. The distribution of respondents according to age groups was as follows: 18–29 years (26.1%), 30–39 years (20.4%), 40–49 years (21.0%), over 50 years (32.5%). Bearing in mind the topic of the survey, a core aspect of the selection of respondents was that they should take part in the decisions related to the purchase of goods and services. Some 46.9% of the respondents were men and 53.1% of them were women. Primary school was the highest level of education for 10.2%, vocational training school for 24.7%, secondary school for 40.2% and higher education for 24.3% of the respondents. The place of residence is Budapest for 12.6%, county towns for 17.6%, other towns for 28.3% and villages for 41.4%.

Consumer segments created according to the variables of CSR and their characteristics

According to the responses for the questions related to social responsibility of companies, the respondents have a positive attitude towards the responsible activities of companies (Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of the variables

When possible, I buy from companies...	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
that take care of local products	4.40	0.85	0.72	-1.48	0.11	1.93	0.22
that take care of environment	4.51	0.74	0.54	-1.59	0.11	2.45	0.22
that take care of working conditions and health protection	4.72	0.53	0.28	-2.00	0.11	5.06	0.22
that take care of local people that are fundraisers and supportive	4.41	0.77	0.60	-1.44	0.11	2.57	0.22
that take care of customer complaints	4.28	1.01	1.02	-1.39	0.11	1.28	0.22
that take care of local products that recycle	4.47	0.77	0.59	-1.64	0.11	3.12	0.22
that take care of environment that recycle	4.28	0.99	0.98	-1.41	0.11	1.62	0.22
with responsible behaviour	4.65	0.59	0.35	-1.64	0.11	2.32	0.22
that take care of employees with disabilities	4.27	0.87	0.75	-1.04	0.11	0.63	0.22
that take care of satisfaction of employees	4.47	0.77	0.60	-1.53	0.11	2.41	0.22
that take care of working conditions	4.32	0.76	0.58	-1.03	0.11	1.18	0.22

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis of social responsibility of companies was carried out by factors of variables. According to Cronbach's alfa and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests (these tests show the reliability of the scale), the variables were suitable for the conditions of factor analysis. The KMO test showed that the data were suitable for factor analysis (KMO=0.755). According to the Bartlett test, the correlation matrix was significantly different from zero (Sig=0.000). The communality of variables contributes to the explanation of factors at a strong or medium level. The total variance explained by the factors is 74.59%, which is acceptable.

Table 2

Factor structure matrix

	Social	Environmental	Employees	Costumers
Variance explained, %	37.8	15.0	11.6	10.2
When possible, I buy from companies...				
that take care of employees with disabilities	0.823	0.166	0.339	0.021
that are fundraiser and supportive	0.816	0.317	0.262	0.307
that take care of local people	0.672	0.236	0.293	0.467
that take care of local products	0.185	0.904	0.312	0.257
that take care of environment	0.397	0.860	0.274	0.312
that take care of satisfaction of employees	0.210	0.367	0.876	0.172
that take care of working conditions	0.536	0.147	0.785	0.221
that take care of customer complaints	0.242	0.291	0.197	0.955

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 shows the factor structure. The Social factor has high coefficients in case of companies that take care of employees with disabilities and that are fundraiser and supportive. With the Environmental factor, both variables are important: the companies that take care of the environment and of local products. The Employees factor has high coefficients for the companies that take care of both employees’ satisfaction and working conditions. The coefficient of the companies that take care of customer complaints is important for the Consumer factor. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix between the factors.

Table 3

Component Correlation Matrix

Component	Social	Environmental	Employees	Costumers
Social	1.000	0.268	0.381	0.286
Environmental	0.268	1.000	0.297	0.306
Employees	0.381	0.297	1.000	0.204
Customers	0.286	0.306	0.204	1.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. *Rotation Method:* Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Own elaboration.

Distinction between the CSR consumer groups by cluster analysis

In our research, we have tried to analyse whether the respondents can be grouped according to their characteristics. For this purpose, the data from factor analysis was used. The cluster analysis was carried out with K-means clustering. As a result, four clusters were separated, which are described below.

Cluster centres and the analysis of variance are presented in tables 4 and 5 and in Figure 1. Descriptions of the segments by their demographic characteristics are summarised in tables 6–10.

Cluster 1 – Socially sensitive and urban

Ratio in the sample: 16.7%.

This group mainly relates the social responsibility of the companies with the importance of social aspects. They consider taking care of working conditions very important. They also consider the two other characteristics, fundraising and supporting the local people very positively. The group evaluates environment protection neutral, while the satisfaction of employees gets lower scores and the customer relations higher scores than the average.

Most of the respondents in the group live in Budapest and in large cities; their age is typically over 40 and they have higher education.

Cluster 2 – Environmentalists

Ratio in the sample: 51.5%.

The group considers the manufacturing of environment friendly products (99.3%) and the use of local products (95.3%) essential. Of the respondents, 87.1% think that it is

important to reuse materials. Social concerns are also important and responsible behaviour with employees and customers is regarded to be valuable compared to other groups.

The respondents in the group mainly live in Budapest and in other major cities; 59.2% of them are women and the majority have secondary or higher education.

Cluster 3 – Neutrals

Ratio in the sample: 12.1%.

Companies social responsibility is considered to be less important in this cluster. The only environmental characteristic that is considered to be important is the reuse and recycling of materials. Handling of customer complaints is of less or neutral importance for 81% of the respondents in this group.

The respondents in this group are close to the average sample population in terms of age structure. Respondents with secondary education and those living in small towns are overrepresented while there is an equal number of men and women in the cluster.

Cluster 4 – Working conditions in rural areas

Ratio in the sample: 19.7%.

Social concerns are of less importance in this group. Within social concerns, supporting the local people is regarded to be less important. Fundraising and supporting is considered to be neutral or less important for 57.4%, which is below the ratio of other clusters. Satisfaction of employees receives the main attention in this cluster.

The typical respondent in this cluster is a man under 40 years with primary or secondary education and lives in a small town.

Table 4

Final Cluster Centres

Component	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environmentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas
Social	0.214741	0.57107	-0.51098	-1.35947
Environmental	-0.41514	0.465954	-0.86624	-0.33501
Employees	-1.32807	0.636551	-0.12469	-0.46235
Consumers	0.164561	0.429667	-1.99985	-0.03648

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1



Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5

Analysis of variance

Component	Cluster		Error		F	Sig.
	Mean Square	Df	Mean Square	df		
Social	98.034	3	0.430	510	228.239	0.000
Environmental	43.433	3	0.751	510	57.869	0.000
Employees	93.775	3	0.455	510	206.293	0.000
Consumers	99.934	3	0.418	510	238.874	0.000

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 6

Description of clusters by types of settlement

(%)

Types of settlement	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environmentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
Budapest	12.9	10.9	8.1	18.8	12.5
County towns	24.7	19.2	11.3	11.9	17.7
Other towns	23.5	21.5	46.8	39.6	28.5
Villages	38.8	48.3	33.9	29.7	41.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Cramer's V=0.151, sig=0.000.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 7

Description of clusters by regions

(%)

Region	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environ- mentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
Central Hungary	31.4	24.2	27.9	31.1	27.2
Central Transdanubia	3.5	8.0	13.1	15.5	9.3
Western Transdanubia	8.1	7.2	13.1	4.9	7.6
Southern Transdanubia	10.5	13.6	16.4	18.4	14.4
Northern Hungary	20.9	23.1	13.1	9.7	18.9
Northern Great Plain	5.8	8.7	9.8	8.7	8.4
Southern Great Plain	19.8	15.2	6.6	11.7	14.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Cramer's V=0.142 p=0.029

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 8

Description of clusters by sex

(%)

Sex	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environ- mentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
Men	43.0	40.8	50.0	63.7	46.8
Women	57.0	59.2	50.0	36.3	53.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Cramer's V=0.178, sig=0.001

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 9

Description of clusters by age

(%)

Age	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environ- mentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
18 – 29 years	19.8	29.2	30.6	47.5	31.4
30 – 39 years	9.3	12.5	17.7	15.8	13.3
40 – 49 years	25.6	17.8	12.9	17.8	18.5
Over 50 years	45.3	40.5	38.7	18.8	36.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Cramer's V=0.140, sig=0.000

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 10

Description of clusters by education

Education	Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environ- mentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
Primary school	50.0	44.7	27.5	40.0	42.5
Vocational training school	20.9	17.8	33.9	14.0	19.5
Secondary school	20.9	24.6	32.2	33.0	26.5
Higher education	8.1	12.9	6.4	13.0	11.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Cramer's V=0.133, sig=0.008

Source: Own elaboration.

Validation of the segments by discriminant analysis

In order to validate the segments created by cluster analysis, a canonical discriminant analysis has been carried out. The aim of the analysis was to control if the respondents fall in the same groups. The significance levels of the functions are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Wilks' Lambda, Chi Square, degree of freedom and significance levels of the discriminant functions

Component	Wilks' Lambda	F	Df1	Df2	Sig.
Social	0.427	228.239	3	510	0.000
Environmental	0.746	57.869	3	510	0.000
Employees	0.452	206.293	3	510	0.000
Customers	0.416	238.874	3	510	0.000

Source: Own elaboration.

The results of the discriminant analysis are summarised in tables 12, 13 and 14.

Table 12

Pearson correlation coefficient matrix

Component	Social	Environmental	Employees	Customers
Correlation				
Social	1.000	0.004	0.248	0.048
Environmental	0.004	1.000	0.015	0.003
Employees	0.248	0.015	1.000	0.152
Customers	0.048	0.003	0.152	1.000

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 13

Eigenvalues, variances and canonical correlation values of the three discriminant functions

Function	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Canonical Correlation
1	2.217	54.376	54.376	0.830
2	1.151	28.244	82.621	0.732
3	0.708	17.379	100.000	0.644

Initially, three canonical discriminant functions were used in the analysis.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 14

Wilk's Lambda, Chi-square, degree of freedom and Significance values of the discriminant functions

Test of Function(s)	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-square	Df	Sig.
1 through 3	0.085	1257.920	12	0.000
2 through 3	0.272	662.918	6	0.000
3	0.585	272.762	2	0.000

Source: Own elaboration.

The results of the classification were validated by discriminant analysis, which showed that the regrouping only resulted in minor differences compared to those of the cluster analysis. The two classifications resulted in the same group for 95.4% of the respondents. The classification according to the cluster analysis was justified because the two methods gave almost the same results (Table 15).

Table 15

Classification results according to cluster and discriminant analysis

		Cluster 1 Socially sensitive and urban	Cluster 2 Environ- mentalists	Cluster 3 Neutrals	Cluster 4 Working conditions in rural areas	Total
Original						
Count	1	84	0	0	2	86
	2	9	250	4	3	265
	3	2	1	59	1	62
	4	1	0	1	100	101
%	1	97	0	0	3	100
	2	3	94	1	1	100
	3	2	1	95	1	100
	4	1	0	1	98	100
Cross-validated						
Count	1	84	0	0	2	86
	2	9	249	4	4	265
	3	2	2	58	1	62
	4	1	0	1	100	101
%	1	97	0	0	3	100
	2	3	94	1	1	100
	3	2	2	94	1	100
	4	1	0	1	98	100

Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions

The attitudes related to the CSR activities of the firms was analysed through a representative sample of respondents in Hungary. The value structure of consumers is presented by factor analysis. The four factors are the social, environmental, employees and costumers factors. The consumers were segmented according to these factors and their demographic characteristics. The segmentation was carried out by cluster analysis and the success of the classification was validated by a discriminant analysis.

The research has proven that it is possible to separate and describe those consumers who are receptive to certain areas of the CSR activities of companies. Four segments are discriminated: socially sensitive, environmentalists, neutrals and those who find the working conditions the most important. There is generally a positive attitude of consumers to the socially responsible companies.

Decision makers in the business sphere increasingly take into account the attitudes of consumers related to the corporate social responsibility of firms. It is a competitive advantage if a firm can identify consumers likely to respond to socially responsible corporate behaviour.

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