

Corporate Social Responsibility in the Agri-Food Sector: Evidence from Greece

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can benefit business directly, such as by improving the working environment and increasing productivity, and indirectly, such as by increasing customers' interest and sales. The focus of this article lies on the investigation of CSR in the Greek agri-food companies through two perspectives, namely the business and the consumer perspective. The business perspective is based on the investigation of CSR activities promoted on the corporate websites of 222 food companies, SMEs and large sized. The consumer perspective is based on a questionnaire analysis of 200 participants, investigating their willingness to purchase products from companies practicing CSR activities. The results of this research showed that CSR activities are rather low in Greece and only few agri-food companies' have a clear and sound strategy to promote such actions. It seems that, during the economic crisis, most companies, especially SMEs, do not invest in such activities, but their main concern is survival, which -given the economic environment- is challenging. In addition, companies mainly support social activities, give less support to environmental activities, and even less support to human resource activities. Although most consumers seem to be socially aware of the CSR actions performed by the agri-food companies and have a sense of responsibility themselves, a significant part still is unaware of such actions.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has received a lot of attention in the business and scientific world, due to its significance both in economic and in societal terms. Studies on CSR primarily focus on whether businesses in various countries take up CSR-related initiatives and perform relevant activities (e.g. sponsorship, charity); which business sectors are more active in CSR; and what is the potential for CSR development (Porter & Kramer, 2006, Aguinis & Glavas, 2012, Carroll & Shabana, 2010, Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010).

The concept of CSR is dynamic and constantly evolving. Although several attempts have been made to define it, a widely accepted definition has not yet been established (Secchi, 2007). CSR was firstly defined by Johnson (1971), according to whom "in a socially responsible enterprise, senior management balances a combination of different interests". On the other hand, the European Commission (EC), through its renewed CSR strategy published in 2011, defines CSR as "the responsibility of businesses for their impact on society". However, ten years earlier, in 2001, the relevant Green Paper, which was the first communication of the EC's CSR strategy, defined CSR in more detail as "the notion that companies integrate social and environmental concerns into their business activities on a voluntary basis, and in their contacts with other interested parties". Within these ten years and

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hence, economic and social conditions changes have affected CSR issues and perceptions, among businesses and societies.

The Greek CSR Network, set up in 2000, defines CSR as "the voluntary commitment of enterprises to integrate into business practices social and environmental actions without being imposed by law and to have a direct relationship with them or indirect cooperation with their activities". The Greek strategy for CSR has been based on European and international practice, emphasizing on Greece's economic environment (Skouloudis et. al., 2011). The aim of this effort was to promote a new development model based on a participatory process, including three basic dimensions; policies and standards, rules and tools, and fields of application.

The objective of this paper is to investigate CSR in the Greek agri-food sector through two perspectives, namely the business and the consumer perspective. The business perspective is based on the investigation of CSR activities of 222 food companies, medium and large sized. The consumer perspective is based on a questionnaire analysis of 200 participants, investigating their willingness to purchase products from companies practicing CSR activities. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of CSR, its main applications and its relation to marketing. Section 3 describes good practices of CSR by agri-food businesses at global level. Sections 4 and 5 describe CSR activities in the Greek agri-food sector from the business perspective and the consumer perspective respectively. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. CSR – History and Applications

2.1. History

The implementation of CSR was not actually incorporated globally until the 1950s. By that time, the social actions of companies mostly regarded donations made to various charity institutions. Typically, these actions did not follow any systematic pattern or scheduling. In the following years, Bowen (1953) identified the notion of "business responsibilities towards society" and analyzed the political actions or decisions that companies should follow to be widely accepted from the general public. This approach was the cornerstone for the concept of CSR. Until then, most businesses were forced to raise equity by undertaking activities targeted to increase business profit (Friedman, 2007). From that moment on, companies slowly started to consider additional factors that raise their value, including the clients', government's and society's satisfaction, as well as the employees' engagement (Clarkson, 1995, Donaldson & Preston, 1995), realizing (especially during the 1960s) that they have a responsibility towards their environment that exceeds legal and financial obligations (McGuire, 1963). Over the next decade, Johnson (1971) argued that the company should not have as sole incentive to gain more profits for its shareholders, but should pay more attention to workers, suppliers, traders, local communities and the nation. Wood (1991) defined CSR as a form of corporate self-commitment, embedded in a business model.

A key element of this era is the term "stakeholders"; in principle, a socially responsible business should be governed by the stakeholder theory (Lin, 2018). This was based on Smith (2003), who argued that companies should take account of the results of their actions to all those involved, even if this is not profitable. Shareholders, on the other hand, were opposed to this concept, claiming that the sole responsibility of a company is to generate profits for its shareholders in a legal way. This, however, leads to the adoption of short-term policies; in contrast, CSR is based on actions which build a long-term investment that yields lasting and sustainable benefits. More generally, the 1970s could be described as a period of scientific

analysis to define the concept of CSR, rather than a period of application to businesses. In the 2000s, businesses began to be more interested in developing and applying best practices of CSR, while several companies started to publicize and promote social work. In 2001, the EC presented the Green Paper in its effort to promote a "European Corporate Social Responsibility Framework", which was intended to launch a wider public debate on how the European Union can promote CSR at both European and international level. The main aspects of this policy included the following: i) the increase of the number of the European companies adopting and promoting CSR strategies; ii) the rise of companies' standards regarding social development, environmental protection and respect of fundamental rights; iii) the embrace of open governance schemes that reconcile the interests of various stakeholders and are quality-driven and sustainability oriented; and iv) the development of new partnerships and relationships within the companies, especially in terms of social dialogue, skills acquisition, equal opportunities, anticipation and management of change, reinforcement of economic and social cohesion, and health protection.

2.2. Types of CSR Activities

An organisation may carry out a variety of different CSR activities (Zinczuk, 2012). These can generally be distinguished into types of activities that are related to:

- *Human resources*: development of skills and staff training, labor rights protection, health and safety, work-life balance;
- *Business leadership*: fostering CSR business culture, developing trust and transparency relationships with stakeholders;
- *Market*: product and service development incorporating CSR principles;
- *Natural environment*: improvement of energy footprint, integration of environmental criteria; and
- *Social environment*: developing good relationships with local communities, supporting social groups in need.

2.3. CSR and Marketing

A CSR strategy designed on the basis of business operations can comprise a major competitive advantage for a company. Some elements of CSR activities, although observable and measurable, are difficult for consumers and stakeholders to assess. In this context, the most effective policy of promoting CSR is to involve people in these activities, so that they feel an important part of the process. In addition, a company's reputation is a key asset for its profitability. In recent years, a pillar of businesses' decision-making is dedicated to customer satisfaction and customer service concerns, including environmental issues. This creates a business profile that is responsible and ethical, boosting moral values through word of mouth while increasing corporate sales (Schreck, 2011).

There is a straightforward correlation between marketing and CSR (Farina & Burnaz, 2019). Some marketing strategies are specified within the framework of CSR, as follows:

- *Promotions of Social Causes*: This refers to a business that offers funds and resources in order to promote a social subject, to support a money-raising effort or to increase its participation in it.
- *Cause-relating Marketing*: It concerns a business committed to contribute or donate a percentage of its revenue for a particular purpose. Typically, such actions are conducted for a specific time, a specific product and a specific institution.
- *Corporate Social Marketing*: It refers to a company that supports the change of public attitudes on a social issue.

- *Corporate Charity*: This is directly related to the contribution or donation of a business to an institution or organization.
- *Community Voluntary*: This refers to a business that encourages its employees, partners, suppliers and customers to participate in a social purpose or activity. They can also donate working hours to their employees, in order to support a social purpose.
- *Socially Responsible Business Practices*: It includes practices and investments that are implemented on a voluntary basis and are aimed at supporting social goals and environmental protection.

3. Current Status of CSR in the Agri-Food Sector

According to Vaxevanidou (2011), the need to apply CSR to business practice has evolved as a result of a global trend. Globalization has led businesses to operate in accordance with international conventions, such as the United Nations International Human Rights Treaties. The three main pillars behind the existence and sustainability of a business are economic growth, ecological balance and social progress.

Studies carried out globally show that the objectives, content and intensity of CSR activities vary across companies, regions and countries. For example, Ewing and Windisch (2007) argue that the Western approach to CSR can fail in Asian countries due to cultural differences. Welford (2007) adds that CSR in Asia is characterized by both the cultural context and the economic and political conditions. Alon et al. (2010), after conducting a survey in 105 companies from Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), concluded that most businesses specializing in a wide range of sectors (e.g., finance, materials, fuel) perform CSR activities. Only eight of the 105 companies did not implement any CSR actions.

Regarding the agri-food sector, CSR has emerged as an important issue since the beginning of the 1990s. It was a series of defamatory campaigns that motivated major multinational companies, such good paradigms of CSR are the following: Haagen Danz in order to raise awareness for the decrease of the bee population, developed a website, as well as an associated campaign in social media, in order to support research activities on the matter (Ralston and Maignan, 2002). In 2010, Mondelez published its key environmental strategies and promoted a set of relevant policies. The main concern was the sustainability of the planet, assuring that further actions should be taken to reduce the environmental footprint and improve the dietary profile of the products. This would ensure sustainability in agricultural supplies, companies and the society. Mondelez also presented the Call for Well-Beginning strategy, which started in 2013 and focuses on the health and sustainability of the planet (Mondelez International, 2019).

4. The Case Study of Agri-Food Companies

4.1. Overview of the CSR Case Study

In order to address the research question of this paper, 222 SMEs and large agri-food companies operating in Greece were reviewed in the period of 2016-2017, constituting a significantly representative sample. The main objective was to record CSR activities of these companies, examining their corporate websites. More specifically, the companies were classified into groups based on their products. Hence, 14 agri-food sub-sectors were identified. Companies operate in these sub-sectors as follows: dairy products (13%), confectionery & snacks (10%), poultry, meat & sausage (16%), pasta-rice-legumes (5%), flour (4%), fish farming (6%), general food commerce (6%), fruit & vegetables (16%), olives & olive oil (9%), pastries (10%), canned food (2%), and drinks & beverage (3%).

CSR activities under review were classified into three different types, namely: i) social activities, including charities, local community support programs, and others; ii) environmental activities, such as recycling initiatives, promotion of activities for reduced carbon footprint, etc.; iii) human resources activities, addressing volunteering events, and promotion of social responsibility practices. In this study, each CSR activity is classified into exactly one of these types (i.e. there are no overlaps). However, a company might be performing activities that belong into one, two or all of the three types. Each company performing CSR activities selects the most appropriate methods and tools for communication, in order to publicize their interest and dedication in addressing problems of the local community.

4.2. Analysis and Results

The companies under study were initially classified by subsector. Following that, another important element that was taken into consideration was the size of the company, i.e. SMEs or large enterprises. Subsequently, this study counted the companies that invest in CSR activities or not, in order to determine the type of companies that demonstrate higher interest in CSR. It was found that 29.3% out of the 222 agri-food companies had actually performed any kind of CSR activity. 64.15% of the large companies were applying CSR, while only 18.45% of the SMEs did not. Figure 1 provides an overview of the companies' engagement in the three types of CSR activities. As observed, large companies give more emphasis on CSR. In addition, companies mainly support social activities, give less support to environmental activities, and even less support to human resource activities.

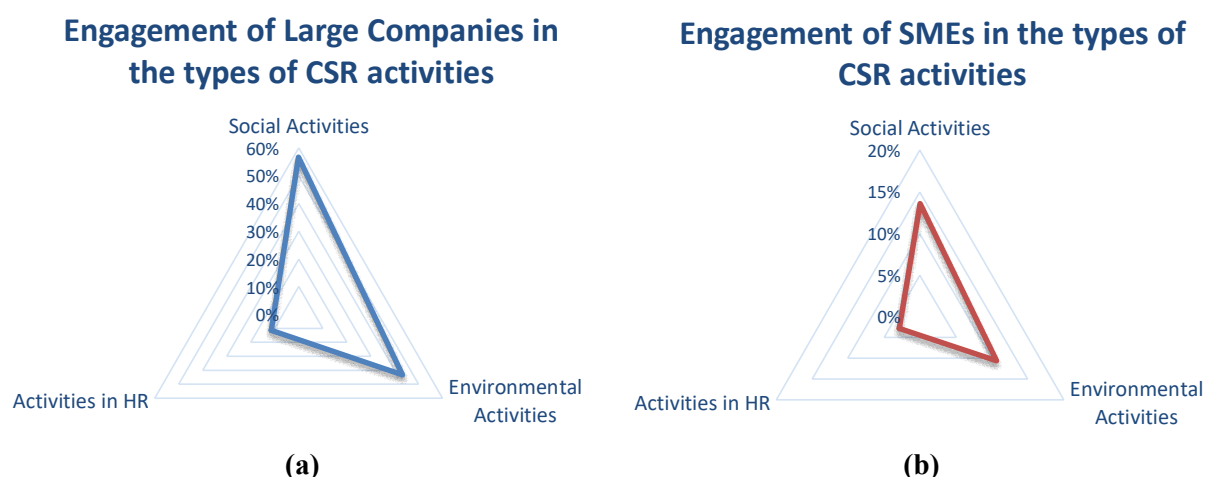


Figure 1. Engagement of (a) large companies and (b) SMEs in CSR activities in the Greek agri-food sector

Table 1 presents the number of the large and SME agri-food companies that perform CSR activities in detail; the activities are categorized according to the three distinct CSR types: social activities, environmental activities and human resource activities.

More specifically, the following conclusions can be extracted:

Dairy products: 4 out of 5 (80%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper, had active CSR activities, while *60% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 4 out of 24 (16.6%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *4% of the SMEs were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Confectionery & snacks: 4 out of 9 (44%) large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while *33% of the large companies were focused on multiple*

CSR activities. On the other hand, only 4 out of 14 (28.5%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *14.2% of the SMEs were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Poultry: 2 out of 3 (66%) large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, and *all of them were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 4 out of 13 (30%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *15% of the SMEs were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Meat: 2 out of 5 (40%) large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while *all of them were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 1 out of 14 (7%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, and this company was actually *focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Pasta/Rice: 1 out of 2 (50%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, which was focused on both social activities and environmental activities. On the other hand, only 1 out of 9 (11%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, and this company was focused only on human resources.

Flour: 1 out of 2 (50%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, and this company was focused on both social activities and environmental activities. On the other hand, only 1 out of 6 (16%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, and this company was focused on both social activities and environmental activities.

Fish farming: 4 out of 5 (80%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while *40% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, 4 out of 9 (44%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *22% of the SMEs were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

General goods: 4 out of 4 (100%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while *50% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 1 small-medium company in this specific sector was studied for this paper, and this company did not have any CSR activities.

Fruit & Vegetables: 3 out of 4 (75%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while *50% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 6 out of the 31 (19.4%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *13% of the SMEs were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Olives and Olive oil: 1 out of 2 (50%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper, had active CSR activities, which was focused on social activities and environmental activities. On the other hand, no company out of the 17 SMEs that were studied for this paper had any CSR activities.

Pastries: 5 out of 8 (62.5%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper, had active CSR activities, while *12.5% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities*. On the other hand, only 2 out of 14 (14%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *none of them were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Canned food: only one large company was studied in this paper, which had active CSR activities on social activities and environmental. On the other hand, 2 out of the 4 (50%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while *none of them were focused on multiple CSR activities*.

Animal feed: only SMEs were studied in this paper, from which only 1 out of 9 (11%) in total had any CSR activities focused on society.

Beverage: 2 out of 3 (67%) of the large companies that were studied in this paper had active CSR activities, while 33% of the large companies were focused on multiple CSR activities. On the other hand, only 2 out of 4 (50%) of the SMEs had active CSR activities, while both of them were focused on social activities only.

Table 1. Number and percentage of Greek agri-food companies that perform CSR activities

| Agri-food Sector | Social Activities | | Environmental Activities | | Human Resources Activities | | Total No. of Companies | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Large | SME | Large | SME | Large | SME | Large | SME |
| Dairy | 4 (80%) | 1 (4%) | 2 (40%) | 3 (12.5%) | 1 (25%) | 1 (4%) | 5 (100%) | 24 (100%) |
| Snacks | 4 (44%) | 3 (21%) | 3 (33%) | 2 (14%) | 1 (11%) | 2 (14%) | 9 (100%) | 14 (100%) |
| Poultry | 2 (66%) | 3 (23%) | 2 (66%) | 3 (23%) | 1 (33%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (100%) | 13 (100%) |
| Meat | 1 (20%) | 1 (7%) | 2 (40%) | 1 (7%) | 2 (40%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (100%) | 14 (100%) |
| Pasta/Rice | 1 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (11%) | 2 (100%) | 9 (100%) |
| Flour | 1 (50%) | 1 (16.6%) | 1 (50%) | 1 (16.6%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (100%) | 6 (100%) |
| Fish Farming | 3 (60%) | 4 (44%) | 2 (40%) | 2 (22%) | 1 (20%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (100%) | 9 (100%) |
| General goods | 4 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 4 (100%) | 1 (100%) |
| Fruits and Vegetables | 2 (50%) | 5 (16%) | 3 (75%) | 4 (13%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (3%) | 4 (100%) | 31 (100%) |
| Olives & Olive oil | 1 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (100%) | 17 (100%) |
| Pastries | 4 (50%) | 1 (7%) | 2 (25%) | 1 (7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 8 (100%) | 14 (100%) |
| Canned food | 1 (100%) | 1 (25%) | 1 (100%) | 1 (25%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (100%) | 4 (100%) |
| Animal feed | - | 1 (11%) | - | 0 (0%) | - | 0 (0%) | - | 9 (100%) |
| Beverage | 2 (66%) | 2 (50%) | 1 (33%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 3 (100%) | 4 (100%) |
| Total | 30 (56,6%) | 23 (13,6%) | 23 (43,4%) | 18 (10,6%) | 6 (11,3%) | 5 (2,9%) | 53 (100%) | 169 (100%) |

5. Consumer Study on CSR

In order to observe how consumers perceive such CSR activities, a survey has been conducted from December 2016 till January 2017. The sample consisted of 200 persons residing in the region of Athens. In the survey, a questionnaire was used, based on relevant work by Liapakis et al. (2017) and included three parts: demographics, knowledge on CSR, and willingness to purchase products coming from companies with active CSR strategies. The questionnaire was developed in Greek and was pre-tested with a small group of volunteers so as to be checked for clarity and that it measures correctly consumers' attitude towards CSR. According to the test, the questions were re-adjusted and corrected by two experts. In total, consumers answered 21 questions regarding CSR awareness, purchasing habits, willingness to buy from companies that conduct CSR and socio-demographics.

As depicted in Figure 2, the questionnaire was answered equally by 100 male and 100 female consumers, mostly of ages between 36-55 years old (53%). Consumers were mostly high-school graduates (38.5%), followed by those with a university degree (30.5%). For the majority the annual salary ranged from 10k to 20k € (29%). Most of them were family members with spouses and children (40%), and they were usually involved in the purchasing of daily needs of products (58%).

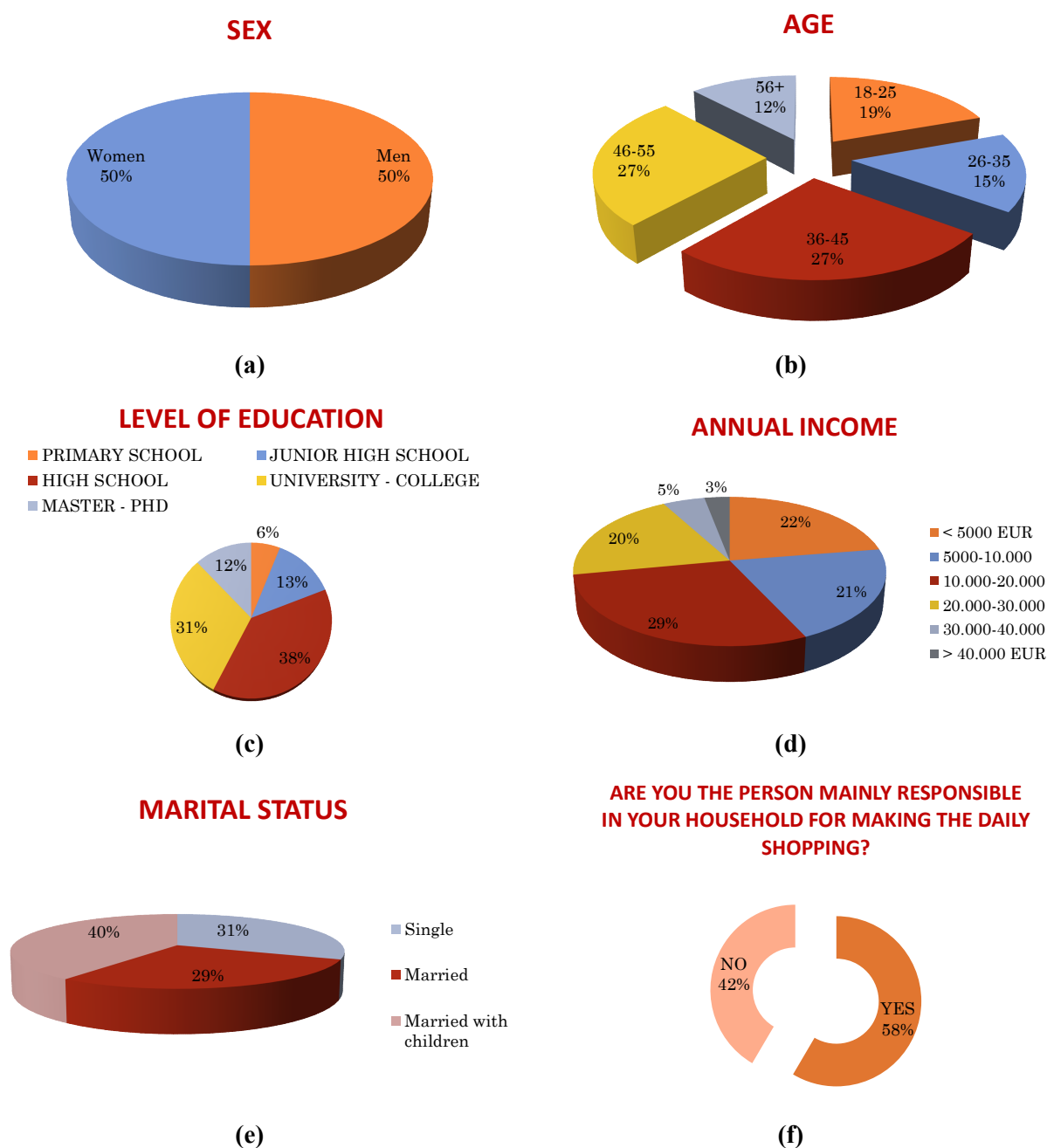


Figure 2. Demographics of the consumer survey (sample size N = 200) in terms of gender (a), age (b), education level (c), annual income (d), marital status (e), and shopping responsibilities (f)

80% of the respondents considered that the social image of the company is very important when choosing a specific product, followed by the quality of the product (76%). The less common response was about their shopping habits, with only 11% of the respondents considering this is an important factor when choosing a product.

Regarding the consumers' knowledge on CSR, most of the respondents had a good knowledge regarding the CSR activities of the companies, but there was also a significant percentage (22%) of respondents that were unfamiliar with such actions. Most consumers who responded to the questionnaire would be purchasing products or services from companies active in CSR, because they feel that providing support to socially responsible strategies is worth the cost. 64% of the respondents feel socially responsible when consuming corporate products with CSR strategies for vulnerable community groups. A high percentage (35.5%) answered that they would probably prefer to buy a product from a company with social responsibility, while 17% did not care and would continue to buy the product from the company they were accustomed to.

As depicted in Figure 3, the amount of the extra cost the respondents are willing to pay for a product combined with a CSR activity is analogous to the original price of the product. More specifically, for a product costing 1 €, the majority of the consumers (30.5%) was willing to pay around 16 to 39 cents more, while for a product at a cost of 9 €, the majority of the consumers (29%) were willing to pay 0.69 € to almost 2 €. However, for essential goods such as water, which has a fixed (regulated) price in the Greek market, most of the consumers (38%) were not willing to pay any extra cost.

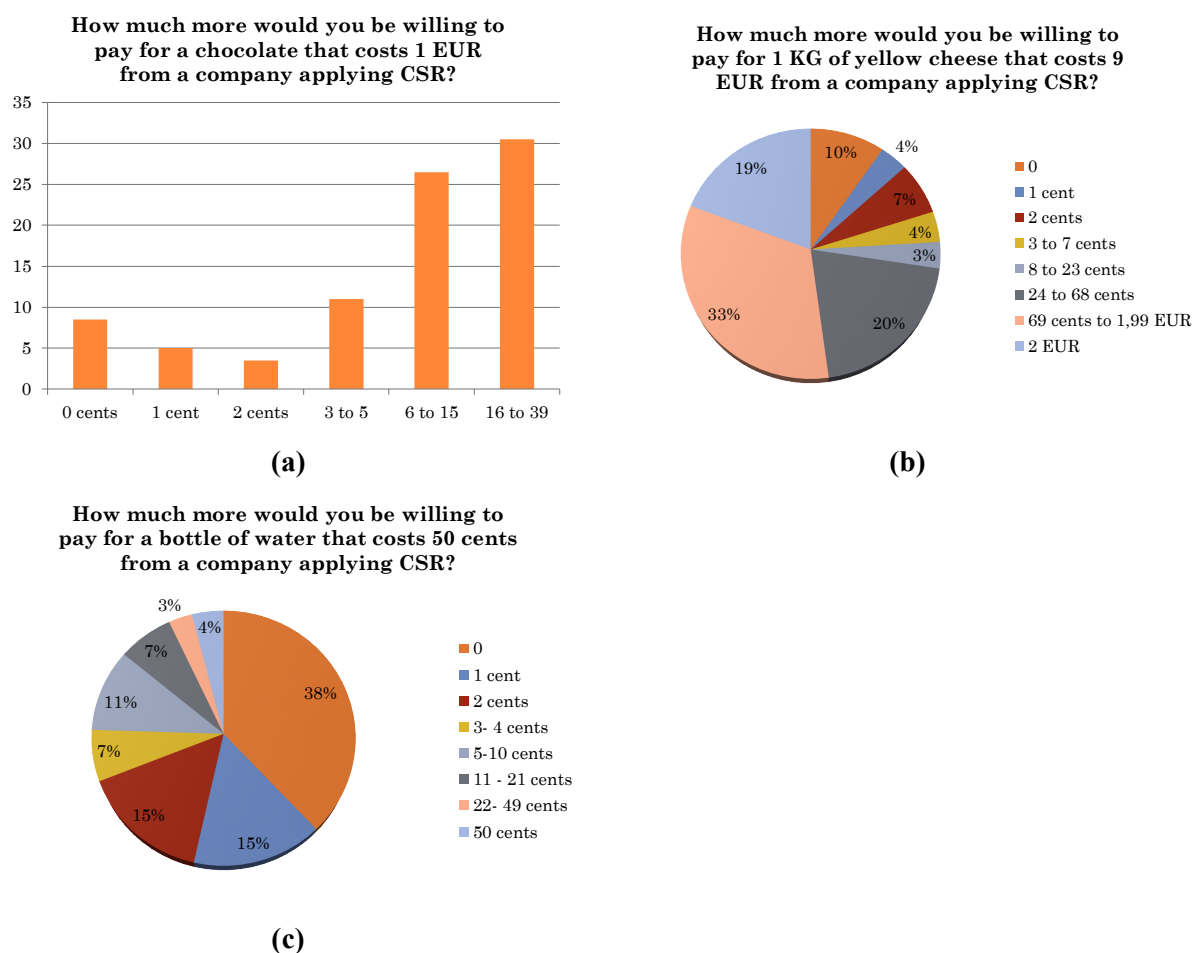


Figure 3. Consumer study: Willingness to pay more for a product offered by a company active in CSR

According to the respondents' replies, as illustrated in Figure 4, 34% had thought of rewarding a socially responsible company and actually did reward it by either buying its products or speaking positively to others. Nevertheless, 33.5% stated that, although they were

not satisfied with the social behaviour of a company, they had not thought of "punishing" it, i.e. stop buying from it and talk "negatively" about it. Regarding the credibility of companies with active CSR actions in Greece, 41% of the respondents believe they are fairly reliable and 18.5% believes they are very reliable. However, there is also a significant percentage of 40.5% who consider them to be of limited reliability (29.5%) or not at all reliable (11%).

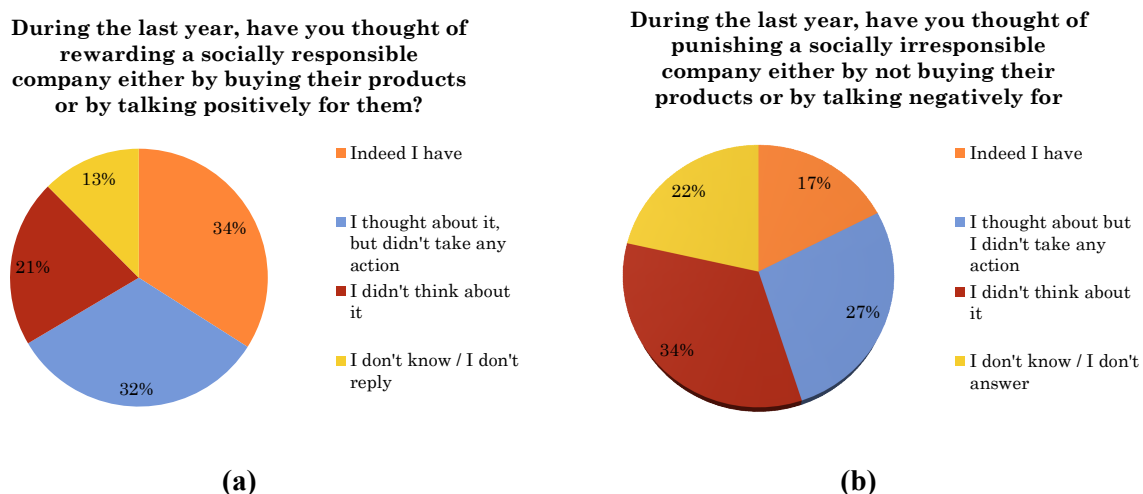


Figure 4. Willingness of consumers to reward (a) or penalize (b) a company with respect to its CSR

6. Conclusions

Businesses strive to ensure not only their profitability but also their sustainability. By adopting a CSR strategy, businesses can increase their benefits in both direct and indirect ways, especially since consumers can more easily trust a company that has a socially responsible profile. However, in the Greek agri-food sector, the degree of correlation between business and social responsibility is low, especially when compared to other European countries that have been implementing such actions for a longer time. The survey regarding the 222 companies from various agri-food sectors, showed that only 29.3% perform CSR actions, i.e. less than 1/3 of the total number of companies, with a clear dominance of the large companies over the SMEs. The majority of implemented actions can be classified as social actions, and most of them concern cases regarding the protection and support of people in need (financial and psychological support). The above facts can be explained through the phenomenon of the financial crisis the Greek society struggles with for almost the last ten years.

The majority of businesses associated with CSR choose their corporate website to promote their actions, even if they have other networking tools such as social media (e.g. Facebook). Although the majority of consumers in Greece is aware of CSR, a significant part of them (40%) tends to be sceptical with regards to the reliability of the performed CSR activities. However, 8 out of 10 of the respondents in the survey consider that the social image of the company is very important in order to choose a specific product, which comes to confirm that CSR and marketing are the two sides of the same coin for the success of a business. In addition, the majority of the respondents mentioned that they are willing to reward a company that follows a specific CSR strategy, by either buying their products, paying an additional cost that is proportionate to the initial product price, and/or recommending them to other people. Future work will focus on reporting CSR activities promotion through social media by Greek agri-food companies.

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