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DOMENIUL MARKETING



SUMMARY

PHD THESIS

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Cluj – Napoca, 2015



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STUDY REGARDING ROMANIAN CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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corporate social responsibility, perception, consumer behaviour, trust, consumer-company identification, satisfaction, loyalty, commitment

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a mainstream topic, gaining the status of corporate priority for a company's management and marketing. This is shown by the growing number of articles published in famous journals in the field.

The concept of CSR enjoys a not very long, but a very varied history. Thus, evidence of business communities' concern for society can be found many years back, but the concept of corporate social responsibility is formally reflected in specialized writings only beginning with the twentieth century, specifically in the last 60 years.

Although hall-marks of the concept appear mainly in the developed countries, the first important writings appear in the United States, where, in time, a considerable amount of literature on corporate social responsibility has been accumulated.

Thus, in literature, references to the concept of corporate social responsibility have been made ever since 1930-1940, but important writings appear only in the early 50s, when Bowen wrote about the social responsibilities of businessmen; he rhetorically asked on what responsibilities he expected businessmen to take towards society, and the answer to this question will be practically the first attempt to define the concept. He claimed that "businessmen have an obligation to follow the policies, to make the decisions or to follow the action lines that are more desirable for the objectives and values of our society" (Bowen, 1953, p. 6).

Another important attempt to define the concept comes, this time, from Carroll (1979). After he clearly suggested that the cornerstone of any economic system is the corporation, and the main purpose of any corporation is to make profits by selling products and services that enjoy request, he tried to outline his own definition: "corporate social responsibility includes all the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic-discretionary expectations that society has on organizations at a certain time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). Basically, until now, there is no generally accepted definition of the concept.

If the EU Commission argued in 2001 that corporate social responsibility refers to actions undertaken by companies beyond their legal obligations towards society and environment, in 2011 it simplifies the definition, condensing it to "the responsibility businesses have for their activity's impact on society" (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). The same committee considers

that certain regulations of such activities could create a more favourable environment for enterprises that voluntarily fulfil social responsibility.

Today, over 90% of the Fortune 500 companies explicitly mention their engagement in activities of corporate social responsibility. The context in which there was a growing demand for the development of social responsibility activities, it is considered to have the following components: the deeper prominence of the negative aspects of globalization; the expansion and the activities of non-profit organizations; the increase of those who require a sustainable development of the socio- economic system (Tanimoto, 2007).

According to reports provided by specialized units, large companies have revealed significant investments (millions of dollars) in corporate social responsibility initiatives. Also, allocating increasing amounts for cash donations, for contributions in kind, for cause-related marketing, for employees' volunteer programs, companies seem to act on the premise that CSR is not just the best thing to do, but also the most inspired (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006).

If 80% of the research conducted to date in the field of corporate social responsibility address the concept in terms of management and only the remaining 20% address it in terms of marketing, through this paper we want to emphasize that CSR should be an area of interest not only for specialists in management or strategy, but also for those in marketing, who, through a better understanding of how consumers perceive the corporate social responsibility activities undertaken by companies, can bring added value to the company. Consumers receive, interpret and organize stimuli in a manner consistent with their world, so their perceptions become important for the development of effective marketing strategies (Plăiaș, 1997).

Thus, starting from the idea that no extensive research has been conducted in Romania for showing how consumers perceive the CSR activities undertaken and communicated by companies, we turn this issue into the aim of this research extending thus the heretofore research in Romania, in the field of corporate social responsibility in terms of marketing.

The determining problem, the starting issue in our research approach is the answer to the question: what is the Romanian consumers' perception on the corporate social responsibility activities undertaken by companies?

Thereby, the purpose of this research is to try to clarify how consumers in Romania perceive the companies' corporate social responsibility activities.

In order to achieve this goal, specific objectives need to be fulfilled. Thus, given that, until now, there is no generally valid definition for the corporate social responsibility, our first objective is to seek a clarification of the concept, to present it this time, not from the point of view of managers, but from the point of view of stakeholders - in our case, the consumers. In this sense, we can highlight a first feature of the work's originality: the trial to outline the concept of corporate social responsibility from the perspective of the consumers in urban areas of Romania. The research conducted so far rely mostly on clarifying the concept of CSR only from the managers' perspective.

Once clarified the concept, we will move to study the impact that the perception of corporate social responsibility activities has on certain important marketing variables, such as: customer satisfaction, trust, commitment and loyalty.

Last but not least, we will try to track the consumers' characteristics consistent with the development of their relationship with the company (the interest or lack of interest shown by consumers towards the companies' social features; the satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding the CSR activities; the development or the lack of consumer's devotion or loyalty to the company). We will also study the influence that various consumers' personal features/traits have on their perception of corporate social responsibility.

In terms of thesis structure, it consists of five chapters pursuing the natural transition from theory to practice. The first three chapters provide the theoretical basis of the research, while the fourth one provides a smooth transition from theory to practice and the last chapter leisurely presents the practical results of the present research.

The first chapter summarizes the conceptual approaches of corporate social responsibility, providing an overview of the current knowledge in the field of corporate social responsibility. There are presented the emergence and the evolution of the concept, the attempts over time to define it, the types of corporate social responsibility activities, the reasons that incite the companies to engage in such activities, the role such activities play. The second part of the chapter presents some different approaches of the concept's dimensions and how it makes its presence felt in the European Union and in Romania. In the end, there is a review of the concept of corporate social irresponsibility.

The second chapter presents the concept of corporate communication, a theoretical approach referring to the definition, the history of the concept's appearance and the types of

corporate communications, finally focusing on marketing communication, and more specifically, on the corporate social responsibility communication.

The third chapter provides a theoretical review of the concept of perception, of the factors influencing perception in marketing, of the perception distortions, and, last but not least, the perception implications in marketing.

The fourth chapter presents a review of the specialized literature over the consumers' perception on corporate social responsibility, of the concept's components both from the managers' point of view and from the point of view of consumers, of how these perceptions can be measured, while the final chapter presents the consumers' perception of how companies influence society.

Chapter number five, entitled "The Romanian consumers' perception on corporate social responsibility" presents the results of a research conducted on a sample of 650 people. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first part includes the presentation of the research methodology used, the purpose, objectives, assumptions and the research tool, while the second part presents the actual results of the research.

The paper concludes with an independent chapter that presents the general findings of the thesis, the limitations of the presented research and the future research directions.

CHAPTER 1

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY – CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

1.1. The emergence and evolution of corporate social responsibility

Apparently, the first traces of addressing the concept of social responsibility have appeared long before attempting to define it. Thus, from the 30s-40s, various works include references to the social side of business. Relevant examples are: Chester Barnard's (1938) *The Functions of the Executive*, J. M. Clark's (1939) *Social Control of Business*, and Theodore Krepes' (1940) *Measurement of the Social Performance of Business*. Carroll noted that since '46, corporate executives, even then called "businessmen", were interviewed by the Fortune magazine journalists about their social responsibilities (Carroll, 1999).

Bowen is called the father of social responsibility, the one who founded the literature of this concept and the one who tried for the first time to define the concept (Schwartz, 2011).

A crucial milestone in the emergence and evolution of the concept of social responsibility is the “Iron Law of Responsibility”, introduced by Keith Davis in 1960, through which he argues that “the businessmen’ responsibility should be measured by their social power” (Davis 1960, p. 71).

As regards the major stages of the corporate social responsibility’s development, John Elkington (2004), also called the global authority of corporate responsibility, describes the evolution of CSR in three stages:

- The first stage relates to the period 1960–1978, which is characterized by the Western governments that sought to limit through legislation, the impact of economic activities on the environment and the rational exploitation of natural resources. This is the period when, for the first time, companies were required minimum standards of environmental protection.

- The second phase starts with the beginning of 1980. During this period, the focus moves from imposing rules on the exploitation of the environment, to what later would be called the “green” production. The focus is on the sustainable use of natural resources, thus giving birth to the concept of sustainable development.

- The third stage starts around 1999 and it virtually accompanies the protests against international institutions and global companies. The main feature of the stage is the rapid development of information and communications technology (ICT), which gives major companies the opportunity to establish and maintain a closer relationship with stakeholders. During this stage, the issues of corporate governance and strategic competitive advantages are reflected, while globalization increases the level of corporate social responsibility approach. In recent years, the concept of companies’ social and environmental responsibility continues to expand, including issues related to human rights, climate change and poverty.

1.2. Defining the corporate social responsibility

Howard Bowen, considered to be the parent of corporate social responsibility, enunciated practically the first definition of corporate social responsibility: “*businessmen’s obligations to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those directions which, in terms of values and objectives, are agreed by our society*” (Bowen, 1953, p. 6).

Similarly, Carroll (1979), one of the first theorists in the field of CSR, claimed that “companies include the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic-discretionary expectations that society has on the organization at a certain time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500).

According to the European Commission, in 2001, corporate social responsibility was “*a concept where companies integrate social and environmental concerns of their activities and of the interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis*” (europa.eu). Ten years later, this definition has been slightly modified: “*companies voluntarily decide to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment... beyond the limit imposed by the law, and investing in human capital, in environment and in the relations with stakeholders*” (europa.eu).

According to a paper published in 2002 by Ogrizek, corporate social responsibility means “*to compete beyond technology, beyond service quality and price, actually to compete where competitive advantage is short or even missing*” (Ogrizek, 2002, p. 215). He defines the scope of CSR as being “*not only the engagement in charitable, philanthropic or social activities, but also business practices that include environmental management systems, human resources policy and strategic investment to ensure a sustainable future*” (Ogrizek 2002, p. 216).

Vogel argues that corporate social responsibility is represented by “*the private companies’ policies and programs that go beyond regulations in response to public pressure and societal expectations*” (in Baron, 2006, p. 686).

In 2011, with the publication of the new 2011-2014 European Strategy on Corporate Social Responsibility, the European Commission published a new definition: “*the companies’ responsibility for the impact they have on society*” (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).

In order to find a common denominator for the many definitions associated with the concept of social responsibility, some authors have highlighted the key elements that are found in most definitions. They are believed to be five (Buchholz, 1991):

1. Corporations have responsibilities that go beyond the mere production of goods and services for profit;
2. These responsibilities entail involvement in solving social problems, especially when they are the ones who created those problems;
3. Corporations have a wider constituency than shareholders alone;
4. Corporations have an impact that goes beyond the mere market transactions;

5. Corporations serve a broader range of human values than can be seen by simply focusing on economic values.

1.3. Types of corporate social responsibility activities

According to Husted and Salazar (2006) there are three types of CSR: altruism, forced selfishness and strategic intent.

Arno Kourula and Minna Halme (2008) mention the existence of three types of typologies of corporate social responsibility: based on motivation; based on the responsibilities expected by society (normative) - Carroll's responsibility dimensions (1991): economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities; and level typologies - there are different stages in which to find a company that conducts social responsibility: from defensive or reactive stages, to stages characterized by strategic or transformative orientation towards social responsibility activities (Zadek, 2004).

Thus, Sri Urip (2010) believes that social responsibility activities should be divided into three different categories, not including philanthropy: *social responsibility is linked to the extended supply chain* (the parts involved in creating a product, from the idea of product to its arrival on the market); *relating with the community; the choice for CSR activities that need to be carried out depending on the needs of the community or society that the company belongs to; corporate philanthropy, an activity considered to be the traditional CSR activity.*

1.4. The reasons why companies implement social responsibility activities

The following reasons appear to be the main ones determining companies to implement corporate social responsibility activities:

- Environment issues (Murphy and Bendell, 1997);
- Increasing expectations of customers and employees, the legislation and the pressures from the state authorities, the investors' interest in social criteria and the change of the economic agents' purchasing practices ("*The Economist*", 2002);
- Strategic or even defensive reasons, altruistic or public-oriented ones (Vogel, 2005);
- "Civil regulation", social responsibility – "*the tribute that capitalism pays everywhere, for virtue*" (Vogel, 2005, p. 3);

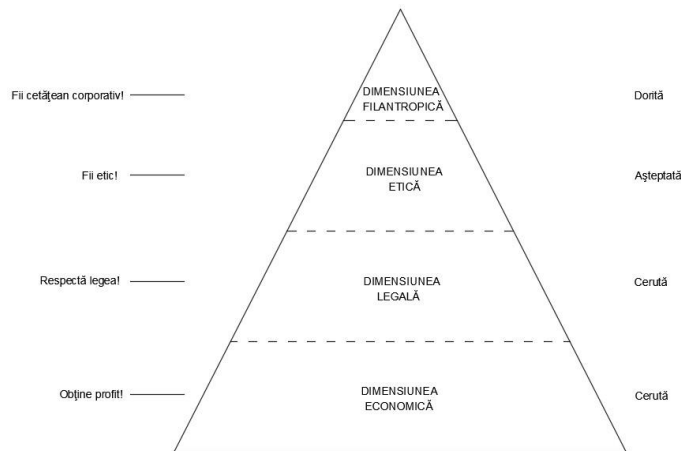
- Improving conditions; inducing economic growth through managing the company so as to respect the environment, the human rights; achieving a competitive position; a high degree of employees' morality or a better reputation; diversion of discretionary resources; profitability (Vogel, 2005);
- Fiscal benefits, increasing the company's visibility, consumers' preference for the products of socially responsible companies, increasing the internal cohesion of the team involved in the project (Vogel, 2005);
- Creating value, thereby gaining legitimacy, while keeping its status and maximizing its long-term economic efficiency (Vogel, 2005);
- Altruism, which was the first reason for social responsibility occurrence in America around 80s (Bueble, 2008);
- Compliance with the laws, ethical conduct and the adoption of responsible behaviour to prove that there is social conscience, a feature proper to the corporate citizen (Kotler and Keller, 2008);
- Identifying consumers' expectations and meeting them with corresponding products, at prices that offer good value for buyers and profit for the manufacturer (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008).

1.5. The role of corporate social responsibility today

Although the effects covered by the implementers of social responsibility (reducing risk, achieving competitive advantage and improving reputation, employees awareness and motivation) are brought into notice by literature, the problem of how to quantify the influence of companies' social responsibility on their performance remains the main concern for many of the authors in the field (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006; Porter and Kramer, 2003).

1.6. Approaches to Corporate Social Responsibility dimensions

Friedman's narrow approach is the first. Thus, in his view, *a corporation's only social responsibility is to obtain significant amounts by maximizing profits, taking into account the rules and regulations of the society in which it operates*, including: conformation to the current regulations, compliance with the customary ethics, and not least, running activity without deceit and fraud (Friedman, 1962).



Source: adapted after Carroll, (1991), pp. 39-48.

Fig. no. 1 – Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility, Carroll (1991)

A second approach is that of Carroll's, in whose view, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is likened to a four level pyramid. These levels correspond to the four dimensions considered by the author, namely: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll, 1991).

Schwartz is very close to Carroll's approach, except that, in his view, there are three key areas of corporate social responsibility, and not four, as advocated by Carroll. These three areas are: economic, legal and ethical. The author believes that philanthropy is not an obligation or responsibility (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003).

The limits of this model, as mentioned by the author himself, refer to the fact that it is hard to believe that companies may undertake actions that are only economic, or legal or ethical. Even if the spheres interfere only in some areas, the author believes that there will always be an overlap between the three spheres up to a certain point.

A third approach relates to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) which mentioned three concepts that define the limits of CSR: the spheres of influence – basically the role of social responsibility is defined in spheres of influence; the value chain – representing the problems and dilemmas along a product's value chain or a life cycle; questions to management – identifying the corporate values and problems, analyzing the impact within the value chain, to communicate, to create a range and to influence. WBCSD argues that the key issues addressed by CSR today are: human rights, workers' rights, the environmental protection, relationships with suppliers and involvement in society.

The impact of a company's activities on community is an excellent catalyst for social accounting and it simultaneously promotes a positive image and reputation. Social responsibility is considered an intangible asset that contributes to its success, equally important, but different in perspective to the financial measures.

A fourth approach is from the European Union's perspective. Thus, according to the documents published by the EU Commission, the concept of CSR would encompass several dimensions: *human rights; the practices on labour and employment; environmental issues; bribery and corruption rebutment; involvement in community and in its development; integration of people with disabilities; protecting consumer interests; promoting social responsibility within the supply chain; non-financial information dissemination; good fiscal governance.*

1.7. CSR in the EU and Romania

The Commission's agenda on CSR refers to: increasing the CSR visibility and disseminating good practices; improving and tracking the companies' level of confidence; improving the processes of self-regulation and co-regulation; improving the CSR market reward; improving the company's social and environmental information dissemination; further integration of CSR into education, training and research; stressing the importance of national and sub-national policies on CSR; better alignment of CSR approaches at European and global level.

As regards the corporate social responsibility in Romania, following a study conducted in 2012 by a group of Romanian researchers, it was concluded: first, the great majority of company managers do not understand the meaning of being a socially responsible company, which is why they disagree with most of the CSR definitions; secondly, when asked to explain the meaning of social responsibility, they are not able to provide logical arguments; they argue that companies' involvement in social responsibility activities is purely economic and is related to the company size; in its vision, rather large companies implement CSR activities (Herman et al., 2012).

1.8. Corporate social irresponsibility

Tench (2012) believes that corporate social responsibility and corporate social irresponsibility are logically inseparable. Basically, they say, without the concept of corporate social irresponsibility, the CSR would be ultimately empty. The two concepts coexist permanently. They argue that "it is undeniable that all illegal business behaviours are socially

irresponsible, but at the same time, all legal business behaviours are not necessarily socially responsible. Therefore, certain business behaviours that are legal may be considered irresponsible by society” (Tench et al., 2012, p. 8-9).

Corporate Social Irresponsibility is considered to lie above the boundary between legal and illegal practice. The suggestion is that at least part of what should be defined as irresponsible is a behaviour falling very close to being considered illegal, but it is either against the spirit of the law, or it is generally considered to be an unethical behaviour that may become illegal in the near future. As an example is the circumvention from taxes by exploiting the regulatory gaps (Nunn, 2012).

By means of the concept of corporate social irresponsibility, CSR becomes more realistic, more effective and more focused.

CHAPTER 2

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

2.1. Conceptual approaches of corporate communication

Today, more and more organizations begin to realize that their future critically depends on how it is perceived and seen by key stakeholders such as shareholders, investors, customers and consumers, their employees, and not finally, their community members. This is why most companies pay particular attention to corporate communication.

“To communicate is to make or to have something in common without bringing prejudice to this thing, neither to the ways that serve to transmission or to the terms (individuals, groups, objects) involved in sharing. Today there is no question that everything communicates, but society itself is defined by communication. Communication is the substance of society” (Sfez, 1993, p. 11).

Communication components are considered to be indispensable: *the transmitter or the speaker; the statement or the message; the receptor; the interference; the feedback* (Paus, 2006).

Oral communication functions (Dragan, 2007, p.87): *referential function; expressive function; conative function; phatic function; metalinguistic function; poetic function.*

Written communication functions: *referential function; expressive function; conative function; phatic function; metalinguistic function; poetic function* (Dragan, 2007, p. 88).

2.1.2. Defining the corporate communication

In 2007, van Riel and Fombrun claimed that corporate communication is “a management tool through which all forms of conscious use of internal and external communication are effectively harmonized, aiming mainly to create a favourable basic relationship with the stakeholders the company depends on” (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007, p. 25).

Thus, corporate communication is a management function that is responsible for supervising and coordinating the communication with the media, the public affairs and the internal communication.

Corporate communication responsibilities are: profiling the “company behind the brand”; developing initiatives to minimize the differences between the desired identity of the company and its brand characteristics; appointing the duties and the persons in the field of communication; developing and implementing effective procedures to facilitate the decision-making in communication matters; mobilization of internal and external support for fulfilling the objectives.

2.2. The emergence and evolution of corporate communication

Along with the advent of industrial corporations, there have also emerged the professional communication officers and a greater need to manage in a more organized way the promotional and advertising activity. These factory owners sought to obtain, and especially to maintain the agreement and the support of governments, customers and of the general public, which forced them to invest large amounts in public relations and advertising campaigns.

Both marketing and public relations have evolved as distinct external communication disciplines when organizations had realized that in order to prosper, they must take care of the public problems, as well as of the ways in which they can effectively bring products on the market. Since the 80s, organizations have started to put back the two disciplines together as the concept of “corporate communication”. Philip Kotler stated that “there is a real need to create a new paradigm, in which the two components (marketing and public relations) can effectively cooperate for the positive interest of both organizations and the public they serve” (Kotler and Mindak 1978, p. 15).

Kotler states that “marketing is for feeling, serving and satisfying a customer for profit, while public relations exist to create goodwill among publics, for they should not interfere in making the profit” (Kotler and Mindak 1978, p. 16).

This overlapping of marketing activities with the public relations point out that an approximation of the two disciplines or at least their management in a more integrative manner may be useful. This is where the concept of “integrated marketing communication” arises. Basically, Kotler and Mindak outline five models to define the possible relationships between marketing and public relations (Kotler and Mindak 1978, p. 17). Thus, these models are divided into two categories: models reflecting equality, but different functions of the two concepts, and models reflecting equality, but overlapping functions.

Another approach of the integrated communication is that of van Reil and Fombrun (2007). Due to the organization’s desire to control the purchase of the resources necessary to their work, they have created specialized groups whose main responsibility was to communicate with the relevant stakeholders. In terms of structure, they say that modern organization generally operates by means of the departments responsible for creating and maintaining the relations with the community, the government, consumers, labour, and human resources.

In recent years, there is an increasingly revival of this integrated communication, not only because of the apparent inconsistencies of the organizations’ communication system, but especially because more organizations understand that the economic value can be created only by strengthening the corporate brand.

The main purpose of the corporate brand is to customize the company as a whole in order to create value from the company’s strategic position, from its institutional activities, staff, structure, and from its products and services portfolio. The corporate brand is basically used to create the halo effect on everything the company does or says, and which capitalizes the company’s reputation.

2.3. Types of corporate communication

There are three groups mentioned in the specialized literature: management communication, organizational or institutional communication and marketing communication.

Management communication refers to the communication performed between an organization’s management and its internal or external public. At this level are all the persons

who lead and authorize the acquisition and retention of key resources. It is the most important component of the three types of communication, and it is more effective if closely supported by marketing and organizational communication.

The second type of communication, the organizational communication, refers broadly to: public relations, public affairs, relations with investors, environmental communication, organization's promotion and internal communication. They designate a heterogeneous group of communication activities, which have four common characteristics: they are designed for the corporate public such as shareholders, financial journalists, investment analysts, regulators and legislators; they are thought for long term and do not principally aim to increase sales; it uses a different communication style, exaggeration is limited, and the message is formal; it is generated by third parties: through external pressure, the organization is practically forced to disclose some information that otherwise would not have shared to the public.

Finally, marketing communication relates particularly to those forms of communication designed to increase sales of products, services and brands. Advertising is very important in this type of communication. Advertising is considered to be an indirect way of persuasion based on information about the benefits of products that are designed to create a good impression, in order to influence the customer's decision to purchase.

The socially responsible marketing communication refers to a series of problems that communications managers must consider when designing the company's marketing message: sales practices, consumer rights, environmental protection and conservation, food safety and dissemination of appropriate, correct and verifiable information. Also, a socially responsible company should take into account the expectations of its consumers, for it is known that the stakeholders' values and norms influence their perception about a company, about its activities and products. Therefore, the company should take into account issues such as child labour, workers' rights, discrimination and other problems that could affect the company's marketing communication.

It is important to note that, together with increasing the importance the media gives to social responsibility issues, companies begin to take direct and visible actions in order to communicate the social responsibility initiatives to their different stakeholders, including consumers.

Basically, social advertising starts to take shape somewhere in the 90s, when big companies start to fund extensive campaigns to promote their social involvement activities (Drumwright, 1996). This promotion seems to be successful given that, according to research conducted in 1993, only 26 % of respondents could state the name of a company considered to be a strong corporate citizen, and in 2004, following a similar survey, the percentage increases to approximately 80 % (Berner, 2005).

The corporate social responsibility is considered a participative social process where communication plays a very important role (Sorsa, 2008). Today, it becomes increasingly important for companies to communicate their involvement in corporate social responsibility activities, as they can influence the behaviour of opinion leaders towards a company. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that global communication creates a favourable context for increasing scepticism among civil society regarding the organizations overestimating their social behaviour.

Therefore, the communication of the corporate social responsibility is often conceived as a means to influence the stakeholders' perceptions about organizations in terms of the information resources they use in order to inform stakeholders about the corporate social responsibility policies and activities conducted (Christensen and Cheney, 2011).

Stakeholders' scepticism on corporate social responsibility activities is the main problem in the communication of corporate social responsibility.

Regarding the *communication channels* used by companies to communicate information about their socially responsible activities, they are: annual social reports (sustainability), websites, advertising and other channels (thematic reports, codes of conduct, consultations with the parties, awards and events, causes related marketing, interventions in the press or on TV etc.)

It can therefore be concluded that the success of a company's involvement in activities of corporate social responsibility hangs upon communicating them. Although both the involvement and the communication of corporate social responsibility incur additional costs for the company and the risks are quite high, optimal results cannot be achieved without communicating it, and the improvement of corporate social responsibility reputation and brand value, cannot be achieved this way. Therefore, the key is to know how to effectively communicate both with the company's stakeholders and within the company.

CHAPTER 3

PERCEPTION – CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

3.1. Perception – conceptual approaches

Perception is a subjective reflection accompanied by an image conformal to what happens within human consciousness towards the facts, the objects and the phenomena of the objective reality that act directly on the human senses. The perceptual process itself is mediated by the sense organs, and the fact that perception is strictly a physical process makes it liable to mental manipulation (Naghiu, 2010).

Perception is considered to be an extremely complex process consisting of the mental activity of finding, understanding and judging the stimuli received by the sense organs. It can be both physiological, namely the physical perception, and psychological, namely the cognitive perception. Its main characteristic is selectivity due to consumer individuality and it completes the need (Cătoiu and Teodorescu, 2004).

According to Cătoiu (2004), perception in marketing is directly related to the informing/learning, which constitutes the elements whereby consumers know the products. In informing, most attention is paid to the sources of information. They can be personal or impersonal.

Prutianu (2008) divides perception into two phases: *sensations' formation and their interpretation and pictorial representation*; the analytical description requires its decomposition into sequences: exposure to stimuli, detection, focusing attention, background figure discrimination, organizing sensory stimulation, interpretation and representation (Prutianu, 2008, p. 474).

Prutianu (2008) presents sensation as a reaction of the sense organs to the impact of stimuli: sounds, images, odours, etc. These are psychical elementary reflections of concrete and isolated qualities of the objects acting directly on a sense organ. The difference between sensation and perception concerns that the first does not reflect the object in its entirety, as a whole, but only its isolated and fragmented characteristics.

Thus, when creating the message, special attention is paid to its adequacy with the recipient. First, the message is sent and the sender shall inform about the recipient's sensory acuity. It is kept in mind that one sees or hears with greater interest when motivated. The interest is the one that focuses attention, as well as trade, passions and concerns of each individual. Also, expectations and aspirations leave a strong imprint on perceptions.

Therefore, despite that most often adapting the message to the recipient is a barrier among marketing professionals, they have learned to use this strategy for the benefit of companies (Plaias, 2015).

Image fructification is also extremely important due to the effects it produces in creating confidence and in perceiving the sense of corporate responsibility. Thus, in commercial terms, information that can be gathered in carrying the image of a company, a product after an office visit, after carefully studying a person, can be divided into two broad categories: trust-generating information and mistrust-generating information. It is obvious that, for a company, this information enjoys special attention because they can rush, or conversely, stop the consumer's intent to purchase (Trevisani, 2007, p. 61).

3.2. Factors influencing the generation of perception in marketing

According to Datculescu (2006), there is a combination of four factors that influence the formation of perception: *the characteristics of external stimulation* – people respond differently to external stimulation, depending on its characteristics; *the context* – a lot of environmental stimuli affect our senses, there so many that we cannot catch all of them, but only a part; *the physiological characteristics of sensory channels, the consumer's characteristics* - they relate to the fact that the consumer's knowledge and experience, his familiarisation with the stimulus influences the way the stimulus is perceived. Other factors that could influence perception in marketing are: the company's image; the customer's mood; the employees' attitude and behaviour towards customers; the features of the products and services provided.

CHAPTER 4

PERCEPTION OF THE CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSABILITY

4.1. The perception of corporate social responsibility in literature

Studies have confirmed that CSR activities have both direct and indirect influence on the consumer's response to the products or even to the assessment of socially responsible companies (Brown and Dacin, 1997), on its identification with a particular company (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), on the consumers' philanthropic behaviour of donating to non-profit organizations (Lichtentein et al., 2004), on its attitude towards the products of socially responsible companies (Berens, van Riel and van Bruggen, 2005), on consumer confidence (Swaen and Chumpitaz, 2008).

It was also noted that consumers are interested not only in the concept of corporate social responsibility, but they increasingly begin to take account of CSR when evaluating a company or deciding on the purchase of a company's products.

Studies have shown that to consumers, a distinction between the components of CSR concept is very important, as they say it is a far too abstract and complex concept to be understood and rated. Oberseder, Murphy and Schlegelmilch would say these elements are: "the employees, the consumers, the environment, the suppliers, the local community, the shareholders and the society as a whole" (2013, p. 6).

The stakeholder theory reflects the extent to which the company deals with stakeholders as appropriate. It suggests that, if the relationship between the company and the groups or individuals that can affect or are affected by it, is adopted as a unit of analysis, then there is a better chance to meet all the three current issues: the issue of value creation and trade; the issue of capitalism ethics; the issue of managerial mentality.

Thus, from the stakeholders' perspective, a business can be understood as a set of relationships between groups that have a common interest. This refers to how customers, suppliers, employees, funders, communities and managers interact in order to create value to sell. And in order to understand a business, one needs to know how these relationships work and how they change over time. Freeman argues that it is up to the manager to manage and shape these relationships in order to create as much value for all stakeholders and to better manage its distribution. If the interests of the parties conflict, it is the manager's duty to find a way to

rethink the problem in order to meet the needs of a wider group of stakeholders, especially if this can create even more value (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 406).

4.2. The components of corporate social responsibility from the managers' perspective

As studies have shown over time, companies, by their managers, distinguish between the different components of corporate social responsibility corresponding to the different types of stakeholders the company has. Thus, companies not only differentiate these components, but they also assign different degrees of importance and prioritization. Therefore, the most important components are related to a company's main stakeholders, namely: investors/shareholders, customers, employees and suppliers. The next important are: the environment, the society, the local community and the non-profit organizations. Company managers believe that the relation with the latter is important, but of less priority than with the first group. In the third group are mentioned: the media, the governments and the competitors, actors whose influence is less vital to the survival of a company. It is very interesting that managers do not mention anything about retailers and consumer protection bodies, regarded as advocates of the latter. Nevertheless, retailers may be considered part of the consumers, even if they are not final consumers, however, managers' approach can be considered incomplete.

4.3. The components of corporate social responsibility from the consumers' perspective

Unlike company managers, consumers cannot perceive the CSR concept as a whole, as they think it is too abstract and complex for this, and divide it into components to which they associate different degrees of importance. Thus, in the consumers' view, companies' responsibilities are divided by two levels, depending on the parties involved, so that employees, consumers and the environment are the most important components of social responsibility. This is because most consumers identify with these three categories, the majority of who are employees, all are consumers and all wish to live in a clean environment. At the next level of importance are the suppliers, the society and the local communities. Consumers did not mention the shareholders, the media, and the organizations defending consumer rights, the retailers, the competitors or the governments, in the research conducted. As for profits, consumers are aware that companies' main responsibility is to make profits, but they are not interested in this, but in how this profit is gained.

4.4. Classification of the consumers' perceptions

The same Austrian writers tried, based on the research conducted among consumers, to outline a classification of consumer perceptions about corporate social responsibility. Thus, following the responses from consumers, they mention three types of perceptions of CSR: the corporate social responsibility seen as a relationship of “receiving-and-giving”, the corporate social responsibility seen as an interconnection, the corporate social responsibility seen as a marketing trick (Oberseder, Murphy and Schlegelmilch, 2013).

4.5. Measuring the consumer perceptions on corporate social responsibility

Thus, one of the most important works of literature that tries to solve the mysteries of consumer perception on corporate social responsibility is “CSR Practices and Consumer Perceptions”, written by the Austrian authors Magdalena Oberseder, Bodo Schlegelmilch and Patrick Murphy.

They conducted three studies aiming to achieve a tool for measuring the consumer perceptions on corporate social responsibility. Their results refer particularly to the validation of the four hypotheses that underlay the creation of the instrument model for measuring the consumer perceptions on CSR.

The first of these hypotheses argues that companies' efforts in carrying out social responsibility activities will positively influence the consumers' assessment of companies.

A second hypothesis says that consumers' identification with the company will be even more favourable as there is a more favourable assessment of the company's commitment to corporate social responsibility activities. Hypothesis number three: there is a direct and positive correlation between consumer perception on CSR and the purchase intent. And the fourth hypothesis suggested that there was a positive and indirect relationship between consumer perception on CSR and their purchasing intent mediated by the consumer-company identification.

For the last two hypotheses to be tested, the authors chose to examine the relationship between the consumer perception on CSR and three important variables of the consumer behaviour, namely the company's valuation, the consumer's identification with the company and the purchase intent.

Following the analysis, the authors concluded that the company's valuation is positively and directly related to how consumers perceive corporate social responsibility. Also, the consumer's identification with the company is directly and positively related to how he perceives social responsibility activities undertaken by the company. The indirect relationship between the perception of corporate social responsibility and the purchase intent has been confirmed, and the consumer-company identification turned out to be a mediator in the relationship between consumers' perception of social responsibility and purchase intent. Instead, the direct effect of the CSR perception on the purchase intention has emerged as insignificant, which, the authors say, contradicts the data obtained in the previous studies (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001).

4.6. The perception of how companies influence societies – EU vs Romania

Little over half of the European respondents (49% for Romanians) believe that companies positively influence society, but less than half of them (40%) believe that there is an increase in the attention companies pay to the influence they exert on society.

Most Europeans (79%) say they are interested in the companies' socially responsible activities. For Romanians the percentage is similar (76%).

Both Europeans and Romanians believe that creating new jobs has the most positive impact, followed by contributing to economic growth and providing opportunities for training for employees; corruption, staff reduction and environmental pollution are seen as the main negative effects.

CHAPTER 5 THE PERCEPTION OF THE ROMANIAN CONSUMERS UPON THE CORPORATIST SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

5.1. Research Methodology

The aim of the research

The aim of the research is to determine the manner the Romanian consumers perceive the activity of corporatist social responsibility communicated by companies.

The objectives of the research

- 1. Determining the perception of the consumers upon the social responsibility activities and politics implemented by the Romanian companies*
- 2. Determining the manner the perception of the consumers upon the social responsibility influences some key elements of the consumer behaviour*
- 3. Determining the degree the corporatist social responsibility may determine the buying by the Romanian consumers*
- 4. Determining the interest of the Romanian consumers toward the reports upon the corporatist social responsibility*
- 5. Determining the degree in which the consumers are available to support the responsible consume*

The method of research

In order to study the manner the Romanian consumers perceive the social responsibility activities performed and communicated by the companies, we used as method for data collection the *online web survey, based on a questionnaire*.

Target group

The target group is represented by consumers over 18, both genders, resident in Romania in 2014 and which, required by the research method, are internet users.

The sample

A number of 650 valid questionnaires were obtained, permitting a high number of statistic techniques for analysing the sampled data.

Research instrument

The research instrument for the data collection was the online questionnaire, permitting to analyse and the explanation of the causal relations between the variables. Due to the fact that the traditional time, material and operators for interview are quite expensive, we used a modern method to apply the questionnaire. It was designed and applied online with the help of Google Forms application and the data were processed using the statistic analyse programme called Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

5.5. The Results of The Research

When it comes to the Romanian consumers and their expectations upon the activities and the behaviour of the companies in Romania, our data shows that the expectations are very high and the companies are not meeting them in the same degree.

The CSR elements the best regulated in the national legislation are perceived as the best met expectations, the consumers that we interviewed answering in high percent to the question related to the behaviour and the activities of the companies in Romania. The best perception is upon the behaviour of the companies in the field of respecting the legislation and the norms (40.0%), closely followed by the behaviour of respecting the rights of the employees (37.3%), next the respect of the rights of the consumers (37.2%) and the opening of new jobs (31.3%).

When it comes to the perception of the corporatist social responsibility, the Romanian consumers mostly consider that the most important social responsibility of the companies is gaining profit, followed by obtaining a competition advantage and, in equal percentage, by the social responsible investment and the protection of the environment.

They consider that, the social responsibility of the companies is mostly formed of sponsorship/ charity activities and partnerships with the local communities, the respect for the rights of the consumers and employees and the respect for the legislation.

The main information source of the consumers upon the activities developed by the

companies in Romania, altogether and in big percentage is online media for 64% of the respondents, followed by social networks – 50.1 %, TV shows – 46.9%, friends/ family – 42.4% and publications – 39.3%.

Another objective of our research is to identify the top three companies considered by the Romanian consumers as the most responsible from the social point of view. They were asked to name the top three companies that, in their opinion, may be considered the most social responsible on the Romanian market.

The classification is: Petrom Company with 156 responses, Orange Company with 69 responses, and again Petrom with 62 responses. The top ten includes the oil company that invested the most in corporatist social responsible activities. Other named companies were: Avon – a cosmetics company with large visibility for women and a campaign against breast cancer, other communication companies, Coca Cola, banks and Dacia Company.

The level of trust from the consumers for the companies considered to be the most social responsible is high to very high and so are their satisfaction and loyalty, but, as modal value shows it, the most frequent answer is *medium*, while, in the case of the other three variants, the modal is *high*. The standard deviation is very low, showing that the answers of the consumers present a high homogeneity.

In the case of the Romanian consumers, the companies developing social responsible activities image to gain image capital for the company through these activities, as it shows the fact that the most respondents show positivity toward the company they consider the most social responsible, every time they are asked an opinion upon the company. This is very positive for the company because it is well-known by promotion by word of mouth is very efficient, not only because it is cheap, but also because is more trusted by the consumers.

The companies considered the most social responsible offer to the consumers a feeling of trust in the products and services they sell and, more than this, their products and services offer a feeling of buying quality and the companies are seen as open and sincere to the customers.

In order to “convince” the customers to become its clients, a company must first respect the rights of the customers, the profitability of the company presenting no importance for the customers.

Related to the criteria for the choice of the products, the tables above show that the main criterion is the “**quality**” of the product, followed by “**price**” and “**trade mark**” and after these

criteria follow: “**the producer**”, the fact that “**the product participate to fundraising**”, the “**habit**” and, last in the category, the “**package**”.

The majority of the Romanian respondents, a percentage of 64.5%, never opened a report of social responsibility from a company.

The Romanian consumers have the intention to support the responsible consume through: the differentiated collection of wastes, involvement in campaigns for the rights of the consumers and the rights of the employees, involvement in environmental campaigns and, only after these preferred variants, they would give up the car for a bicycle or walking at least once a week or involve in campaigns for the rights of the animals.

The majority of the respondents, with slightly different opinions, consider that the companies choose to develop social responsible activities first in order to gain image capital and second in order to generate an increase of profit by increasing the number of clients. The fourth place among the reasons for the social responsible activities is, in the opinion of the respondents, the fact that companies are members of the community and must act like it. The last reason in the opinion of the consumers is the pure altruism.

GENERAL CONCLUSION, LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH AND FUTURE RESEARCH CORRIDORS

6.1. General Conclusions

From a theoretical point of view, the present thesis offers a perspective upon the perception of the Romanian consumers upon the corporatist with social responsible activities developed by companies in Romania, contrasting with the dedicated literature based mostly on presenting the concept of corporatist social responsibility from the point of view of the American or English managers.

The paper aims mainly to determine the perception of the Romanian consumers upon the corporatist social responsible activities and politics implemented by company on the territory of the country using the identifications from the consumers, the manner they perceive the main

component elements of the concept and the identification of the main information sources of the consumers upon the activities of the companies.

Also, the paper aims to determine the impact of the corporatist social responsible activities upon the consumers, especially the manner they influence the buying behaviour, the trust, the satisfaction, the loyalty and the devoutness toward the companies considered to be the most social responsible.

We also realised a classification of the companies considered by the Romanian customers as being the most social responsible on the Romanian territory.

Finally, the thesis aims to determine the interest of the Romanian consumers toward the reports of the social responsibility, their perception upon the reasons the companies have to involve in such activities and the degree the consumers are opened to support a responsible consume.

We reached the conclusion that, generally, do not exist significant differences in the manner of perceiving various components of corporatist social responsibility given by gender. On the contrary, there are significant differences of perception depending on the educational level of the consumers.

Related to the novelty of the present paper, we consider as credits the fact that:

- Clarifies the concept from the point of view of the consumers, the majority of the published studies presenting it in a managerial manner or using only students as respondents;
- Is one of the few ample studies in Romania aiming to identify the perception of the Romanian consumers upon the social responsible activities of the companies active in our country;
- Realizes a classification of companies considered by the consumers to be the most social responsible companies in Romania;
- Conserves the multidimensional nature of the concept by avoiding the usage of a single indicator of the corporatist social responsibility or the usage of a single dimension (environment, philanthropy, ethics etc.) as the majority of the published Romanian studies do;
- Highlights the importance of corporatist social responsibility in creating and maintaining long term relations between the Romanian consumers and companies;

- Highlights the existing relation between the corporatist social responsibility and the marketing variables: satisfaction, trust, loyalty and devoutness;
- Highlights the existing relation between the corporatist social responsibility and the perceived quality, the identification consumer - company and the determination of the buying process, in the case of the Romanian consumers;
- Highlights the fact that the corporatist social responsibility influences the perceived quality of the products and services offered by the companies considered to be the most social responsible and especially influences the trust in the company, generating loyalty from the consumers, a higher reputation and image of the company and, finally, a bigger profit.

6.2. Managerial Implications

From a practical point of view, the results in our research may offer real support in managerial decisions, bringing a series of contributions for the social responsibility activities of the companies. The thesis:

- Might help managers to find a proper justification necessary for investment in the development of social responsibility strategies. These investment might have, on a long term, effects upon the consumers: trust, satisfaction, loyalty and devoutness to the company;
- Offers to the managers a starting point in answers to the questions upon: the corporatist social responsibility as cost versus long term investment for the company; the expectations of the consumers for the social responsibility activities implemented by companies.
- Certifies the fact that the effects of the social responsibility initiatives developed and communicated by companies depend on a series of factors such as: the expectations of the consumers upon the activities of corporatist social responsibility (values of the consumers), the level of knowledge and information, the congruence consumer – company, the importance given to other products or attributes and the credibility of the information source. There are also added to the equation: the economic,

technologic, political and social context and the socio – demographic characteristic of the consumers;

- Offers the proof that the managers need to integrate into the informational marketing system questions related to the expectations of the consumers upon the social responsibility activities of a companies, in order to continuously monitor the modifications in the expectations and perceptions, to be capable to anticipate and adapt to them in order to satisfy the consumers, and to understand that the implementation of the social responsibility activities may not be successfully realised without an adequate communication from the company, because the mission of communicating the social responsibility activities of the company remains difficult without the trust of the consumers.

Thus, the answer to the problem we identified in the beginning, the implication or the lack of implication from the company in activities of corporatist social responsibility, is given under the form of *implication*, because it bring advantages for all the parties involved. Consumers with a positive appreciation upon the social responsibility activities of a company will reward through the act of buying.

6.3. The Limits of The Research

Although the present thesis assumes a series of credits and contributes to the enrichment of general knowledge upon the concept of corporatist social responsibility perceived by the Romanian consumers, our thesis also presents a series of limits, which, corroborated with the empiric results offer the possibility for new investigation and research.

One of the limits of our research is linked to the disadvantages given by the small rate of response to the online questionnaire. A first limit is the small response rate, the online questionnaire being characterised by the impossibility to interact with the respondents. Another limit refers to the high degree of self-selection of the respondents, the representativeness of the sample being possible to be affected by it, because a certain category of respondents might be over-represented in the disadvantage of other categories.

Using an alternative method of data sampling might improve the response rate, which is quite small in the case of online questionnaire. Thus, a face-to-face questionnaire might be a

viable alternative for using the e-mail. Still, efforts were made to increase the response rate: the preliminary notification of the respondents through telephone or chat; an introduction was sent together with the online questionnaires as an invitation to the sampling; reminding e-mail and messages were also used.

Another limit of the research is imposed by the Google platform in designing the questionnaire. Some of the inconvenient are: the impossibility to create questions to permit the respondent to make a hierarchy on some criteria; the difficulty of designing the questionnaire and the impossibility to download it in an editing form.

A very important limit is linked to time, thus, a longitudinal research may be relevant to highlight the relations that may be established between the consumers and the declared social responsible companies, having as mediator the corporatist social responsibility. This may be a method to observe the evolution of these relations depending on factors as the economic-social context and also the evolution from the starting point of the relations until their maturity.

6.3. Future Corridors of Research

In terms of future corridors of research, it may represent be important to identify the moderation factors in the relation between the perception of the consumers upon the corporatist social responsibility and different marketing variables.

In the same time, as mentioned in the thesis, it may be useful to create a scale for the perception measurement, the dedicated literature being poorly represented (Moisescu, 2014b).

Also, a longitudinal research may offer a series of results, impossible to obtain using other types of research, upon the time evolution of the perception upon the activities of social responsibility developed by companies; upon the evolution of the relations between consumers and companies and upon the identification of the factors that moderates the relations consumers – companies.

Finally, a research on segments of consumers might offer information relevant to managers from various domains of activity.

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