

Characteristics of Consumer Segments based on Consumer Habits and Preferences from an Environmental and Social Responsibility Perspective

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Abstract: Consumer habits and preferences are increasingly being transformed by CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). Consumers are becoming more aware of what they are buying, and this is encouraging companies to pay attention to social, environmental and ethical issues. Environmental concerns are now a key concern for consumers and ethical consumption is a major trend today. Younger generations, especially Generation Z, are particularly sensitive to social and environmental issues. Consumer demand for social responsibility is increasingly influencing purchasing habits and preferences. Companies that are able to credibly integrate CSR principles into their business practices are more likely to gain the trust and loyalty of modern, conscious consumers. In this study, I conducted a primary research to investigate whether the characteristics of ethical consumer behaviour (environmental awareness, social responsibility) are reflected in customer habits and preferences.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; consumer behaviour; responsible consumption

1 Introduction

Corporate sustainability is a business approach that plans for long-term operations and growth, taking into account environmental, social and economic considerations. Sustainability aims to conserve natural resources, reduce carbon emissions, improve waste management and support local communities. Increasingly, companies are developing sustainability strategies that not only help protect the environment, but can also deliver long-term business benefits, such as cost savings and positive branding.

The three main pillars of sustainability environmental, social and economic sustainability. Environmental sustainability: the aim is to minimise environmental

impact, for example through energy efficiency measures, the use of renewable energy sources and green logistics. Social sustainability: focuses on employee well-being, community relations, equal opportunities and diversity in the workplace. Economic sustainability: developing business models that ensure sustainable operations, for example through cost reduction and efficient resource management, with a focus on long-term financial stability.

Corporate sustainability has become a competitive advantage, as consumers and investors are increasingly aware of the need to choose sustainable companies, so investing in sustainability also adds business value.

The general perception of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) has changed significantly in recent years and is increasingly central to corporate strategy. CSR means that companies not only seek to increase profits but also take into account the social, environmental and economic impact of their activities.

Modern consumers are increasingly aware and expect companies to behave responsibly. This includes attention to the environment, ethical business practices and social justice. It is, therefore, increasingly important for companies to communicate their CSR activities effectively to the public.

Proper implementation of CSR activities can give companies a competitive advantage. Companies that make a positive difference in their social and environmental responsibility can become more attractive to consumers, employees and investors alike. Although CSR is generally viewed positively, there is also some scepticism. Some critics argue that some companies engage in CSR only to improve their image (known as "greenwashing"), without making real changes.

Overall, the perception of corporate responsibility is positive, particularly in terms of promoting long-term sustainability and ethical business practices, although there are sometimes criticisms of its actual effectiveness and credibility.

2 Theoretical Overview

2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility from a Business Perspective

CSR has become an important and topical issue in both theoretical research and practice in recent decades. The concept itself reflects the fact that companies do not only seek to maximise profits, but also monitor the environmental and social impacts of their operations as a community of people [1]. Several studies support the research findings that companies that want to be successful in the future must integrate CSR into their business strategy [2] [3].

The basic principle of corporate social responsibility is that a business organisation is not independent of its environment and that communities and countries, like the success or failure of businesses, are interconnected, and it follows that communities should benefit from the successes achieved [4].

Corporate social responsibility in the modern sense is usually associated with Howard Bowen's book on Corporate Social Responsibility [5], but the focus is not on the company as a whole, but on the responsibility of the managers. Of course, the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of managers are inevitable in the analysis of corporate social responsibility [6] [7].

The analysis of corporate social responsibility can identify impacts that contribute to sustainability (e.g. innovative products for low-purchasing power consumers, reduction of waste production and use of recycled materials, formulation and implementation of codes of ethics, etc.), the limits of which are clearly defined by business considerations [8].

In the last decade, the valuation of companies has been dependent not only on financial performance, but also on environmental and social strategies and successful management strategies in relation to these. The impact and (non)financial consequences of corporate governance on CSR are the most complex and heterogeneous in business practice. Corporate governance can only be linked to enhanced CSR efforts if there is a specific context (e.g. other aspects related to the company or country [9].

Previous research has placed considerable emphasis on the factors (antecedents, facilitators and moderators) that influence the implementation of CSR and the consequences of CSR implementation at the organisational level. Much of the literature on CSR implementation has examined organisational and individual-level outcomes. One of the most prominent difficulties that organisations face in implementing CSR is the prioritisation of stakeholders' interests [10] [11].

Given that the nature of the organisation is to ensure profitability, researchers have focused primarily on identifying how the implementation of CSR affects organisational outcomes such as organisational reputation and CSR performance. Likewise, customers are considered the most important stakeholder as they have a direct impact on the profitability of the organisation and hence its sustainability. Accordingly, most previous studies have examined the impact of CSR strategy implementation on customer perceptions and behaviour [12].

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is defined as a concept whereby companies should not only pursue their main goal of maximising profits, but also contribute to the well-being of society through voluntary efforts. CSR is becoming increasingly important in today's global world. Companies are increasingly required to engage in socially responsible activities to support the growth of their business. It is argued that companies that engage in CSR initiatives can gain a competitive advantage over other competitors by building a good public image or reputation and generate higher profits and returns [13].

2.2. The Link between Consumer Behaviour and Social Responsibility

Consumers are increasingly interested in the stories behind the products and services, particularly their impact on society and the environment. Many are choosing products that are environmentally friendly, ethically sourced or produced under decent working conditions.

Ethical consumption is another major trend. Consumers are paying attention to the working conditions under which products are produced and whether companies treat their employees fairly. Companies that are committed to fair trade, human rights and community development often enjoy greater consumer loyalty.

According to the definition of Dudás [14], an informed consumer is one or more of the following: aware of and asserting his/her consumer rights, aware of the individual and/or social consequences of his/her decisions and making informed choices, or having identified self-interest (e.g. health, safety, cost savings) and expressing it in his/her purchasing decisions, or being willing to consider ethical and sustainability (environmental, social and economic) considerations in addition to self-interest.

Research confirms that, in addition to being fully informed, awareness also refers to a complex pattern, a pattern of behaviour that includes both values and actions [15].

Younger generations, especially Generation Z, are particularly sensitive to social and environmental issues. They often put CSR and value-driven purchasing at the forefront of their decisions and are willing to boycott companies that do not meet these expectations.

Research also confirms that the basic structure of values-based consumer behaviour theories can be applied to the food consumption habits of Generation Z and that openness to volunteering and willingness to participate in knowledge-sharing pro bono activities is related to a core values approach [16] [17].

The results of our research group show that awareness is reflected in food consumption and that different consumer groups differentiate their preferences for domestic food products (price, quality, reliability). Based on food purchasing preferences, we identified potential target groups for domestic food products, among which the group of "conscious food consumers," who pay special attention to the quality and reliability of products, plays a significant role [18].

Social media and digital platforms play an important role in spreading the impact of CSR. Consumers can easily share their positive or negative experiences, which can influence the purchasing decisions of others. Online reviews, ratings and campaigns can quickly reach a wide audience and have a powerful impact on a brand's reputation.

On the other hand, research shows that CSR communication between companies and consumers could be further improved. It seems that companies do not communicate enough about their CSR activities to the public, so that what they are doing for society and the environment is actually hidden from consumers.

Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the online space, companies should make use of the possibility to inform consumers about the progress of their CSR work, which can potentially give them a competitive advantage [19].

By examining the affective and conative components of consumer consciousness, researchers have found that consumers attribute self-conscious consumer behaviour to themselves, despite the fact that they can back it up with cognitive knowledge or behaviour. Despite the fact that a significant proportion of consumers believe that they are conscious of their own consumer behaviour, only 10-20% of consumers can be classified as conscious consumers [20] [21].

Conscious and responsible consumer behaviour is a long-term process and depends to a large extent on individual, political and marketing factors. International research has shown that there is a need for review, intervention and implementation of lifestyle marketing activities by businesses, with a particular focus on CSR, not only in Europe but also in other countries [22].

Research has shown that price, convenience and time are the factors that influence consumers' willingness to take social responsibility. Social responsibility can be seen as a process and that the stages of the process influence consumers' willingness to engage in social responsibility. These consumers can create sufficient awareness to take social and environmental responsibility for their actions. Responsible consumers also aim to influence other consumers to take greater responsibility [23] [24] [25].

Education plays an important role in the development of informed consumer behaviour. Developing values in the target environment, such as the family and the home, helps raise and develop awareness and attitudes [26] [27].

Brand building is about creating and delivering on a promise to target consumers. This promise can be about functional satisfaction, richness of experience or fulfilment of aspirations. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities affect a range of outcomes, including company image, company valuation, product evaluations, purchase intentions and the market value of the company [28].

Research has shown that sustainable marketing is valuable for brand image, ultimately leading to increased long-term customer engagement. There is a link between corporate image and customer engagement, and CSR can specifically strengthen this link [29]. Narrowing the scope of marketing activities to online research, one study also provides evidence that CSR-related web marketing can improve companies' performance and brand image among stakeholders [30].

Ultimately, if consumers feel love and trust in the brand, it will show in their commitment and support for company. This conclusion suggests that companies should embed CSR strategy into their core business activities [31].

3 Material and Methods

In Hungary, I conducted a quantitative survey in the form of a pre-tested, standardised online questionnaire.

Subjects were recruited using an arbitrary sampling technique, which resulted in 1,852 evaluable questionnaires.

The research tool consisted of twenty-two closed questions and two open questions, the latter for spontaneous association tests. For the closed questions, single- and multiple-choice selective questions, Likert scales and semantic differential scales were used to analyse consumer attitudes and values. For the scaling questions, a scale from 1 to 4 was used. One reason for this is the individual scale preference of Hungarian respondents: due to the school grading system, our Hungarian respondents are most stable in interpreting the scale up to five as opposed to scales 1-7, 1-9 or 1-10.

And I chose the even scale because the middle value (3) for the odd (1-5) scale is a kind of escape route for respondents. In the analysis of attitudes, those who chose the middle value do not tip the scales in either direction, resulting in an excessive proportion of "indifferent" consumers, making it difficult to segment them in a statistically and professionally meaningful way. I therefore opted for an even scale, which, by excluding the middle value, forces the respondent to take a more stringent stance, thus contributing more to a successful segmentation [32].

The themes of the research tool were developed as a result of relevant secondary data analysis. Each of the response alternatives – the pre-testing of the research tool – was finalised in the light of qualitative results. The themes of the quantitative research tool finalised as a result of the qualitative phase were: general perceptions of corporate responsibility, consumer habits and preferences in the light of corporate social responsibility, a values survey and socio-demographic data.

To process the quantitative results and test the hypotheses, I used descriptive statistics, bivariate and multivariate analyses using SPSS 26.0 software. In the first step of segmentation by customer preference, I performed factor analysis on the elements of the preference system, deciding on the final factor structure based on the KMO value, the total variance value and the professional explanatory power. I implemented Principal Component Analysis and varimax rotation procedure.

For segmentation, I used a K-means clustering procedure, which is a statistically appropriate method due to the number of sample elements exceeding one thousand. In the present study, in addition to the results of factor and cluster analysis, I used Pearson's Chi-square significance values for nominal measurement levels to establish statistical correlations when characterising the segments, while I used the absolute values of the Adjusted Residual (Adj.R) to establish and analyse internal correlations.

In each case, the internal correlation test for each relationship was performed on the basis of the adjusted standardised residuals (AdjR), interpreted as follows: AdjR ≥ 2 : 95% confidence in the positive direction relative to the expected value; AdjR ≥ 3 : 99% confidence in the positive direction relative to the expected value. For a negative sign, the deviation from the expected value is negative for the same value intervals [33].

According to the main socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, the two sexes were equally represented in the sample. Respondents aged 16-25 made up 44% of the sample, with the 26-35 age group being the second largest age group at 20%. They were followed by 46-55 year olds with 14% and 36-45 year olds with 13%. The 56-65 age group accounted for 5% and the 66+ age group for only 3%.

57% of the respondents had a secondary education, 40% had a tertiary education, 3% had a bachelor's degree and 83% of the sample lived in Central Hungary.

In this paper, I focus on the partial results of the quantitative phase of the research project, aiming to test the following research hypotheses:

-segments with significant differences in terms of shopping habits can be characterised (H1);

-among the segments based on purchasing habits, the prioritisation of environmental awareness and social responsibility is reflected (H2).

4 Findings

In testing hypothesis 1, I sought to answer the question of how shopping habits can be characterised. I paid particular attention to whether environmental, ethical aspects are present in the shopping situation.

In the light of the results, it can be said that the sample members typically make necessity-generated purchases, they repair their broken appliances, they rarely buy new products and even then they try to buy products made of recycled materials.

Overall, the results are encouraging, with a significant increase in elements linked to environmental and ethical behaviour.

Table 1
Analysis of shopping habits and preferences in the sample
(average, where 1 = not at all prevalent, 4 = fully prevalent)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I only buy when I need something	1852	3,10	0,839
I only buy Hungarian products	1852	2,12	0,872
I often buy products made from recycled materials	1852	2,49	0,865
I rarely buy new clothes	1852	2,79	0,969
I usually buy used products	1852	1,89	1,009
I usually buy organic products	1852	1,99	0,885
I only buy animal-free brands	1852	2,32	1,043
I always buy the cheapest product	1852	2,24	0,883
I get my broken appliances repaired	1852	2,86	0,876
I try to buy from local producers	1852	2,61	0,931

Source: author's own research 2023 N=1852

I then conducted a factor analysis of the preference system for shopping habits, which resulted in a three-factor structure as the best solution based on statistical and technical explanatory power.

Table 2
Factors influencing buying habits and preferences

	Component		
	environmentally conscious factor	need factor	price sensitive factor
I usually buy organic products	0,745	-0,026	0,181
I only buy animal-free brands	0,693	-0,073	0,125
I try to buy from local producers	0,678	0,306	-0,053
I often buy products made from recycled materials	0,657	0,203	0,124
I only buy Hungarian products	0,605	0,225	0,193
I only buy when I need something	0,050	0,802	0,022
I rarely buy new clothes	0,005	0,626	0,414
I get my broken appliances repaired	0,260	0,591	0,031
I always buy the cheapest product	0,069	0,114	0,755
I usually buy used products	0,342	0,059	0,718
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			

Source: author's own research 2023 N=1852 KMO= 0,805; total variance =54,39%

The "environmentally conscious factor," which includes elements such as prioritising the purchase of organic and non-animal products, and giving preference to local producers and Hungarian products.

In the "need factor," the motivators that generate a purchase based on the lack of a given product and its unsatisfactory or inadequate condition were included in the purpose of purchase.

The 'price sensitive factor' included statements such as preferring the cheapest and buying secondhand products in general, suggesting that the role of cheapness is most predominant in this group of factors, even before quality.

Table 3
Consumer segments based on buying habits and preferences

Factors	Clusters		
	Functional buyers (N=737)	Environmentally conscious shoppers (N=624)	Price sensitive customers (N=491)
Environmentally conscious factor	-0,39583	0,07160	0,50316
Need factor	0,78015	-0,90845	-0,01649
Price sensitive factor	-0,32910	-0,55076	1,19394

Source: author's own research 2023 N=1852

I then performed the segmentation process for the factor scores of the factor structure using K-means clustering. As a result, I was able to characterise three significantly ($\text{sig}=0.000$) different groups of consumers:

The "functional buyers," who is most driven to buy by the lack of a product and the inability to use it.

The group of "environmentally conscious shoppers" who overestimated the items included in the environmentally conscious factor. For them, organic quality is an important aspect of their purchases, they prefer products that are free of animal testing and they also pay attention to the origin of the product: preferring local products.

The "price-sensitive customers" were consumers for whom cheapness was also a criterion that took precedence over quality in the purchasing preference system. They are willing to buy second-hand products, the main thing is to find the cheapest possible solution.

I then characterized each segment in terms of gender and age, and for both variables, Pearson's Chi-square test for significance confirmed the statistical relationship between the variables ($\text{sig}=0.000$).

The analysis of the internal correlations showed that, in terms of gender, the proportion of male respondents was higher than expected for "functional buyers".

In other words, men were more likely to be motivated to buy a product by its lack or inadequacy.

Table 4

Relationship between consumer segments based on shopping habits and preferences and gender

			Gender		Total
			male	female	
Consumer segments based on buying habits and preferences	Functional buyers	Count	455	282	737
		Adjusted Residual	8,1	-8,1	
	Environmentally conscious shoppers	Count	268	356	624
		Adjusted Residual	-4,4	4,4	
	Price sensitive customers	Count	206	285	491
		Adjusted Residual	-4,2	4,2	
Total		Count	929	923	1852

Source: author's own research, 2023, $N=1852$, Pearson's Chi-sqaure $\text{sig}=0,000$

In the "environmentally conscious" and "price sensitive" segments, the proportion of women was higher than expected. This suggests that both the parameters related to conscious consumption and price sensitivity are more specific to women.

Table 5

Relationship between consumer segments based on purchasing habits and preferences and age

			Age						Total	
			16-25 years	26-35 years	36-45 years	46-55 years	56-65 years	66+		
Consumer segments based on buying habits and preferences	Functional buyers	Count	304	147	101	128	40	17	737	
		Adjusted Residual	-2,3	-0,7	0,8	2,8	1,4	-0,7		
	Environmentally conscious shoppers	Count	305	140	77	81	13	8	624	
		Adjusted Residual	2,7	1,3	-0,6	-1,4	-3,7	-2,6		
	Price sensitive customers	Count	215	97	62	61	32	24	491	
		Adjusted Residual	-0,4	-0,6	-0,3	-1,6	2,4	3,6		
Total			Count	824	384	240	270	85	49	1852

Source: author's own research 2023, $N=1852$, Pearson's Chi-sqaure $\text{sig}=0,000$

The results of the following study showed that a statistical relationship was also found for age. Among "functional shoppers," a higher proportion were in the 46-55 age group, while among "price-sensitive shoppers," the proportion of shoppers

aged 56 and over was higher than expected. The latter is not a surprising result given domestic shopping habits and consumer basket composition.

In the "environmentally conscious consumer segment," a higher than expected proportion of young people, aged 16-25, were found to be environmentally conscious, suggesting that they are the most likely to consider solutions to social and environmental problems when making a purchase.

Most of this generation, however, do not yet have an independent income due to their age, but their preference is certainly welcome in terms of sustainability. The main aim is to keep it for later purchases when they have to make their purchasing decisions on their own income.

In my view, maintaining and sustaining this consumer preference should be a priority, also in terms of educational and community marketing activities to promote sustainability and environmental awareness.

Conclusions

Based on the results of a primary data survey, I investigated whether ethical consumer behaviour, such as environmental awareness and social responsibility, is reflected in consumer habits and preferences.

As a result of self-sampling, 1852 evaluable questionnaires were processed. The results of the research showed that consumer habits and preferences can be used as segmentation criteria (H1 confirmed), and that among these segments it was possible to clearly define an environmentally conscious consumer group that reports an increasing dominance of ethical, environmentally conscious behavioural traits (H2 confirmed).

As a result of the cluster analysis, I was able to characterise the following groups of consumers within the sample: the "functional buyers," who are most driven to buy by the lack of a product and the inability to use it. In this segment, men and the 46-55 age group were more represented than expected.

The "environmentally conscious shoppers," who is concerned about buying organic, prefers products that are free from animal testing and pays attention to the origin of the product. Female respondents and the 16-25 age group were more represented than expected.

For the "price-sensitive customers," the criterion of cheapness also prevails over quality in the purchasing preference system. In this group, women and respondents over 56 years of age were more represented than expected.

The role of the family is paramount in the development of good behaviour. It is in the family that children learn patterns of thinking and the basics of relating to others. In this process, the parents are the models, the family preserves the norms of human behaviour, the moral standards which define behaviour and habits, including consumer behaviour.

Based on the results, I believe that fostering ethical behaviour among young people is a priority, in which I believe outside the role of the family educational and higher education institutions have a key role to play. Among this target segment, the most important task would be to strengthen this form of behaviour and to reinforce its values in the context of the educational programmes linked to it. After all, the current 16-25 age group will soon be consumers with independent income and potential decision-makers on the labour market [34].

If this age group is starting a family, it will be very important to encourage their children to adopt these values and behaviours, while maintaining their preferences.

Finally I believe that it is currently necessary to strengthen ethical consumer behaviour in terms of values and to promote it by selecting the right opinion leaders, taking advantage of the specific consumer habits of this age group.

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