# Analysing the Role of Responsible Consumer Behaviour and Social Responsibility from a Generation-Specific Perspective in the Light of Primary Findings

## Mónika Garai-Fodor<sup>1</sup>, Anett Popovics<sup>2</sup>

Keleti Károly Faculty of Business and Management, Óbuda University, Budapest, Hungary

<sup>1</sup>fodor.monika@kgk.uni-obuda.hu; ORCID: 1 0000-0001-7993-2780

Abstract: Nowadays, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an indispensable factor in the operation of companies so successful businesses need to integrate CSR into their corporate strategy. A new consumer perspective has also emerged: conscious consumers have appeared, who place great emphasis on buying environmentally oriented, ethical products and for whom the relevant credible communication of companies is also essential. In the present study, we have used primary data to investigate the perception of corporate social responsibility and the generation-specific elements of consumer behaviour. Our findings confirmed that the general characteristics of the values and behaviour of each generation can be used as a segmentation criterion for the perception of corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: social responsibility; conscious consumer; generational marketing

### 1 Introduction

Corporate social responsibility is clearly gaining ground in the way companies operate today. In addition to maximising profits, companies are also concerned with minimising the negative environmental and social impact that may be associated with their activities.

The concept of corporate social responsibility can be examined from various aspects. To this day, the cornerstone of CSR is Caroll's four-element pyramid: the bottom level is economic responsibility, profitability, legal responsibility, compliance with legal requirements, followed by ethical behaviour, which is society's expectation, and finally, at the top of the pyramid, philanthropic responsibility [1].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>popovics.anett@kgk.uni-obuda.hu; ORCID: 20000-0003-3050-6953

Braun puts sustainability at the centre of the definition: drawing a parallel between the concepts of CSR and stakeholder management, the main objective of the company is to reduce or eliminate risks to stakeholders [2].

Sarkar-Searcy also adds an economic dimension to the aforementioned stakeholder-focused theory, according to which companies must voluntarily go beyond minimum legal requirements to operate ethically and take into account the impact of their operations on society and its stakeholders [3].

### 1.1 The Conscious Company - CSR in Corporate Strategy

Moving beyond the theoretical approach, the practical implementation of CSR, according to Tahniyath & Said, is a process that involves awareness of social issues, internal and external communication of CSR initiatives, and embedding CSR values within the organisation. It also aims to increase the commitment of internal stakeholders to social values, which it seeks to achieve through the use of specific communication tools. These include, for example, meetings, internal newsletters, training for employees, board members, advertisements to external stakeholders and CSR reports [4].

Newman et al. found that the positive impact of CSR initiatives on corporate performance was stronger in non-competitive industries. The impact of campaigns targeting the local community was particularly significant. These include environmental activities, participation in local poverty reduction programmes or education and health programmes [5].

Horváth's research on more than 40 companies in Hungary revealed that among the companies that had engaged in corporate responsibility, philanthropic activities were the most frequently selected, with almost two-thirds of respondents mentioning this form of action, and a similar proportion indicating environmentally conscious operations [6].

Several studies therefore support the research findings that companies that want to be successful in the future need to integrate CSR into their business strategy [7]

From the point of view of corporate strategy, however, we must distinguish the concept of CSR from the definition of social marketing. CSR is defined as a company voluntarily doing more for society or the environment than the minimum required by law, whereas social marketing focuses on the voluntary change in consumer behaviour by focusing on responsible consumption [8].

Social marketing refers to the planning and implementation of marketing strategies of organisations to address social issues and problems. Through practising social marketing, a company sets socially relevant goals and uses its resources to achieve them, as well as facilitating the widest possible involvement of consumers [9].

Further research has shown a link between CSR activities and employer branding: if a company is active in socially responsible activities, this contributes to a positive image. Existing and potential employees appreciate the company's activities in this direction, which ultimately supports local communities. [10].

# 1.2 The Conscious Consumer - Perceptions of Corporate CSR Activities and Communication

In terms of CSR, it is not enough for companies to adopt this philosophy, but a new perspective is needed from the consumer's point of view: conscious consumption at the individual and corporate level, where sustainability is a shared responsibility of both sides [11].

Dagevos and Gaasbeek define the 'responsible consumer' as one who is environmentally oriented, who prefers ethical products in their purchases and who is also concerned about the transparent communication of the company [12].

Conscious consumption is closely linked to sustainability. Consumers who care about protecting the environment and aim to pass on a sustainable planet to future generations by reducing their ecological footprint are clearly considered conscious consumers [13] [14].

According to international research, awareness abroad is most evident in environmental protection, whereas in Hungary the need for social responsibility is an important factor for consumers and companies alike [15].

In addition to food consumption, for example, research has shown that conscious consumers constantly seek information on cosmetics in order to make informed decisions [16].

Asványi et al. investigated consumer perceptions of sustainable products in Generation Y and identified four consumer categories: sustainable consumers, open consumers, persuadable consumers and traditional consumers. Furthermore, they observed that the product hierarchy is different for different consumer groups according to preferences and consumer group characteristics [17].

Further research has shown that Hungarian consumers value and expect responsible behaviour from companies, but do not necessarily take this into account in their purchases. Companies are strengthening sustainability in their CSR activities by targeting the responsible consumer niche and by exploiting the competitive advantage of CSR communication [18].

In her study, Lipták points out that the conscious consumer now expects authentic communication from the company - a clear statement of the brand value. In her results, she details that today's companies do not necessarily promote widely accepted values in their CSR communication, and even launch explicitly divisive CSR campaigns [19].

Simor-Szőke examined consumers' attitudes towards responsible companies from a generational perspective. Their quantitative research reveals that Generation X is not very concerned about financial considerations in their purchasing decisions, while Generation Y is. Generation Z is open to issues of social responsibility but has little information. Through targeted communication and education campaigns, companies can raise awareness among young people in this area [20].

This is also the conclusion of Garai-Fodor's research, which suggests that the basic concept of value-based consumer behaviour models also applies to the members of Generation Z under study [21].

In terms of their purchasing preferences, Generation Z consumers not only consider value for money, but also consider the organisation, value or mission they support and the goals they contribute to. [22] The new generation is even willing to pay more for a product if they know that the company whose product or brand they are buying is working for a good cause or donating part of its revenues to support social causes. This sense of social responsibility seems to be already evident among members of Generation Y and has been further reinforced by the values of Generation Z consumers [23], [24].

Not only in purchasing decisions, but also at the level of job choice preferences, Generation Y and increasingly Generation Z show that the CSR practices of a given organisation influence whether they want to work for that company and whether they are committed to that employer. For members of this generation, it is especially true that it is important for them that their workplace carries out socially responsible activities [25], [26], [27], [34].

For these generations, it is also important to stress that they are sensitive to a brand – be it a product, a service or an employer – which is credible, and that social responsibility is not just a communication promise or a slogan, but an actual activity, a value-creating process found at corporate level [28], [29].

### 2 Material and Method

We conducted a primary quantitative survey in Hungary using a pre-tested, standardised online questionnaire.

Subjects were recruited using an arbitrary sampling technique, resulting in 1852 assessable questionnaires.

The research tool consisted of twenty-two closed questions and two open questions, the latter serving as spontaneous association tests. For the closed questions, single-and multiple-choice selective questions, as well as Likert scales and semantic differential scales were used to analyse consumer attitudes and values. Scaling questions were asked using a scale from 1 to 4. One reason for this is the individual

scale preference of Hungarian respondents: due to the school grading system, Hungarian respondents are the most stable in interpreting the scale up to five as opposed to scales 1-7, 1-9 or 1-10.

And the even scale was chosen because the middle value (3) for the odd (1-5) scale is an escape route for respondents. In the analysis of attitudes, those who choose 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. We therefore opted for an odd-numbered scale, which, by excluding the middle value, leads the respondent to take a more rigorous stance, thus contributing more to a successful segmentation [30].

The topics of the research tool were developed as a result of relevant secondary data analysis. Each response alternative – the pre-testing of the research tool – was finalised in the light of qualitative results. Individual interviews were conducted as part of this qualitative research phase. A total of 20 respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule for the baseline research. Qualitative sampling was also conducted using an arbitrary method. The mini-focuses were conducted with 3 participants each, in heterogeneous groups according to the sociodemographic characteristics described in the questionnaire. The main objective of the qualitative research was to establish the quantitative research, finalise the standardised questionnaire and outline the research hypotheses.

The topics 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 examination and socio-demographic data.

Descriptive statistics, bivariate and multivariate analyses using SPSS 22.0 software were used to process the quantitative results presented in this study. To examine the relationship between the nominal and metric scale scores, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to compare the one-point multiple sample means. The mean of a metric dependent variable was compared between more than two groups. The post-hoc test was conducted to determine which pairs of groups were significantly different. In doing so, significance values were used to determine the existence of correlations (sig <= 0.05). Internal correlations were analysed along the comparison of group means using the F-statistic, i.e., the coefficient of variance of the means within samples. For questions at the nominal measurement levels, a Chisquare test with Pearson's significance analysis of variance was used for the correlation test. In each case, the internal correlation test for each relationship was conducted 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;  $AdjR \ge 3:99\%$  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 [31].

According to the main socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, the two genders 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 proportion of respondents aged 56-65 was 5% and only 3% for those aged 66 and over.

57% of the respondents had a secondary education, 40% had a higher education, 3% had a primary education and 83% of the sample lived in Central Hungary.

In this paper we focus on the partial results of the quantitative phase of our research project. Within this, we will also focus on the generation-specific perception of corporate social responsibility and the analysis of responsible purchasing habits, also in relation to intergenerational differences.

In this paper, we have sought to test the hypotheses underlying the evaluation of the primary results, which are as follows.

The perception of corporate social responsibility is associated with individual age (H1/a) and also with the level of activism for social causes (H1/b).

Social responsibility as reflected in purchasing decisions has generation-specific elements (H2).

### 3 Results

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we analysed the perception of the importance of corporate social responsibility (H1/a) and social cause activity (H1/b) in relation to age.

The perception of the importance of corporate social responsibility has generation-specific elements (H1/a was confirmed) according to the results of the analysis of variance (sig<=0.05).

Most of the areas such as public concern against poverty, working conditions, anticorruption and healthcare were considered more important by respondents aged 56-65 years on sample average and compared to other age groups.

Human rights was the priority area for young people aged 16-25, which is not a surprising result considering the values that characterise this generation.

Education, environment and sustainability were above average for 45-55-year-olds.

We believe that the general values and mindset of this generation are also reflected in the way in which some areas of social responsibility are perceived.

To test Hypothesis H1/b, we analysed whether active involvement in social issues also shows these generation-specific characteristics.

Table 1
Perception of the importance of corporate social responsibility by area and age

The importance of areas of corporate social responsibility	generations	N	Mean	sig
environmental protection,	between 16-25	824	3.60	
sustainable development	between 26-35	384	3.53	
	between 36-45	240	3.61	
	between 46-55	270	3.66	0.010
	between 56-65	85	3.64	
	over 66	49	3.33	
	Total	1852	3.59	
human rights	between 16-25	824	3.50	
	between 26-35	384	3.35	
	between 36-45	240	3.44	
	between 46-55	270	3.47	0.020
	between 56-65	85	3.48	
	over 66	49	3.27	
	Total	1852	3.45	
fight against poverty	between 16-25	824	3.08	
	between 26-35	384	3.00	
	between 36-45	240	3.20	
	between 46-55	270	3.20	0.001
	between 56-65	85	3.36	
	over 66	49	3.24	
	Total	1852	3.11	
education	between 16-25	824	3.23	
	between 26-35	384	3.21	
	between 36-45	240	3.31	
	between 46-55	270	3.47	0.000
	between 56-65	85	3.42	
	over 66	49	3.33	
	Total	1852	3.28	
anti-corruption	between 16-25	824	3.31	
	between 26-35	384	3.29	
	between 36-45	240	3.45	
	between 46-55	270	3.44	0.040
	between 56-65	85	3.46	
	over 66	49	3.31	
	Total	1852	3.35	
working conditions	between 16-25	824	3.54	0.004
	between 26-35	384	3.43	0.004

	between 36-45	240	3.54	
	between 46-55	270	3.56	
	between 56-65	85	3.61	
	over 66	49	3.22	
	Total	1852	3.51	
health promotion, disease	between 16-25	824	3.54	
prevention	between 26-35	384	3.48	
	between 36-45	240	3.55	
	between 46-55	270	3.62	0.020
	between 56-65	85	3.68	
	over 66	49	3.37	
	Total	1852	3.54	

Source: authors' own research, 2022, N=1852, analysis of variance; One-way Anova

Pearson's significance value (sig=0.02) for the age-specific analysis of active involvement in social affairs indicates that the two variables are not independent (H1 confirmed).

When assessing the internal correlations based on the values of the adjusted standardised residuals, we found that the 45-55 age group showed a higher than expected level of activity in terms of commitment to social causes.

Table 2

Active involvement in social issues in age-specific contexts

		Age							
Campaigns for social causes		between 16-25	between 26-35	between 36-45	between 46-55	between 56-65	over 66	Total	
Do you	yes	Count	692	325	207	247	76	38	1585
consider it		%	43.7%	20.5%	13.1%	15.6%	4.8%	2.4%	100.0%
important to be active in social		Adjusted Residual	-1.8	-0.6	0.3	3.0	1.0	-1.6	
issues? (e.g.,	no	Count	132	59	33	23	9	11	267
protecting		%	49.4%	22.1%	12.4%	8.6%	3.4%	4.1%	100.0%
the environment, helping the needyetc.)		Adjusted Residual	1.8	0.6	-0.3	-3.0	-1.0	1.6	
Total		Count	824	384	240	270	85	49	1852
		%	44,5%	20.7%	13.0%	14.6%	4.6%	2.6%	100.0%

Source: authors' own research, Pearson's Chi-square, sig=0.02

In the second hypothesis analysis, we investigated the correlations by age for two lists of statements on shopping behaviour. According to the results of the analysis of variance (sig<= 0.0.5), a significant relationship was found between social responsibility reflected in shopping habits and the age of the individual (H2 confirmed).

Table 3
Generation-specific analysis of the impact of corporate social responsibility on purchasing decisions

Is your purchasing decision influenced by whether a company is socially responsible?					
(where 1= not at all influenced, 4= fully influenced)					
	N	Mean			
between 16-25	824	2.73			
between 26-35	384	2.80			
between 36-45	240	2.85			
between 46-55	270	2.97			
between 56-65	85	3.08			
over 66	49	2.86			
Total	1852	2.82			

Source: authors' own research, 2022, N=1852, analysis of variance; One-way Anova; sig= 0.000

The results show that respondents aged 56-65 are the most likely to admit that they consider the social responsibility of a company as a key factor in their purchasing decisions.

In terms of purchasing preferences, we found that respondents aged 56 and 65+ were more likely to repair broken appliances, to favour local producers and cheaper products, and to make necessity-driven purchases.

The main buyers of Hungarian products, organic products and non-animal products were respondents aged 35-46 years belonging to Generation X, a preference that is not surprising based on the results of our previous research [21] [32] [33].

Table 4

Purchasing patterns in the light of social responsibility in a generational context

Statements on buying habits (where 1= not at all typical, 4= very				
typical)		N	Mean	sig
I only buy when I need something between 16-25		824	2.9939	
	between 26-35	384	3.0990	
	between 36-45	240	3.2125	
	between 46-55	270	3.2000	0.000
	between 56-65	85	3.5059	
	above 66	49	3.2449	
	Total	1852	3.1042	
I only buy Hungarian products	between 16-25	824	1.9672	
	between 26-35	384	2.0130	0.000
	between 36-45	240	2.4775	

	between 46-55	270	2.4000	
	between 56-65	85	2.0588	
	above 66	49	2.0735	
	Total	1852	2.1161	
I usually buy organic products	between 16-25	824	1.9333	
	between 26-35	384	1.9505	
	between 36-45	240	2.5567	
	between 46-55	270	1.9926	0.000
	between 56-65	85	2.1294	
	above 66	49	1.5510	
	Total	1852	1.9946	
I only buy animal testing-free brands	between 16-25	824	2.2925	
	between 26-35	384	2.3151	
	between 36-45	240	2.4708	
	between 46-55	270	2.2185	0.050
	between 56-65	85	2.4988	
	above 66	49	2.19	
	Total	1852	2.3224	
I always buy the cheapest product	between 16-25	824	2.2488	
	between 26-35	384	2.1458	
	between 36-45	240	2.2542	
	between 46-55	270	2.1481	0.000
	between 56-65	85	2.5176	
	above 66	49	2.6531	
	Total	1852	2.2365	
I have my broken appliances repaired	between 16-25	824	2.8228	
	between 26-35	384	2.7552	
	between 36-45	240	2.9667	
	between 46-55	270	2.9111	0.000
	between 56-65	85	3.1529	
	above 66	49	3.1633	
	Total	1852	2.8645	
I try to buy from local producers	between 16-25	824	2.4466	
	between 26-35	384	2.5078	
	between 36-45	240	2.8333	
	between 46-55	270	2.8778	0.000
	between 56-65	85	3.0000	
	above 66	49	3.0408	
	Total	1852	2.6134	

Source: authors' own research, 2022, N=1852, analysis of variance, One-way Anova

### **Summary**

Based on the results of a primary data collection, the study investigated whether the perception of corporate social responsibility and the impact of corporate social responsibility on consumer behaviour have generation-specific elements. The research used a pre-tested standardised online questionnaire. Self-sampling resulted in 1852 evaluable questionnaires. The results show that the perception of corporate social responsibility is related to the age of the individual (H1/a), which is also true for the level of activism in social causes (H1/b). Social responsibility in purchasing decisions is also found to have generational elements (H2).

We believe that the issue of social responsibility is not perceived in the same way between age groups. The generation-specific elements that characterise them are reflected both in the corporate social responsibility activity and in the impact of social responsibility on purchasing decisions.

We conclude that the general characteristics of the values and attitudes of each generation can be used as segmentation cognitions for the assessment of social responsibility.

Based on the results, we consider that differentiation may be a good solution for campaigns promoting social issues, which address individuals taking into account the generation-specific characteristics of the target group instead of standardised messages.

One limitation of the research is the sampling procedure, which only provides results valid for a selected sample. In the continuation of this research, we would like to carry out an international sample to investigate cultural specificities in more depth and with a particular focus on Western Europe, which is at the forefront of conscious behaviour. We believe that this would provide an opportunity to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the links between awareness and cultural values, which could provide an even more comprehensive understanding of the values and purchasing behaviour of Generation Z.

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