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Discourse on corporate social responsibility in the context of marketing scientific research

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Abstract

This paper aims to reveal the discourse on corporate social responsibility in the context of marketing scientific research. Six research streams are distinguished after a thorough analysis of scientific literature, i.e. development and maintenance of sustainable relationships with consumers; consumer responses to corporate socially responsible activity; decisions of corporate or brand image creation and maintaining, strengthening corporate reputation; identification whether CSR may affect the process of consumer decision making, the preferences of consumers; CSR integration into marketing activity; communication about CSR to different stakeholders. Results of analysis show that scientists choose different approaches to investigate the effect of CSR on corporate results. However, from the marketing perspective, intangible results, such as long-term relationships between company and consumer could be described as a major benefit for company which integrates CSR in corporate activity.

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Introduction

Recently business has been facing various challenges conditioned by dynamic changes in economic, technological, political and social environments. A constantly changing unpredictable business environment makes companies search for means to ensure stability and to achieve long-term results. Despite common theory that business community will only focus on financial issues during global recession and large-scale mergers (Jimena, 2009), responsibilities and commitments of companies to consider environmental and social aspects of business

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development increased under the mentioned conditions (Durif, Boivin, Rajaobelina & Francois-Lecompte, 2011). In the unstable business environment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) remains an important area of corporate management since, according to Carroll (2000), it reflects essential attitudes that are necessary to ensure public spirit and entrepreneurship. The arguments that company's engagement in socially responsible activity mitigates the consequences of economic crisis and helps to recover from it (Pirsch, Gupta & Grau, 2007) are confirmed by close relations between corporate social responsibility and sustainable development (Ellis & Bastin, 2011). Torugsa, O'Donohue & Hecker (2013) notice that the integration of sustainable development principles, involving aspiration for coherence among economic, social and environmental dimensions of activity, into corporate social responsibility enables the development of a new business model that guarantees expansion and profit maximisation. Certainly, one cannot reject the opinion that during economic convulsions, companies pay more attention to the economic dimension of sustainable development that is associated with economic stability (Ellis & Bastin, 2011). On the other hand, even under conditions of economic recession, different stakeholders of a company support and rely more on business that not only seeks economic profit but, while becoming and being socially responsible, also contributes to public well-being and to the implementation of all the dimensions of sustainable development (Dolnicar & Pomeroy, 2007).

In this context, the search for decisions that enable companies to pursue sustainable development in relationship with various stakeholders becomes relevant. Therefore both scientific literature and practical activity emphasise the priority issue of a company becoming engaged in socially responsible activity (Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos & Avramidis, 2009; Amine, Chakor & Alaoui, 2013). Arguments that company's engagement in socially responsible activity enables more successful competitiveness in the market, where general corporate abilities no longer suffice, are more and more frequent.

Corporate socially responsible activity is useful for companies in a variety of ways: it helps to attract and retain high qualification employees, generates a positive image of the company and helps to maintain reputation, increases market value of the product and the company with regard to consumers, enables building long-term relationships with them (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Pirsch *et al.*, 2007; Piercy & Lane, 2009; Peloza & Shang, 2011; Lii & Lee, 2012). Corporate socially responsible activity may create significant sustainable and unique value for company's consumers, which also determines its tangible long-term financial results that are in general beneficial to the society (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2009; Piercy & Lane, 2009). On the other hand, Mohr, Webb & Harris (2001) remark that business executives lack clear understanding of societal needs, how and to what extent they should be satisfied. According to the above mentioned arguments, the *scientific problem* of this paper is formulated as the following question: what are streams of scientific research on the application of corporate social responsibility for marketing purposes? *Aim of the paper*: to reveal the discourse on corporate social responsibility in the context of marketing scientific research. General scientific *methods* of systematic and logic analysis and comparison of scientific literature on the topic are applied in the current research.

1. Streams of research on corporate social responsibility in the context of marketing

Scientific discussions on the topic of CSR have been going on for more than five decades. There is no doubt that the works of Carroll (1991, 1998, 2000), which define the structure of corporate socially responsible activity and are extensively analysed in subsequent studies, are considered to be the most significant sources of scientific literature that initiated the discussion about the decisions of CSR implementation in company's performance. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the majority of early scientific works on CSR were confined to studies of CSR conceptualisation and estimation of its impact on corporate financial performance. The interest of marketing researchers in CSR integration into different areas of corporate activity served as an incentive for further development of CSR theory. It is in the framework of research undertaken by the representatives of marketing studies (for example, Bronn & Vrioni, 2001; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, 2009; Karna, Hansen & Juslin, 2003; Gupta and Pirsch, 2006; Luck, 2006; Vaaland, Heide & Gronhaug, 2008) that the new trends of CSR analysis allowing to understand the decisions of CSR integration into corporate activity better and assess intangible results of socially responsible activity that are extremely important for the company started to develop. The studies of CSR from marketing perspective have become more intense during the last decade. Various authors have presented their arguments for the significance of CSR when making different corporate marketing decisions. The analysis of

existing research into CSR in the marketing context allows stating that the research is limited to a few issues that might be grouped into the following research streams.

The first research stream includes scientific works that emphasise the development and maintenance of sustainable relationships with various stakeholders, consumers in particular (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001; Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010), while satisfying their need now and in the future and demonstrating sensitiveness to social issues (Podnar & Golob, 2007). However, building long-term and sustainable relationships with socially aware stakeholder groups still remains the object of scientific research demanding new insights. This attitude is due to the fact that works attributed to the studied research group and analysing the impact of corporate socially responsible activity on various dimensions of relationship quality or on the results of long-term relationships are fragmentary and are not sufficiently comprehensive. They are often contingent to the analysis of the individual dimensions of relationship quality or a particular long-term relationship result. For instance, Luo & Bhattacharya (2006), McDonald & Rundle-Thiele (2008), Senthikumar, Ananth & Arulraj (2011), Hasoneh & Alafi (2012), Choi & La (2013) deal with *satisfaction dimension*; Swaen & Chumpitaz (2008), Pivato, Misani & Tencati (2008), Castaldo, Perrini, Misani & Tencati (2009), Vlachos *et al.* (2009) give more attention to *trust dimension*; Liu, Wang & Wu (2010) analyse *commitment*; whereas Curras-Perez (2009), Lacey & Kennett-Hensel (2010) study *trust and commitment*. The analysis of long-term relationship results shows the lack of clarity in their typology. For example, Sen & Bhattacharya (2001), Curras-Perez (2009), Ali (2011) study *purchase intentions*, Vlachos *et al.* (2009), Beneke, Wannke, Pelteret, Tladi & Gordon (2012) distinguish *intentions to recommend*; *loyalty* is analysed by Choi & La (2013), *attitudinal loyalty* by Mandhachitara & Poolthong (2011), *intentions of repeated purchase behaviour* by Vlachos *et al.* (2009).

The second research stream involves a considerable number of works that investigate consumer responses to corporate socially responsible activity; for example, *consumer awareness towards the dimensions of corporate socially responsible activity* (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Rugimbana, Quazi & Keating, 2008; Carvalho, Sen, Mota & de Lima, 2010), *consumer-company congruence* (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Marin & Ruiz, 2007), *congruence between social cause and brand or company* (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Sheikh & Beise-Zee, 2011; Adiwijaya & Fauzan, 2012), *congruence between consumer perceived company's motivation and its socially responsible activity* (Adiwijaya & Fauzan, 2012), *impact of corporate socially responsible activity on consumer-company identification* (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Lichtenstein, Drumwright & Braig, 2004; Lii, 2011; Lii & Lee, 2012), *consumer perceived support for corporate socially responsible activity* (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Marin & Ruiz, 2007).

The analysis of existing CSR studies in the marketing context helps to identify the works that can be attributed to *the third research group* and that are related to *decisions of corporate or brand image creation* (Jones, Comfort & Hillier, 2005; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009, Simmons, 2009), *maintaining and strengthening corporate reputation* (Siltaoja, 2006; Ali, 2011). Relations between CSR and company's activity are revealed through corporate reputation, therefore it should be managed purposefully (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001) and developed with regard to all important stakeholders' behavioural norms and values (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005).

The fourth research stream is devoted to the employment of CSR concept to ascertain the attributes of consumer behaviour in the studies while identifying whether corporate socially responsible activity may affect the process of consumer decision making and what impact this would have on the preferences of existing and potential consumers (Beckmann, 2006; Cailleba & Casteran, 2010). Changing consumer values become focused on concern over the consequences of humankind existence. Echoing the trends, scientific papers give considerable attention to socially responsible consumers in order to define the profile of such consumers (Durif *et al.*, 2011), to reveal the factors that induce socially responsible consumer behaviour (Oberseder, Schlegelmilch & Gruber, 2011) and the motives for such behaviour (Gonzalez, Korchia, Menuet & Urbain, 2009). Furthermore, the results of performed studies show that the attitudes of socially responsible consumers are based on refusal of products of the company whose activity is &responsible and unfair (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Piercy & Lane, 2009).

The fifth research stream involves studies devoted to theoretical analysis of *CSR integration into marketing activity* (Lantos, 2001; Blomqvist & Posner, 2004; Maignan *et al.*, 2005; Chahal & Sharma, 2006). For example, Blomqvist & Posner (2004) suggest three strategies of CSR integration into company's marketing activity; Maignan *et al.* (2005) develop comprehensive eight-step methodology for CSR integration into marketing activity; whereas

Chahal & Sharma (2006) investigate how corporate socially responsible activity may be implied into the marketing activity to achieve competitive advantage.

With reference to a frequently emphasised approach that CSR concept must be supported by clear corporate actions and specific marketing decisions, related in particular to carefully selected and consistently implemented marketing communication, scientific works dealing with *marketing communication* are attributed to *the sixth research stream* (Jones *et al.*, 2005; Amine *et al.*, 2013). Company's marketing communication should focus on using the means that would enable the company to inform consumers and increase their self-awareness towards social responsibility (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001). Therefore, communication concerned with corporate socially responsible activity (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001; Kim & Rader, 2010) is becoming an integral part of corporate identity, image, or reputation management and development of sustainable relationships with stakeholders.

Discussion and conclusions

The scientific research streams identified and surveyed by the authors of the paper demonstrate that recent discussion in scientific literature tends to focus on the impact of corporate socially responsible activity on consumer behaviour (Cailleba & Casteran, 2010) with specific emphasis on the relevancy and potential of the research trend in terms of application of research findings to corporate marketing activity. On the other hand, the presented results of research (that is often of exploratory nature and encompasses only narrow areas) sometimes ambiguously reveal the impact of corporate socially responsible activity on consumer behaviour and long-term relationships between the consumer and the socially responsible company. Moreover, despite a considerable amount of studies that reveal the benefits of corporate socially responsible activity to the company at theoretical level, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that would describe how the impact of corporate socially responsible activity on changes in consumer attitudes and behaviour works. This context serves as a background against which the problem of anticipating the results of long-term relationships with consumers which are affected by corporate socially responsible activity is revealed (Lacey & Kennet-Hensel, 2010).

Having summarised scientific research to date, it must be noted that the results do not allow clear identification of likely consumer responses to various company's initiatives of socially responsible activity. The presented analysis shows that scientists choose different theoretical approaches in order to reveal how consumer behaviour towards socially responsible company is modified by corporate socially responsible activity. Some of them investigate the relation using individual dimensions of relationship quality (Castaldo *et al.*, 2009; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008) or long-term relationship results (Madrigal & Boush, 2008; McDonald & Rundle-Thiele, 2008); whereas others emphasise the change in personal consumer opinions and attitudes towards a brand (Ramasamy & Yeung, 2008; Gu & Morrison, 2009). Furthermore, with reference to the existing research, it can be stated that there is a lack of integrated approach that would justify the importance of each of relationship quality dimensions for building long-term relationships with consumers in the analysis of the quality of relationships between the consumer and the socially responsible company (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Pivato *et al.*, 2008; Lacey & Kennet-Hensel, 2010). The results of long-term relationships between the consumer and the socially responsible company, such as attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, have also been studied in a fragmentary manner (Lacey & Kennet-Hensel, 2010; Mandhachitara & Poolthong, 2011; Green & Peloza, 2011).

Considering ambiguous findings of the mentioned studies and seeking to indicate future research trends in this field, it is stated that the concept of social identification derived from social identity theory and the appropriateness of its application to reveal consumer-company identification affected by corporate socially responsible activity should be considered of interest. Using the concept, researchers seek to explain what factors mediate or moderate the impact of corporate socially responsible activity on consumer behaviour and especially on long-term relationships with consumer (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, it is important to notice that to date there are only a few scientific studies, the results of which substantiate the existence of such relation (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009; Perez, 2009; Kwan, Siu & Zhang, 2012). Therefore, the following conclusion is made: the studies of deeper consumer-company identification in the context of corporate socially responsible activity, the spread of its construct and validation of measuring scale are considered to be also priority area of scientific research.

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