CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ISSUES IN THE SLOVAK E-COMMERCE COMPANIES

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Abstract: *Present time is marked by the expansion of online shopping. However, E-commerce companies, which are providers of online shops, are expected not only to meet the needs of online customers but also to take responsibility for their actions. In Slovakia, there are numbers of E-commerce companies but only a small part of them follows the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The aim of the paper is to identify CSR issues in the Slovak E-commerce companies. The main conclusion of the paper are: The CSR concept should be natural to every E-commerce company and should focus on CSR activities listed in the paper. The paper is based on primary and secondary information gathered through extensive literature review using internet, research databases and the author's own experience. The paper is organised as follows: section 1 aims at approaches to define the CSR notion; section 2 describes the methodology approach; section 3 comparatively review the primary data on CSR issues from the point of view of customers and the secondary data on CSR strategies of selected Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies; section 4 discusses the results of primary and secondary research.*

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility, E-commerce, Stakeholder, Customer, Activity.*

JEL Classification: *M14, L81.*

Introduction

Development of information and communication technologies has caused revolution not only in communication but also in other areas, such as news, education, entertainment, business and retail. Within retail, online shopping has experienced probably the highest development. We can only conclude that the development of online shopping is not yet over. This is evidenced by the fact that at its beginnings, online shopping existed only as a part of brick and mortar stores but nowadays, online shopping represents the core of retail. However, E-commerce companies, which are providers of online shops, are expected to take over obligations and responsibilities of traditional companies represented by brick and mortar stores. One of the many expectations is responsible behaviour of E-commerce companies towards society and environment, i.e. adoption of the CSR concept. We are aware that in the conditions of Slovakia and its nearest neighbour Czech Republic, CSR is a relatively new concept but a lot of attention has been paid to it ([4], [6], [15], [16], [18], [20], [28], [31]). Just as much attention has been paid to online shopping and E-commerce companies ([3], [19], [21], [22], [29]). Nevertheless, it is difficult to find relevant research dedicated to the CSR concept in the conditions of E-commerce companies. It indicates the need for deeper insight into this topic.

The aim of the paper is to identify CSR issues in the Slovak E-commerce companies. The paper is organised as follows: section 1 aims at approaches to define the CSR notion; section 2 describes the methodology approach; section 3 comparatively review the primary data on CSR issues from the point of view of customers and the secondary data on CSR

strategies of selected Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies; section 4 discusses the results of primary and secondary research.

1 Statement of a problem

In Slovakia, there is a wide number of E-commerce companies (according to the portal Heureka.sk about 9 355). However, out of this number of E-commerce companies, only a small part follows the principles of CSR. Situation in foreign countries is very different for the CSR concept is being utilized on a larger scale. Modern ways of doing business introduce also new challenges and result in more processes being deployed to the Internet environment. And that is why Slovak E-commerce companies should be interested in the CSR concept. Another reason is related to customers, since online customers are smart and they care about social and environmental responsibility, ethics and shared values of E-commerce companies from which they purchase.

1.1 Defining Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR is known as a new driving force towards companies' boarder responsibilities – for the environment, for local communities, for working conditions and for ethical practices. Oftentimes, CSR is also described as the corporate triple bottom line (TBL) which is represented by the totality of the financial, social and environmental performance of a company. Thus, beyond making profits, companies are responsible for the totality of their impact on people and the planet [26].

Besides TBL, CSR is also linked to other terms, such as Corporate Citizenship and Sustainable Development. CSR can be described as a framework used for measuring a company's performance against economic, social and environmental parameters [2].

Properly understood, CSR should be seen as the way that companies can develop innovative and economically viable products, processes and services within core business processes, resulting in improved environmental protection and social conditions. All this assuming that companies take into account those most affected by their decisions. On a practical level, CSR approach needs to be constructed by adapting best practices, so companies can enhance their good reputation and continue to demonstrate positive business, social and environmental performance [14].

Socially responsible companies have a competitive advantage. But it is not enough just to be socially responsible, it is necessary to let the general public know about companies' CSR performance. Every company is, in fact, externally assessed by its actions, which promote its reputation. Therefore, the CSR concept and reputation are deeply connected [33].

The broadest definition of CSR is concerned with what relationship between companies, governments of countries and individual citizens should look like. On a more local level, definition of CSR is concerned with relationships between companies and local societies in which they reside or operate [5].

While there is not only one definition of CSR, it generally refers to transparent practices of companies that are based on ethical values, compliance with legal requirements and respect for people, communities and the environment [26].

CSR is a general management concern, it is important to all divisions of companies. CSR is integrated into companies' operations through their values, culture, decision-

making, strategies and reporting mechanisms. But still, there are companies which are not committed to CSR [27].

1.2 Stakeholder theory

In a traditional view, shareholders are the owners of companies and their needs have to be put first. On the other hand, stakeholder theory argues that there are other parties involved, including governments, political groups, trade associations, trade unions, communities, financiers, suppliers, employees, customers and even competitors. Consequently, a modern view obliges companies to satisfy not only the interests of shareholders [11].

Socially responsible companies are constantly working with those most affected by their decisions, generally called stakeholders. The main reason for cooperation between companies and stakeholders is that companies are an integral part of communities in which they operate. Also, long-term success is based on continued good relations with a wide range of stakeholders, such as individuals, groups and institutions. Moreover, the general public has high expectations of the private sector in terms of socially and environmentally responsible behaviour. The most important fact is that shareholders of socially responsible companies are searching not only for enhanced financial performance but they expect integration of social and environmental considerations, both in terms of risk and opportunities [14].

Stakeholder theory reflects and directs how companies operate. This theory is based on two core questions. The first question encourages companies to articulate shared sense of the value they create: What is the purpose of the company? It brings the core stakeholders together. The second question pushes companies to articulate how they want to do business: What responsibility does the company have towards stakeholders? It is about the kinds of relationships they want to create and sustain with their stakeholders [12]. Therefore, the core of today's stakeholder theory reads as follows: "Economic value is created by people who voluntarily come together and cooperate to improve everyone's circumstance." It results in the need of developing relationships with stakeholders, inspiring them and creating welfare for communities [13].

1.3 Corporate Social Responsibility and E-commerce

CSR is becoming compulsory for companies operating in various industries. Within retail, large brick and mortar retailers are familiar with the CSR concept but it is less common in smaller E-commerce companies. An importance of CSR is also increasing among online customers who are able to choose from a large variety of vendors. This trend is often referred to as a socially responsible consuming. A continuous growth of social networking and social shopping is a sign for many E-commerce retailers to adopt the CSR concept. Official websites of E-commerce companies with the content identifying CSR efforts can increase sales by standing out to these customers [7].

Internet is also a place where customers exchange their experience. This process contributes to shaping online reputation of companies, especially of E-commerce companies. Positive online reputation is desired by most companies but only few companies know that it can be changed from positive to negative per day. To avoid inconveniences, companies need to adopt the CSR concept [32].

Adoption of the CSR concept may be one of the most challenging tasks that E-commerce company can face. Proposal of the CSR strategy requires working with a bunch of social

philanthropists and web technologists which mostly is very expensive and E-commerce companies are well-known for their limited budgets. Another way of declaring social responsibility of E-commerce company is to become a member of an alliance of like-minded E-commerce companies and their online customers who fund community projects that improve the quality of communities' life. Such alliances are re-engineering the technology as a web service that enables any E-commerce company transacting online to integrate footprints into its purchase path and start funding projects [24].

2 Methods

The aim of the paper is to identify Corporate Social Responsibility issues in the Slovak E-commerce companies. The fulfilment of the aim was preceded by:

- analysis of opinions on the identification and significance of corporate social responsibility,

- carrying out the primary research for identification CSR issues in the Slovak E-commerce companies from the point of view of their customers,

- carrying out the secondary research for analysis the CSR strategies of selected Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies.

A main source of primary research was online questionnaire which was distributed by e-mail during the period from February 1, 2016 to March 31, 2016 (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Research plan

Type of research	primary, quantitative
Data type	primary
Data collection methods	standardized questioning
The technique of data collection	online questionnaire by e-mail
Population size	individuals (residents of SR)
Sample size	150
Data collection period	February 1, 2016 to March 31, 2016

Source: Authors

Distribution of the questionnaire by e-mail provided a higher probability that the questionnaire would be filled truthfully, rather than if it were shared on social networks where it could have got filled by literally anyone.

The main research problem: identification CSR issues in the Slovak E-commerce companies from the point of view of their customers.

The main objectives of primary research were to determine:

- whether the respondents are the customers of any Slovak E-commerce company,

- whether the respondents (the customers of Slovak E-commerce companies) have knowledge about the CSR concept,

- whether the respondents (the customers of Slovak E-commerce companies) are able to recognise Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies,

- whether the Corporate Social Responsibility of Slovak E-commerce companies is important for the respondents (the customers of Slovak E-commerce companies),
- whether CSR companies are attractive for the respondents (the customers of Slovak E-commerce companies).

The questionnaire was divided into two parts – the first was the identification part (age, residence, highest level of education) and the second part contained specific questions about online purchasing and the concept of CSR in these conditions (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2: Questions versus research assumptions

Question	Research assumption
Are you the customer of any Slovak E-commerce company?	Research assumption 1: More than 50% of the respondents are the customer of any Slovak E-commerce company.
Do you have knowledge about the concept "Corporate Social Responsibility"?	Research assumption 2: More than 50% of the respondents have knowledge about the "Corporate Social Responsibility" concept.
Are you able to recognise any Slovak socially responsible E-commerce company?	Research assumption 3: More than 50% of the respondents are able to recognise Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies.
Do you think that it is important for Slovak E-commerce companies to declare responsibility for their actions?	Research assumption 4: For more than 50% of the respondents it is import, that Slovak E-commerce companies declare responsibility for their actions.
Would you rather buy goods from socially responsible E-commerce company or from E-commerce company which does not declare responsibility for its actions?	Research assumption 5: For more than 50% of the respondents are attractive socially responsible E-commerce company.

Source: Authors

To evaluate statistical indicators, the formula for small core files and unknown distribution (1), critical value (2), dispersion (3), variability of core group of respondents (p = 0.5) and maximum allowable margin of errors <±10%; ±2%> were used [10].

$$n = \frac{z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 * \sigma^2 * \left[\dfrac{N}{N-1}\right]}{H^2 + \left[\dfrac{z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 * \sigma^2}{(N-1)}\right]} \tag{1}$$

$$z_{1-\alpha/2} \tag{2}$$

$$\sigma = \sqrt{p*q} = \sqrt{p*(1-p)} \tag{3}$$

where n – minimum sample size (minimum number of respondents); $z_{1-\alpha/2}$ – critical value; σ^2 – dispersion calculated from the standard deviation; H – maximum allowable

margin of error; N – size of the core set; σ – standard deviation of a population (probability distribution); p – probability of success; q – probability of failure (q = 1 – p).

This study is based on primary and secondary data gathered through extensive literature review using internet, research databases and the author's own experience. Official websites of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies were used as sources of the secondary research (Agados [1], ETIshop [8], Mixxer Medical [23], EWITAS [9] and Walmark [34]). The application of analysis, comparison, selection, querying and mathematical-statistical methods was required by the nature of this study. Results of the primary and secondary research are to be presented in the form of text and tables.

3 Problem solving

The problem solving is organised as follows: section 1 comparatively review the primary data on CSR issues from the point of view of customers; section 2 comparatively review the secondary data on CSR strategies of selected Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies.

3.1 Evaluation of the questionnaire results

The questionnaire was sent to 150 people and was completed by 137 of them. Using the formula for small core files and unknown distribution (1) with critical value (2) dispersion (3) and variability of basic group of respondents (p = 0.5), the reliability of estimation is 95% and the maximum allowable margin of errors is 4.70%. Respondents were divided into seven age categories: age less than 20 (8.03%); age 20 – 29 (75.18%); age 30 – 39 (11.68%); age 40 – 49 (2.19%); age 50 – 59 (1.46%); age 60 and more (1.46%). Respondents consist of two groups: the first group includes respondents who are also customers of Slovak E-commerce companies (91.97%) and the second group includes those respondents who do not buy goods on the internet (8.03%). Results of the first group of respondents was selected for further evaluation.

When asking about the CSR concept, 38.10% of respondents have never heard of it. On the other hand, 61.90% of respondents have knowledge about this concept and 30.77% of them were able to recognise some Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies. Remaining 69.23% of them could not think of any Slovak socially responsible E-commerce company. Most of respondents (66.67%) stated that this may be caused by the fact that most of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies do not report their CSR activities properly.

Respondents' answers to the question "Do you think that it is important for Slovak E-commerce companies to declare responsibility for their actions?" were expressed as follows: yes, it is very important: 76.92%; probably yes, it is important: 19.23%; probably not, it is not very important: 3.85%; no, it is not important at all: 0%.

When respondents were asked to choose whether they would buy goods from socially responsible E-commerce company or E-commerce company which does not declare responsibility for its actions, most of them decided to choose socially responsible E-commerce company (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3: Respondents' choice of E-commerce company

I certainly would choose socially responsible E-commerce company	60.26%
I probably would choose socially responsible E-commerce company	33.33%
I probably would not choose socially responsible E-commerce company	3.85%
I certainly would not choose socially responsible E-commerce company	2.56%

Source: Authors

3.2 Interpretation of the results

Based on data analysis of primary research, we have found that from the total number of 5 researcher assumption, the 4 has been confirmed, and 1 has been unconfirmed.

- Research assumption 1: More than 50% of the respondents are the customer of any Slovak E-commerce company. – confirmed (91.97% of respondents are the customers of Slovak E-commerce companies).

- Research assumption 2: More than 50% of the respondents have knowledge about the "Corporate Social Responsibility" concept. – confirmed (61.90% of respondents have knowledge about the CSR concept).

- Research assumption 3: More than 50% of the respondents are able to recognise Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies. – unconfirmed (only 30.77% of the respondents are able to recognise some Slovak socially responsible E-commerce company; most of respondents (66.67%) stated that this may be caused by the fact that most of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies do not report their CSR activities properly).

- Research assumption 4: For more than 50% of the respondents it is import, that Slovak E-commerce companies declare responsibility for their actions. – confirmed (it is very important for 76.92% of respondents).

- Research assumption 5: For more than 50% of the respondents are attractive socially responsible E-commerce company. – confirmed (60.26% of respondents would choose socially responsible E-commerce company).

To summarize, most of respondents are familiar with the CSR concept but more than a half of them were not able to recognise Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies. This is a very confusing result. On the other hand, respondents have settled upon the fact that the most of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies do not report their CSR activities properly. Also, overwhelmingly major part of respondents think that it is important for Slovak E-commerce companies to declare responsibility for their actions. This is followed by the respondents' choice of E-commerce company, whereby they chose socially responsible E-commerce company.

3.3 Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies

To conduct secondary research, these Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies operating in various retail sectors were selected for the analysis:

- Agados [1]: online sale of agricultural machinery, trailers and spare parts;

- ETIshop [8]: online sale of consumer electronics, toiletries and books;

- Mixxer Medical [23]: online sale of medical supplies and equipment;

- EWITAS [9]: online sale of household products;
- Walmark [34]: online sale of nutritional supplements and vitamins.

Agados is a socially responsible E-commerce company which achieves a profit respecting the needs of all its partners (stakeholders). These partners are employees, customers, competitors, suppliers, local communities and the environment but also the government. CSR strategy of Agados is based on its reputation and attractiveness for investors. It offers responsible products and services, cares about work-life balance of its employees, increases loyalty of its employees and uses eco-friendly materials. Agados also improves risk management through collaborating with suppliers, non-governmental and governmental organizations, by which it gains a positive image among the general public [1].

The main aim of **ETIshop**'s CSR strategy is to bring ethical values into the process of buying. ETIshop constantly tries to prove its credibility to the general public by disclosing all of the information about its revenues and expenses. An interesting fact about ETIshop is that it offers products in the same price at which it bought them. Transparency of ETIshop begins with the personal data protection and continues with its anti-corruption policy and community engagement [8].

The CSR strategy of **Mixxer Medical** is not linked just with its essential role of medical supplies and equipment distribution. Mixxer Medical is fully aware that the quality of life is not given by an option to use top-quality products for health improvement. Its CSR activities in the economic area are: good practice, quality and safety of products, ethical codex, customer focus, anti-corruption policy, protection of intellectual property and marketing ethics. Mixxer Medical performs these CSR activities in the social area: safety, development and work-life balance of its employees, respect for equal opportunities and human rights. In the environmental area, it is focused on: recycling, energy saving and water saving [23].

EWITAS is a socially responsible E-commerce company which believes that only company focused on the principles of CSR can be successful. Since EWITAS is a small company, it primarily supports community in which it operates. The CSR strategy of EWITAS is focused on activities beneficial to the environment, local schools, kindergartens, retirement homes and animal shelters [9].

Walmark actively participates in initiatives focused on increasing an interest in healthy lifestyle and responsible attitude to the health. Besides that, another part of Walmark's CSR strategy is engagement in projects which enforce general welfare of the society. Walmark also cares about the quality of products, good customer relations and environmentally friendly manufacturing process [34].

4 Discussion

According to the results of the research, 61.90% of respondents have knowledge about the CSR concept. As the most negative finding may be considered that 69.23% of them were not able to recognise any Slovak socially responsible E-commerce company. According to respondents, it is probably caused by the fact that most of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies do not report their CSR activities. But still, for most of respondents, the CSR concept is very important even in the conditions of E-commerce. As the most positive finding may be considered that 60.26% of respondents would certainly

choose socially responsible E-commerce company, when buying online. Based on the questionnaire results, we suggest that every Slovak E-commerce company should adopt the CSR concept.

As we look onto existing CSR strategies of selected Slovak E-commerce companies, our intention is to classify their CSR activities in accordance with economic, social and environmental area. A simplified overview of CSR activities of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies is displayed in Tab. 4.

Tab. 4: CSR activities of Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies

Area	Activities
Economic	Risk management, good practice, quality and safety of products and services, reasonable prices, ethical codex, customer focus, transparency, credibility, anti-corruption policy, protection of intellectual property and marketing ethics.
Social	Safety, development and work-life balance of employees, focus on the loyalty of employees, supporting healthy lifestyle, personal data protection, respect for equal opportunities and human rights, supporting local communities (local schools, kindergartens, retirement homes and animal shelters), community engagement.
Environmental	Using eco-friendly materials, environmentally friendly manufacturing process, recycling, energy saving and water saving.

Source: Authors

We argue that adopting the CSR concept should be natural to every company, therefore Slovak E-commerce companies should be no exceptions.

We suggest that Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies should focus on performing CSR activities listed in Tab. 4.

We also suggest that every Slovak socially responsible E-commerce company should focus on good relations with its stakeholders, including employees, customers, competitors, suppliers, local communities, environmental organisations, non-governmental and governmental organisations.

Another suggestion for Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies is to disclose all of the information about revenues and expenses to the general public, so their transparency and credibility would be proven. Equally important is engaging in projects which enforce general welfare of the society.

Accordingly, we suggest proper reporting of CSR performance. Slovak socially responsible E-commerce companies should focus on creating simplified CSR reports along with annual reports and by the time they should move on to the creation of separate CSR reports. As we suggested in our previous research, when creating a high-quality CSR report, companies should keep in mind eight core sections: introduction, governance, strategy, performance, supply chain, employees, society and environment.

Results from this paper is confirmed by The Nielsen Global Survey of Corporate Social Responsibility [30] (it was conducted between Feb. 17 and March 7, 2014, and polled more than 30,000 consumers in 60 countries throughout Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and North America). More than half (55%) of global respondents

in Nielsen's survey say they are willing to pay extra for products and services from companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact – an increase from 50% in 2012 and 45% in 2011. Regionally, respondents in Asia-Pacific (64%), Latin America (63%) and Middle East/Africa (63%) exceed the global average and have increased 9, 13 and 10 percentage points, respectively, since 2011. Similar responses are reported for stated past purchases of sustainable products. More than half of global respondents (52%) say they have purchased at least one product or service in the past six months from a socially responsible company.

An interesting finding is the results of answers to the question of what CSR activities, the enterprise should realize that the respondents were willing to pay extra for their products and services. The top causes (of the 20 included in the study), which global respondents indicate, include: increasing access to clean water (67%), improving access to sanitation (63%), ensuring environmental sustainability (63%), eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (62%), combating non-communicable diseases (58%), reducing child mortality (58%), improving maternal health (56%). [30]

Our future research should provide a comprehensive review of a solved problem. We believe that in the near future, other research dealing with a same problem will be conducted so our future research could be provided with a systematic literature review. Also, it would be very interesting to compare our research with other similar research. In this manner we could propose more detailed and effective recommendations.

Conclusion

The CSR concept has been built gradually with the change of orientation, especially in British and American companies. In the 1920s, large American companies have started their CSR strategies with pension funds, life insurance schemes, reducing working hours and wage increases. They were also actively involved in building schools, libraries, hospitals and in the charity work [25]. In Slovakia, the principles of CSR started to penetrate in 1992. As "classic" companies (not E-commerce company) are constantly being replaced by E-commerce companies, the CSR concept finds its place in an online environment. The lack of relevant research, dedicated to the CSR concept in the conditions of E-commerce companies, shows a gap that strongly indicates the need for deeper insight.

Today, when we look on the shape of most CSR strategies, they mostly aggregate their CSR activities into three areas – economic, social and environmental area [17]. Currently, within retail, online shopping is becoming increasingly popular. This is the main reason why our primary research was focused on online customers and secondary research dealt with E-commerce companies. Since our statement of a problem says that from a wide number of Slovak E-commerce companies, only a small part follows the CSR principles, we tried to determine online customers' attitude towards the CSR concept and socially responsible Slovak E-commerce companies. We also analysed CSR strategies of selected Slovak E-commerce companies. We also stated our commitment to future research and confirmed a need for finding relevant research dedicated to the CSR concept in the conditions of E-commerce companies and comparing such research with our findings.

Acknowledgement

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