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CSR AS A MODERN MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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ABSTRACT:

The presented study focuses on the influence of marketing communication of CSR activities in the practice of food companies in Slovakia on the consumer behaviour of Generations X, Y, and Z. In the marketing activities of food companies, there is a noticeable shift towards considering social aspects, which increasingly influence consumer behaviour. This trend not only helps in solving many problems but also raises awareness of CSR activities. The theoretical and practical value of the article lies in the empirical confirmation of the reporting of CSR activities by food companies in the field of social marketing activities and their impact on consumer purchasing decisions, profit growth, brand awareness, and the building of corporate reputation through a questionnaire survey in which 946 respondents of Generation X, Y and Z took part. To evaluate the established hypotheses, statistical methods, and techniques such as Pearson's Chi-square test of independence, the Kruskal-Wallis test and Chi-square test of independence, and One sample proportion Z test using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software were used.

KEYWORDS:

customers, food enterprises, marketing communication, purchasing preferences in consumers' behaviour, rationality and irrationality

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1 Corporate Social Responsibility as a Modern Concept in Marketing Communication

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an increasingly popular concept in companies worldwide. CSR has become indispensable in today's environment and plays a decisive role in the efficiency of food companies (Wang et al., 2021). Also, nowadays, there is more and more agreement with the opinion that sustainability should be a part of all human activities (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1986). In today's business environment, including the food industry, relentless competition between companies has led to many products becoming so similar that consumers often lack sufficient incentive to choose one over another (Igarová et al., 2022).

Food companies can improve their brand equity and reputation through proper marketing communications and maintaining high food quality standards. In today's food market, customers are interested in the price and quality of products and the environment and society in which they live (Battistoni et al., 2013). Society increasingly pressures companies to act responsibly in their business practices, making businesses aware that neglecting social responsibility could result in losing customers (Ušák & Bednárik, 2022). Based on this, companies realised the importance of CSR activities. CSR also plays an essential role in the evaluation of the performance of companies; in the food market, it is already considered an obligation for companies to fulfil their social responsibility through their economic goals. (Shaikh et al., 2022). CSR is considered one of the decisive factors for food companies to stay in the commercial game (Alakkas et al., 2022). Numerous CSR activities can help the company increase its popularity, which is also closely related to relations with employees, consumers, suppliers, and the community in which the company operates (Azid & Tahir, 2019).

Consumers and the development of their consumer behaviour are influenced by dynamic global changes, with new information search possibilities and modern marketing communication approaches (Fašiang & Gežik, 2024). Consumers demand that food companies apply CSR activities to all three pillars of CSR – people, planet, and profit. At the threshold of the 3rd millennium, social responsibility is strongly linked to rationality and irrationality in the formation of preferences in the purchasing behaviour of consumers. Companies must present their activities in such a way that they appear credible and accurate, which will fulfil the requirements and expectations of customers (Igarová et al., 2023).

All CSR initiatives and activities are related to ethics, economics, and philanthropy, making the most effective dimensions philanthropic, ethical, economic, and legal. All the dimensions of CSR, except for the legal aspect, positively model the relationship to creating brand value and consumers. For this reason, food companies must try to direct their marketing communication so that the public learns about their intentions and CSR activities as much as possible and formulate strategies for all dimensions of CSR (Alakkas et al., 2022).



Figure 1. Carroll's pyramid
Source: own processing, 2024

According to Carroll (1991), companies should strive for profit, be ethical, comply with the law, and be good corporate citizens. In addition to these dimensions, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept was developed, also known as 3Ps, which included three elements: profit, people, and planet (Savitz, 2014). In the literature, authors still have different opinions on CSR's economic and social approaches. The economic approach is considered a voluntary commercial activity, which is unprofitable. On the other hand, a social approach responds to stakeholders' expectations and contributes to various social benefits (Kádeková et al., 2020).

In this context, food companies are already aware of the importance of implementing the principles of corporate social responsibility, which can also be an essential factor in building competition in the food market (Metzker et al., 2021). Businesses should inform their customers about their values, products, and services in the food market, especially what they do regarding social responsibility (Kádeková et al., 2021).

Food companies perceive the importance and role of reporting CSR activities because they are also evaluated from the consumers' point of view (Nguyen, 2022). While CSR reporting was initially focused on solving environmental issues, protecting consumer rights, and philanthropy, there are other motivators for food businesses. In companies, CSR is essential to improving the organisation's image and customer satisfaction (Bhaduri & Selarka, 2016).

Incorporating CSR and being socially responsible requires food companies to communicate correctly with stakeholders, not only to convince them and appear credible but also to maximise the benefits of such an image, e.g., competitive advantage in the food market, avoiding charges for unethical behaviour, and long-term investments in the company's image (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009).

Companies must pay enough attention to the two Cs of marketing communication: Contact and Convince. Every marketing communication tool can mediate CSR activities and contribute to the company's corporate image and brand value. Food companies need to know the individual needs, attitudes, purchasing behaviour, and values of the so-called green/sustainable consumer, and to target them with the correct form of marketing communication (Jaderná & Srbová, 2024).

2 Research Methodology

The present study focuses on the influence of marketing communication of CSR activities in the practice of food companies in Slovakia on consumer behaviour. Attention was paid to dividing respondents into individual Generations X, Y, and Z, which are influenced by the marketing communication of companies that report and present CSR activities. The study presents the results of a questionnaire survey conducted in 2023. The survey consisted of 57 questions, which were divided into four subsections. We asked the respondents basic categorisation questions and asked them about CSR awareness amongst Generations X, Y, and Z. In the following subsection, we were interested in whether they know specific food companies in Slovakia that apply CSR. In the last subsection, we focused on questions related to the influence of marketing communication on the consumer behaviour of the respondents. The research included 946 respondents from Generation X, Y, and Z. The research includes respondents who buy food and perceive the presentation of CSR activities of food companies.

We further processed the obtained data, omitting the faulty questionnaires, which were 14 due to errors and inaccuracies, and analysed them into figures and tables with the subsequent interpretation of the results. We established four hypotheses, which we evaluated using various statistical methods such as Pearson's Chi-square test of independence, the Kruskal-Wallis test and Chi-square test of independence, and One sample proportion Z test using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software. As we were interested in a deeper analysis of the results, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: We assume no differences between Generations X, Y, and Z and whether they prefer to buy food from socially responsible companies that they know from advertising.

H2: We assume that Generation Z buys food more often based on the marketing communication of a socially responsible company than Generations Y and X.

H3: We assume that there are differences between Generation Z and Generation Y and what form of marketing communication influences them when buying food.

H4: We assume that more than 30% of respondents who make purchase decisions based on whether the company is socially responsible obtain information about food and the company's socially responsible activities through advertising.

3 Research Results

The results presented in this part of the study are divided into four subchapters based on the data obtained regarding the hypotheses set previously, as described in the Research Methodology.

3.1 Results Regarding Hypothesis 1

In the first hypothesis, we assume there are no differences between Generations X, Y, and Z and whether they prefer to buy food from socially responsible companies that they know from advertising. Respondents were asked, "Do you prefer to buy foods you know from advertising?". Respondents had a choice of three options:

- Yes,
- I do not know,
- No.

Table 1 below shows the distribution of responses by each generation. Of the 946 respondents, 319, representing 33.7%, prefer buying well-known foods from advertisements. 318 respondents (33.6%) chose the answer "I do not know", and 309 respondents (32.6%) do not prefer to buy food that they know from advertising.

In the most numerous Generation Z (aged 18 – 27), consisting of 336 respondents, 106 (31.5%) prefer to buy food from advertisements, 122 (36.3%) do not prefer, and 108 (32.1%) do not know. The percentage of respondents who do not prefer to buy food based on advertising is the highest in this generation.

In the least numerous Generation Y (aged 28 – 42), made up of 292 respondents, the option "I do not know" prevails, chosen by 111 respondents (38%). 91 respondents (31.2%) prefer well-known products based on advertising; on the contrary, advertising has no effect on the preference of products for 90 respondents (30.8%).

Generation X (aged 43 – 57) consisted of 318 respondents, and 122 of them (38.4%) preferred to buy foods they knew from advertising, and 97 (30.5%) did not prefer such foods. The share of people who prefer to buy food based on advertising is the highest in this generation.

Table 1. Answers to the question “Do you prefer to buy food that you know from advertisements?”, divided by generations

		Do you prefer to buy foods that you know from advertisements?				
		yes	I don't know	no	Total	
What is your age?	18-27	Count	106	108	122	336
		Expected Count	113.3	112.9	109.8	336.0
		% within What is your age?	31.5%	32.1%	36.3%	100.0%
	28-42	Count	91	111	90	292
		Expected Count	98.5	98.2	95.4	292.0
		% within What is your age?	31.2%	38.0%	30.8%	100.0%
	43-57	Count	122	99	97	318
		Expected Count	107.2	106.9	103.9	318.0
		% within What is your age?	38.4%	31.1%	30.5%	100.0%
Total	Count	319	318	309	946	
	Expected Count	319.0	318.0	309.0	946.0	
	% within What is your age?	33.7%	33.6%	32.7%	100.0%	

Source: own processing, 2024

If there was no statistically significant difference between the generations, there should be a similar distribution of answers for individual age groups (Figure 2).

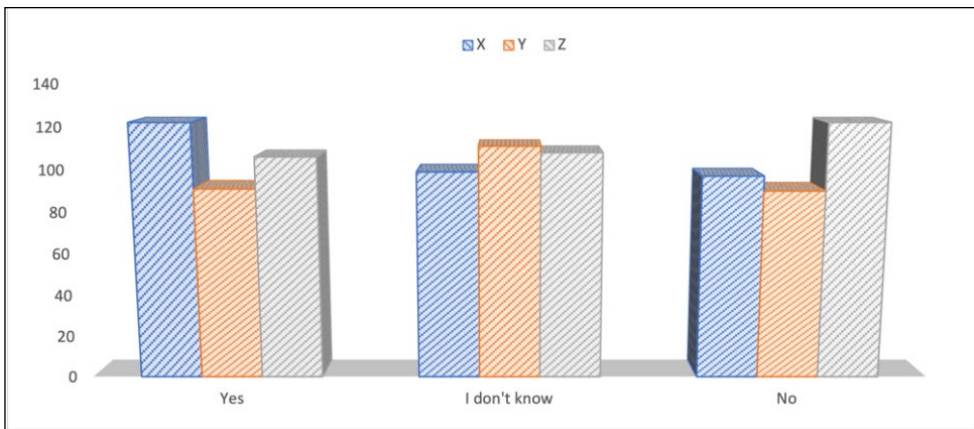


Figure 2. Answers to the question “Do you prefer to buy foods that you know from ads?”, divided by Generations X, Y, and Z

Source: own processing, 2024

We tested the hypothesis using Pearson’s Chi-square test of independence. The P value of the Pearson Chi-square test of independence is 0.104 (Table 2). We reject the null hypothesis of independence. There are no differences between generations and whether they prefer to buy food from socially responsible businesses that they know from advertising.

Table 2. Results of the Chi-Square test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.676 ^a	4	.104
N of Valid Cases	946		

Note: a. 0 cells (0,0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 95.38.

Source: own processing, 2024

3.2 Results Regarding Hypothesis 2

In the second hypothesis, we assumed that Generation Z buys food more often based on the marketing communication of a socially responsible company than Generations Y and X. Respondents had a choice of options:

- I did not buy – 1
- one-time – 2
- 2 – 3 times – 3
- 4 – 5 times – 4
- 6 and more – 5

The number after the dash represents the coding for statistical calculations (Table 3).

Table 3. Hypothesis test summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.
1	The distribution of <i>How often have you purchased food based on the selected form of marketing communication in the last six months?</i> is the same across categories of <i>What is your age?</i>	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	,725

Note: Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is 0.50.

Source: own processing, 2024

We used the Kruskal-Wallis test to test this hypothesis. The P value is 0.725 (Table 4). We cannot reject the null hypothesis. Generation Z buys food more often than Generations Y and X, based on the marketing communication of a socially responsible company. The generation has no influence on the frequency of food purchases (Figure 3).

Table 4. Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis test summary

44Total N	946
4Test Statistic	,643 ^{a,b}
Degree Of Freedom	2
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	,725

Note: a. The test statistic is adjusted for ties.

b. Multiple comparisons are not performed because the overall test does not show significant differences across samples.

Source: own processing, 2024

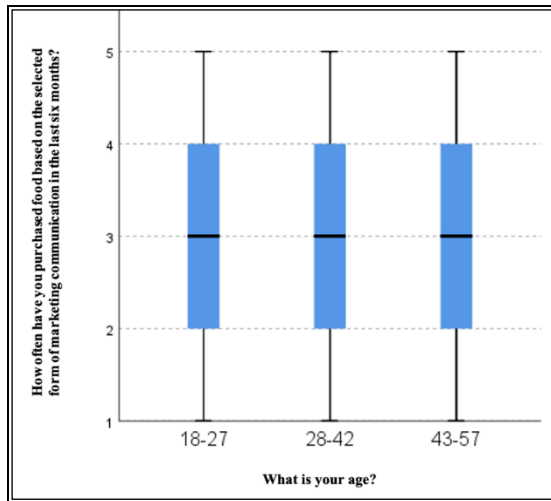


Figure 3. Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis test

Source: own processing, 2024

3.3 Results Regarding Hypothesis 3

In the third hypothesis, we assume there are differences between Generation Z and Generation Y and what form of marketing communication influences them when buying food. Respondents were asked: “What online marketing communication influences you to buy food?” The answers are shown in Figure 4 below. Respondents could choose from seven options:

- e-mail marketing,
- influencer marketing,
- social media,
- video marketing,
- viral marketing,
- company websites.

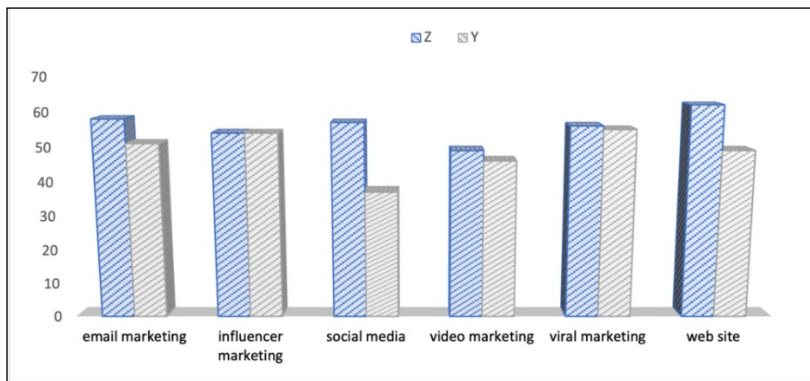


Figure 4. What online marketing communication influences you to buy food?

Source: own processing, 2024

The 628 respondents were analysed: 336 in Generation Z and 292 in Generation Y. The most common forms of marketing communication affecting respondents include viral marketing and company websites, affecting 111 people or 17.7%. In the case of viral marketing, it is 16.7% of Generation Z and 18.8% of Generation Y. The situation is the opposite for company websites. 18.5% of respondents in Generation Z chose this option, but only 16.8% in Generation Y. E-mail marketing is the third most influential form of marketing (109 respondents, 17.4%). The percentage distribution between generations is very similar. In Generation Z, 58 respondents (17.3%) and 51 (17.5%) in Z. 108 people (17.2%) chose the influencer marketing option—54 respondents in both groups. Video marketing (15.1%) and corporate social media profiles (15%) have negligible influence. Video marketing affects 14.6% of respondents in Generation Z and 15.8% in Generation Y, totalling 17% (Table 5).

Table 5. What type of online marketing communication influences you to buy food?

What online form of marketing communication influences you to buy food?		What is your age?		Total
		18-27	28-42	
email marketing	Count	58	51	109
	Expected Count	58.3	50.7	109.0
	% within What is your age?	17.3%	17.5%	17.4%
influencer marketing	Count	54	54	108
	Expected Count	57.8	50.2	108.0
	% within What is your age?	16.1%	18.5%	17.2%
social media	Count	57	37	94
	Expected Count	50.3	43.7	94.0
	% within What is your age?	17.0%	12.7%	15.0%
video marketing	Count	49	46	95
	Expected Count	50.8	44.2	95.0
	% within What is your age?	14.6%	15.8%	15.1%
viral marketing	Count	56	55	111
	Expected Count	59.4	51.6	111.0
	% within What is your age?	16.7%	18.8%	17.7%
websites	Count	62	49	111
	Expected Count	59.4	51.6	111.0
	% within What is your age?	18.5%	16.8%	17.7%
Total	Count	336	292	628
	Expected Count	336.0	292.0	628.0
	% within What is your age?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: own processing, 2024

The P value of the Chi-square test of independence is 0.659 (Table 6). There is no statistically significant dependence between the variables. There are no differences between Generation Z and Generation Y regarding marketing communication influencing food purchases.

Table 6. Chi-Square tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.264 ^a	5	.659
Likelihood Ratio	3.282	5	.657
N of Valid Cases	628		

Note: a. 0 cells (0,0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 43.71

Source: own processing, 2024

3.4 Results Regarding Hypothesis 4

In the last hypothesis, we assume that more than 30% of respondents who make purchase decisions based on whether the company is socially responsible obtain information about food and socially responsible activities based on advertising. Based on the answers, 406 respondents decide when buying food based on whether the company is socially responsible. Of this number, 141 (34.73%) obtain information about food based on advertising. We will use the one-sample proportion from the Z test to test this hypothesis. The test statistic is 2.08, and the critical value is 1.64 (Table 7). The P value of the test is equal to 0.018. We accept and reject the null hypothesis at the significance level of 5%.

Table 7. Z test

n	406
x	141
p	34.73%
p value	0.018
critical value	1.64
test statistic	2.08

Source: own processing, 2024

Our assumption was confirmed: More than 30% of respondents who make a purchase decision based on whether the company is socially responsible obtain information about food and the company's socially responsible activities through advertising.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Some means of communication can be more powerful and effective than others, such as Public Relations, advertising, social media, and sponsorship. Many of these marketing communication tools are perceived negatively by consumers and, to a large extent, by companies (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005). The application of CSR activities in marketing communication currently focuses mainly on customers, employees, philanthropy, and the environment. Corporate marketing communication has assumed an essential role in ensuring that sustainable practices and reporting of CSR activities are understood externally (Battisti et al., 2023).

Marketing and marketing communication enable food businesses to communicate their social responsibility externally by influencing how it is perceived by all stakeholders (Martínez & Del Bosque, 2013). Marketing communication helps companies increase customer satisfaction and sets customer expectations about how companies facilitate food sales. Companies that apply and show CSR activities can gain various strategic benefits, which is a cause of concern for many stakeholders. Still, from the consumer side, it can lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty and influence their rational and irrational purchasing behaviour (Kadhim et al., 2023).

The consumer will also spread positive word-of-mouth information about companies' socially responsible activities, which can increase both the market position and the number of customers (Du et al., 2010).

Many consumers are sceptical and untrusting of companies and their practices, which has recently forced food companies to communicate their CSR efforts in marketing communications (Wagner et al., 2009). In marketing and business, advertising is defined as encouraging the promotion of goods or services to the public to gain people's attention and increase sales of these goods and services (Scharf & Fernandes, 2013).

Therefore, in the communication of the CSR activities of the company to all interested parties, correct communication and trustworthy advertising are essential. That is why companies must differentiate between

convincing and informative CSR advertising. Persuasive CSR advertising is aimed at consumers with the aim of products with CSR elements. In contrast, informative CSR advertising mainly informs the external public about the CSR practices of the company and the aspects of CSR activities (Kadhim et al., 2023). For this reason, companies must communicate their CSR efforts and present marketing activities in a way that inspires credibility and trust. To contribute to credibility, food businesses have begun to pay attention to the trust of more sustainable suppliers (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) generally aims to fulfil social obligations beyond traditional economic contributions. CSR is also identified as supporting philanthropic actions and relationship-building initiatives. These facts also show that Public Relations play an active role in marketing communication and illustrate different methods of involving public relations in socially responsible business activities. In addition, PR interlinks with CSR and supports relationships between the organisation and the public, as well as individuals and community groups, through PR and CSR activities (Clark, 2000).

Food companies must also focus on developing two-way relationships with consumers, which social media may provide. When communicating CSR activities of companies, social media make it possible to create and present CSR activities without being modified by traditional gatekeepers or media. Communication channels are changing to any-to-any and many-to-many from traditional one-to-one or one-to-many communication. Social networking sites represent a significant advantage in marketing communications, but currently, food businesses only use social media to a limited extent (Kadhim et al., 2023).

The topic of corporate social responsibility is relevant in the food market and in marketing in all three pillars. Consumers try to find as much information as possible about products and competition. With the creation of purchasing preferences, CSR is also closely connected with the rationality and irrationality of consumers at the threshold of the 3rd millennium. CSR activities of food businesses can influence consumer behaviour, so trustworthiness is vital in this regard.

Based on the selected issue, we conducted a questionnaire survey focused on the impact of CSR activity as a marketing tool on the food market, focusing on CSR activities and marketing communication in the conditions of food businesses in Slovakia. The survey results were 946 participating respondents from Generations X, Y, and Z. Based on the established hypotheses, we reached several conclusions. We were interested in how individual Generations X, Y, and Z perceive the CSR activities of food companies and how their consumer behaviour is influenced by marketing communication. We asked the respondents of each generation whether they prefer food they know from advertising when buying food from socially responsible companies. The results show no significant differences between Generations X, Y, and Z and whether they prefer foods they know from advertising when buying. Based on the result, companies should present their products and CSR activities as much as possible and explain how and why they behave socially responsibly. It is essential that the given form of communication appears trustworthy and is presented in the correct form of marketing communication. We were also interested in the differences between the specific Generations Y, and X. We assumed that there would be differences in how often each generation buys food from a socially responsible company. The results claim that age does not affect the intensity of food purchases. Next, we asked the respondents of Generations Z and Y what specific form of marketing communication influences them to buy food. The respondents' answers suggest that no specific form influences them more, and all are similar. In the last hypothesis, we focused on whether respondents obtain information about CSR activities from advertisements. In this question, we focused only on respondents who, when buying food, decide based on whether the company is socially responsible. The results confirm that more than 30% of respondents of all generations obtain information based on advertising.

More and more forms of marketing communication point to companies' CSR activities. From an external perspective, CSR is an excellent way to increase consumer credibility and build a good name in the food market.

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