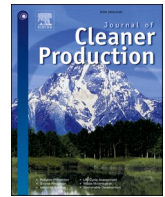




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Cleaner Production

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jclepro

Before and after the outbreak of Covid-19: Linking fashion companies' corporate social responsibility approach to consumers' demand for sustainable products

Elena-Mădălina Vătămănescu^a, Dan-Cristian Dabija^{b,*}, Patrizia Gazzola^c,
Juan Gabriel Cegarra-Navarro^d, Tania Buzzi^e

^a National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

^b Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

^c Patrizia Gazzola, Università degli Studi dell'Insubria, Insubria, Italy

^d Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena, Cartagena, Spain

^e Università degli Studi dell'Insubria, Insubria, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: Dr. Govindan Kannan

Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility (CSR)
Sustainability
COVID-19 pandemic
Strategic communication
Corporate reputation
Fashion companies
Consumers

ABSTRACT

The current exploratory endeavour sets out to scrutinize the relationships between the corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach of fashion companies, their strategic CSR communication, corporate reputation, and consumers' propensity towards buying sustainable products. The study elaborates on consumers' perspective on these variables, comparing two-time frameworks, before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical research was performed on 977 Millennials and Gen Zers, thus extending previous studies based on the generational theory. Emphasis was placed on the fashion sector as one of the industries most challenged by the pandemic, with Italy being one of the most affected European countries. Scrutiny relied on a questionnaire-based survey; data being processed via structural equation modelling (SEM) technique. The findings reveal that consumers attach great importance to the social and environmental sustainability practices applied by companies (i. e., circular economy issues, location of apparel production, organic production of raw materials, pollution generated during production, respect of workers' rights and health, and use of recycled materials) and to the attributes of targeted products, even since the spread of the virus. The empirical evidence has substantive implications for scholars, professionals, and companies, urging that sustainability priorities are critical to favourable consumer behaviour, and implicitly to business survival.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only caused a new economic recession but has also forced all countries to take extreme decisions to contain the virus, to the point where "business as usual" is no longer possible. The pandemic requires businesses to think outside the box, to draw on their own resources and creativity, and to be resilient, dynamic, and proactive, adapting classic business models or developing new ones (Alexandru et al., 2020; Bratianu, 2020; Bratianu and Bejinaru, 2020; Qi et al., 2020; Fasan et al., 2021). In line with Taleb's (2008) conceptualization, the global pandemic has emerged as a "black swan", profoundly challenging expectations, exerting a dramatic impact at

multiple levels, and prompting various actors (i.e., people, communities, and organizations) to find suitable explanations and approaches for rapid adaptation.

Faced with the unprecedented circumstances generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all challenged to find suitable adaptive and future-oriented solutions to fight the systemic multilevel crisis generated by the virus outbreak (Alvarez et al., 2020; Delaporte and Pena, 2020; Hasanat et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2020; Bratianu and Bejinaru, 2021; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2021; Fasan et al., 2021; Nemţeanu and Dabija, 2021). Focusing on the economic impact of the pandemic, most companies, regardless of their size or sector, have been forced to rethink and readjust their strategies, especially concerning

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: madalina.vatamanescu@facultateademanagement.ro (E.-M. Vătămănescu), dan.dabija@ubbcluj.ro (D.-C. Dabija), patrizia.gazzola@uninsubria.it (P. Gazzola), juan.cegarra@upct.es (J.G. Cegarra-Navarro), tania.buzzi@gmail.com (T. Buzzi).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.128945>

Received 5 February 2021; Received in revised form 1 September 2021; Accepted 4 September 2021

Available online 9 September 2021

0959-6526/© 2021 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.