

Consumers' Perception of Responsible Companies and Using of Cause-Related Marketing in their CSR Practice

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Abstract

The importance to integrate principles of social responsibility has also penetrated the field of marketing. The paper focuses on the topic of cause-related marketing (CrM), an innovative tool of corporate social responsibility (CSR), that allows for a balance between the company's interest, consumer satisfaction, and the long-term prosperity of society as well. The main aim is to examine consumers' perceptions of using cause-related marketing as a part of the socially responsible activities of companies in Slovakia. This aim is preceded by a partial aim – to examine the consumers' perception of socially responsible companies in general. The selected results of the pilot questionnaire survey are presented. The obtained data from a sample of 415 respondents were evaluated by selected statistical methods (Chi-Square, Spearman's correlation coefficient). Generally, consumers positively perceive the importance of socially responsible behavior of companies. According to research results, CSR is a differentiation point on market, when socially responsible companies are perceived as more trustworthy and attractive than competitors. Engagement in cause-related marketing is relatively high when almost 80 % of the respondents indicated that they have already participated in a campaign of this type. On the other hand, skepticism towards CrM exists. Research results indicated that CrM can create a competitive advantage for companies that adopt it and help enhance better image and reputation of a socially responsible company.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR); cause-related marketing (CrM); consumers; perception; Slovakia;

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1. Introduction

Current long-running social, economic, and environmental problems of the world cannot be solved only by national governments, but responsibility for them must be taken also by the companies and by consumers themselves. In all business activities, including marketing activities, the significantly responsible approach still penetrates. Responsible marketing behavior becomes a great challenge for companies, both at the educational and communication levels in order to contribute to problem-solving in a wider societal context

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(Musova *et al.*, 2016). Obviously, the relationship with a customer is in the first place, but also other stakeholders such as employees, the community, or the public can properly be involved in the responsible programs of companies (Stojanovic *et al.*, 2020). According to Metzker and Zvarikova (2021) or Belas *et al.* (2021), implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles helps companies to build their image, improve the satisfaction and loyalty of stakeholders and thus increase their value.

Globalization, accompanied by rapid technological changes, has given rise to a completely new business environment. The development of a modern company is determined by taking into account the higher responsibility and more business ethics in management processes. Bhattacharya *et al.* (2011) emphasize a fast-changing approach of companies to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Firstly, the CSR concept is viewed as a business opportunity (Metzker and Streimikis, 2020). Secondly, companies are beginning to see the important role of all stakeholders (Marakova *et al.*, 2021; Lu *et al.*, 2020b). And third, the CSR concept is perceived as a strategic, long-term approach, not as a single shot, as a one-off action in the short term (Musova, 2020). Streimikiene and Ahmed (2021) also note the positive relationship between marketing and CSR. All responsible activities have a positive effect on the marketing efforts of companies and their image.

The need for integration of CSR principles has also entered the area of marketing and it has transformed traditional marketing concepts into the form of socially responsible marketing – the one which takes the ethical, environmental and social aspects into account. Part of responsible marketing activities can be represented by cause-related marketing (CrM) – an innovative approach to marketing that enables the creation of a balance between the economic interests of a business, effective satisfaction of the customers' needs, and all-society interests. It fosters partnerships between business entities and non-profit organizations interestingly while aiming to support a “good cause” and reach their own economic and non-economic goals (Silva *et al.*, 2021). Cause-related marketing is an innovative tool of corporate social responsibility (Chatzoglou *et al.*, 2017), that allows for a balance between the company's marketing interest, effective consumer satisfaction, and satisfaction of social needs as well. According to Christofi *et al.* (2015) CrM is a fundraising innovation, Robinson *et al.* (2012) refer to it as a very attractive marketing strategy.

Companies engage in cause-related marketing for several reasons such as improving their image (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012), enhancing consumer attitudes (Melero and Montaner, 2016), or increasing customer loyalty (Park *et al.*, 2017). Consumers also directly benefit from companies that engage in CrM initiatives. Positive perception is necessary, but not automatically transformed into a buying decision. In the decision-making process, each consumer takes various factors into account. Therefore, it is also interesting to examine the impact of responsible marketing behavior of companies on this process. Predicting consumer attitudes and, consequently, behavior is important in planning and implementing an effective CrM project (Musova, 2020).

In this context, the paper focuses on the consumers' perception of socially responsible companies in Slovakia and especially on the perception of one of the responsible marketing activities – cause-related marketing, which they use. In the conditions of Slovakia, this innovative CSR tool appears only occasionally. Considering that the active approach and involvement of consumers affect the success of CrM projects, it is essential to pay attention to their opinions on this type of responsible business behavior. The examination of the consumers' perception of companies implementing CrM marketing is preceded by a general view of socially responsible companies. Anticipating consumer behavior can be

important for businesses while planning socially responsible activities, including creating efficient CrM projects.

The paper is organized as follows. After a brief literature review in the next section, the applied methodology and research design are presented. The research results are given and discussed in the section Empirical results and discussion. The Conclusion sums up the most important research outcomes and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is considered an important part of each modern company. It is transformed into a business strategy, into all company's functions, strategic, tactical, and operative goals. Many researchers (Rozsa *et al.*, 2021; Streimikiene and Ahmed, 2021; Musova, 2020; Servaes and Tamayo, 2013), as well as practitioners, emphasize, that responsible behavior is a long-term, voluntary, and consistent action and investment. The positive effects of CSR are unquestionable. According to Dvorsky *et al.* (2020), proper use of strategic management and marketing tools can help companies to achieve responsibly better outcomes and higher competitiveness in the market. The relationship between CSR and companies' competitiveness was mentioned by Gavurova *et al.* (2022), Lu *et al.* (2020b), Hadj (2020), and Anser *et al.* (2018). Several studies deal with the impact of CSR on the performance of the firm (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2018; Hategan *et al.*, 2018). The positive impact of CSR on consumers' trust and loyalty and perception of reputation was demonstrated by Farid *et al.* (2020), Kim (2019), Paulík *et al.* (2015).

For Adkins (2000), corporate social responsibility can be currently regarded both as a threat and an opportunity. The main reason is customers – they have higher sovereignty and more knowledge when purchasing, the power to protest and boycott unethical and irresponsible companies' practices. But they also have the potential and desire to be part of the responsibility, to be engaged, and to support. In this regard, an important issue is – how can a company build trust, and reputation and develop preferences towards the brand? How can ensure consumers understand their values and socially responsible principles? In order to achieve this, corporate social responsibility has to be authentic and visible not only to consumers but to all stakeholders. Considering the internal stakeholders (employees, especially) the CSR principles implementation mitigates numerous problems like inconsistencies in age management practices (Urbancová and Vrabcová, 2020), inequality in career opportunities, unfair remuneration, and dissatisfaction with other forms of compensation and benefits (Bilan *et al.*, 2020).

If a company bases its activities on the aspects of social responsibility, trust related to consumers is built. CSR creates a loyal customer base: when customers are deciding to buy goods or services, they notice whether a company respects their own as well as society's interests to create safe, clean, and justice-based aspects of a community (Moisescu, 2017). One of the innovative and relatively modern tools of corporate social responsibility is cause-related marketing. Cause-related marketing can be defined as marketing that ties a company's product or brand to a specific cause. The main goal for a company is to increase sales and corporate image while contributing to the non-profit organization (Ptacek and Salazar, 1997). More specifically, cause-related marketing represents an alliance between a private (profit) company and a social cause to integrate the marketing activities of a responsible company with the promotion of charitable work (Chaabouni *et al.*, 2020).

The evolution of cause-related marketing began with the concept of socially responsible marketing, firstly described by Philip Kotler, who makes the argument that marketing can't be only profit-driven, marketing must consider the future welfare of consumers as well as future company needs (Kotler, 1972). The first campaign in cooperation between profit and non-profit organizations was successfully created even before the term "cause-related marketing" was established (a partnership between the Marriott Corporation and the March of Dimes from 1976 to generate positive low-cost public relations for the opening of family entertainment center Great America Park (Di Donato, 2010). The term cause-related marketing originated in 1983 from the campaign by American Express in support of the renovation of the Statue of Liberty. The campaign resulted in \$1,7 million contributions by American Express to the renovation, but also resulted in a 28 % increase in card usage, a sizable increase in the number of new cards issued, and the impression of a responsible and patriotic corporation (Ptacek and Salazar, 1997). The first conceptualization of CrM is from Varadarajan and Menon (1988): "*CrM is the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specific amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational individual objectives*".

Duarte and Silva (2018) understand cause-related marketing as the alignment of philanthropy and business interest, as a marketing program that strives to achieve two objectives – improve corporate performance and help worthy causes, by linking fundraising for the benefit of a cause to the purchase of the firm's products or services. Consumers can be motivated to respond to cause-related marketing appeal by economic motivations, by social norms that encourage charitable behavior, or by enduring values, which have been internalized and result in appropriate behaviors. According to Nelson and Vilela (2017), cause-related marketing is a marketing tool linking a company to a social cause within a promotional initiative to obtain mutual benefit. Kumar and Bansal (2017) mention the connection between social responsibility and the marketing strategy aimed at promoting social progress, the quality of human life, well-being, or security.

Burtch (2013) presents several foundational elements of cause-related marketing. The partnership of all partners (profit as well as a non-profit organizations) is necessary for fair, trusting, and successful work in CrM projects. In most cases, the partnership is between two subjects, but sometimes there can be three or even multiple partners involved. All subjects approach partnerships with different marketing objectives and internal agendas, which must be understood. The key stimulus that will motivate all partners involved in cause-related projects is creating a greater good, focusing on the specific problem or on the specific target group that will benefit from this project.

From a socially responsible perspective, there is a very fine line between cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility can be understood as an effort of a company to give back to society, which it gains from it, whereas cause-related marketing is when it devotes time and money to a particular charitable or any good cause. Corporate social responsibility is a complex concept, defined by Carroll (1979) as "*the responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time*". In practice, this concept is perceived as partly motivated by logical and socially responsible motives, partly by marketing purposes. Cause-related marketing is not then a synonym but a manifestation, one of the dimensions of corporate social responsibility. It helps companies to make their responsibility visible and to demonstrate their values. The fact is, that corporate social responsibility can be more or less cause-specific, which may include cause-related marketing to some degree or not at all. Cause-related marketing can be part of

companies' responsible activities, but alone cannot fully embody this concept (Adkins, 2000; Sheikh and Beise-Zee, 2011). However, Khan *et al.* (2015) highlighted that CSR performance influences consumers' perception through cause-related marketing. On the other hand, as Varadarajan and Menon (1988) define, cause-related marketing is marketing way how to do well by doing good. Because of this, it is important to understand, that from a marketing perspective, the fundamental objective of cause-related marketing is to strengthen consumer demand, regardless of whether such activity is motivated by economics or by pure altruism.

Cause-related marketing can be connected to a broad range of benefits for the company. Increasing sales and better relationships with customers (in the form of higher willingness to buy promoted products or repeat purchasing) are the most fundamental reasons for participating in cause-related marketing activities (Bianchi *et al.*, 2020). The fact is, that cause-related marketing appeals to consumers and helps develop a strong and unique bond between them and the company. Connection with respected non-profit organizations and popular causes can help enhance the reputation of a socially responsible company, improve corporate image and gain national visibility (Mendini *et al.*, 2018; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). This tool can be very effective in countering negative publicity or can be used as part of a larger program to appease the offended public or customer groups. According to Bhattacharya *et al.* (2011), supporting communities, charities, and good causes can have a positive effect on the human resources of the company (e.g. in form of improving employees' morale, increasing their productivity or loyalty). From a branding point of view, cause-related marketing could build brand awareness and enhance brand image, establish its credibility, and also elicit brand engagement (Ptacek and Salazar, 1997; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012). Polat and Cetinsöz (2021), Lu *et al.* (2020a) add nowadays brand loyalty is considered essential for the success of companies in the long term and companies can gain more market share through it.

While cause-related marketing can come with many problems and challenges, the potential benefits usually outweigh them. Some of them are unique only to this initiative, others are commonly associated with other tools of CSR as well. The most significant include the implications for the company's costs, staff time, and the potential marketing and legal risks (Kotler and Lee, 2005).

Usually, the most problematic part of cause-related marketing is the consumer behavior toward this CSR tool. In many cases, consumers can be skeptical of CrM campaigns – they can question the link between the product and the cause or consider cause-related marketing as exploiting a cause or a promotion tactic for purely profit motives (Chang and Cheng, 2015). Another type of skepticism is hidden in the perception among consumers that the donation amount for every purchased product is too small so it can't make a difference and be helpful for non-profit partners and causes. Similarly, when consumers perceive the company as inconsistent and insufficiently responsible in its behavior (Sheikh and Beise-Zee, 2011; Kotler and Keller, 2013). "Cause" also can be a problematic area. Mendini *et al.* (2018) believe that CrM campaigns will harm those members of society who are critical of the cause that the company supports. Kotler and Lee (2005) state that a dangerous problem is when consumers do not believe that donations will be distributed to non-profit subjects. Some consumers may have concerns about the non-profit partner the brand is associated with and may not want to purchase this product, for example, when charity is associated with negative publicity.

From a managerial perspective are concerns connected with an increased amount of time, attention, and finance consumed by the preparation and organization of CrM campaign

(Musova, 2020). For example, the process of drawing up a contractual agreement specifying contribution conditions takes more time and attention than other socially responsible activities. The process of realization often requires investment in paid promotions aimed to obtain a reasonable reach and frequency threshold with targeted consumers, and also complicated accounting methods.

3. Research methodology

The study deals with responsible companies in general and companies using one of the innovative tools of CSR – cause-related marketing, from the consumers' perspective. The main aim is to examine consumers' perceptions of using cause-related marketing as a part of the socially responsible activities of companies in Slovakia. This aim is preceded by a partial aim – to examine the consumers' perception of socially responsible companies in Slovakia in general. The correlations between consumers' perception and selected demographics – gender and age of consumers – are found too. In the conditions of Slovakia, CrM is considered a new tool of CSR and appears in the practice of companies only occasionally. We carried out the research as a pilot in 2018, intending to explore the potential of using CrM in Slovakia. The initial findings will be launched by further studies of the behavior of consumers and companies in this area.

Aimed to examine consumers' perception of responsible companies in Slovakia, using CrM in companies' practice and regards the paper's objectives, the following partial *research questions* were developed:

1. How do Slovak consumers perceive socially responsible companies? Do they perceive them as more attractive and trustworthy than competitive (less responsible) entities?
2. Can gender and age of consumers influence the perceptions towards socially responsible companies?
3. How do Slovak consumers perceive cause-related marketing as a part of CSR? Have they already participated in some CrM projects/campaigns?
4. How do Slovak consumers perceive companies using cause-related marketing?
5. How do they perceive any level of skepticism toward CrM campaigns?

Research questions 1 and 2 concern the responsible behavior of companies and their perception by consumers. We considered it essential to examine the broader context of the issue as a starting point for the main goal. Cause-related marketing is generally considered one of the CSR tools, but it is still little known and only occasionally used in Slovakia. We were interested in how consumers in Slovakia perceive it (since it is a relatively unknown term), whether they consider it a CSR tool, and whether they have personal experience with CrM (RQ 3). From the point of view of determining the potential of CrM we also dealt with the perception of companies using this tool and the perception of possible negatives associated with it (RQ 4 and RQ 5).

To fulfill the aims of the paper, two kinds of research were conducted. For developing the brief literature review secondary data were used, mostly scientific journals, scholarly books, and research works of other authors in the field of CSR and CrM applying several scientific research methods. Secondary data analysis offers basic theoretical background

for the primary research. More attention was paid to CrM, as it is a new responsible approach in the conditions of Slovakia.

To answer research questions, quantitative descriptive consumer research was conducted. The data were collected during November and December 2018 via online or paper (for older respondents) questionnaires. The questionnaire contained 15 questions in three sections. The first section consisted of the identification data of respondents (age, gender, education, average monthly income). The second section was general and mainly focused on consumers' perception of socially responsible behavior of companies and responsible activities of consumers too. The third section focused its attention on the several aspects of cause-related marketing, as a part of the socially responsible behavior of companies, from the consumer perspective. To measure respondents' perception series of questions (closed-ended questions, dual or multiple-choice) and statements were used after an exhaustive review of the research related to the topic. Statements were measured by a seven-point Likert scale with extreme points labeled "absolutely disagree" and "absolutely agree".

In the paper, only selected results from research are presented. Based on the theoretical review, international studies, and previous research on consumers' perception of socially responsible companies and cause-related marketing in Slovakia, not only research questions but also the following assumptions were formulated:

- *There is a significant dependency between the perception of socially responsible companies and the selected consumers' demographics (gender, age).*
- *There is a significant dependency between the consumers' perception of chosen aspects of cause-related marketing and the selected consumers' demographics (gender, age).*

The questionnaire survey data were processed using Excel software and then analyzed and statistically evaluated by applying various statistical tests (binomial test, Chi-Square test, Spearman Correlation test) by software SPSS. Assumptions of correlation of the perception of a socially responsible company (or cause-related marketing) with the selected demographics (gender, age) were verified by the Chi-square tests and Spearman's correlation coefficient. The null hypotheses (no significant dependency exists) and the alternative hypotheses (significant dependency exists) were tested at a significance level of .05.

In the primary research, quota sampling was utilized. To achieve representativeness of the research selection of respondents concerning gender and age groups was controlled. The research sample consisted of 415 respondents in Slovakia, 50.12% were women and 49.88% were men. Among respondents, four age groups were created from 15 to 26 years old, from 27 to 34 years old, from 35 to 49, and from 50 to 64 years old). The research sample follows the structure of the Slovak population in terms of gender and age (overall 3,810,273 people aged 15 – 64 years in the research period according to Statistical Office SR). Other demographic data such as education and average income per month were not representative from a national perspective. Respondents' distribution according to the selected demographic characteristics is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to the demographic characteristics

Gender	Woman: 208 (50.12%) Men: 207 (49.88 %)
Age groups	15 – 26: 86 (20.7 %) 27 – 34: 74 (17.8 %) 35 – 49: 132 (31.8 %) 50 – 64: 123 (29.6 %)
Education	Primary education: 5 (1.2 %) High school education without leaving exam certificate: 49 (11.8 %) High school education with leaving exam certificate: 170 (41.0 %) Bachelor's degree: 70 (16.9 %) Master's degree: 117 (28.2 %) Higher university education: 4 (1.0 %)
Monthly income	0-199 €: 28 (6.7 %) 200-499 €: 85 (20.5 %) 500-699 €: 123 (29.6 %) 700-999 €: 112 (27.0 %) 1000-1199 €: 36 (8.7 %) 1200 € and more: 31 (7.5 %)

Source: Authors' own research.

4. Empirical results and discussion

The first research question was focused on examining how Slovak consumers think about responsible companies – the importance of their engaging in responsible activities, their attractiveness, and credibility compared to competitors. The general perception of social responsibility of companies through three statements was examined (importance of socially responsible behavior, credibility, and competitiveness of socially responsible companies on market). The analysis of the descriptive variables showed that consumers in Slovakia perceive socially responsible companies positively. In all three questions, more than 50% of respondents absolutely agree or agree with the statement. Cumulatively, disagreement with statements is lower than 10 % in all three questions. **Table 2** illustrates the complete research results.

Table 2. Consumers' perception of socially responsible companies

Statement / Scale	Absolutely agree	Agree	More agree than disagree	More disagree than agree	Disagree	Absolutely disagree	No attitude
S.A: I think, the socially responsible behavior of companies is very important	42.2 %	39.3 %	16.6 %	1.2 %	0.0 %	0.0%	0.7 %
S.B: A socially responsible company is for me more trustworthy than its competitors.	20.2 %	40.7 %	28.0 %	5.1 %	2.4 %	0.5 %	3.1 %
S.C: A socially responsible company is for me more attractive than its competitors.	27.2 %	35.4 %	26.0 %	5.8 %	3.4 %	0.2 %	1.9 %

Source: Authors' own research.

In the first statement (S-A), more than 98 % of respondents perceive the importance of socially responsible behavior in business. In our opinion, people in Slovakia want to rely on the responsibility of companies selling goods and services, on employers, and on all market subjects shaping and influencing the environment in which they live and also believe in the positive features of socially responsible companies. When considering the higher credibility of these companies compared with competitors, more than 60 % of respondents absolutely agree or agree with the second statement. Even more, respondents believe in the higher attractiveness of socially responsible companies – approximately 63 % of respondents absolutely agree or agree with statement S-C.

Our results from Slovak consumers' perspective are also like the Cone Communications / Ebiqity Global CSR Study, that global consumers unequivocally believe companies must act responsibly to address social and environmental issues. 91 % of them expect companies to do more than make a profit only. In addition, 93 % of Global CSR study respondents state they have a more positive image (93 %), are more likely to trust (90 %), and are more loyal (88 %) to companies that act socially responsible (Cone, 2015). Our findings also support the results of Focus agency research (2017), according to which 92 % of Slovak consumers expect companies should do more than make a profit. The positive relation between the CSR actions and consumer perception was found out also by Sheikh and Beise-Zee (2011) who emphasized that social and environmental initiatives must be designed based on the consumers' requirements. Research by Sinčić Ćorić and Dropuljić (2015) conducted in Croatia reveals that even 97% of the Croatian consumers, respondents of research, support socially responsible behavior in general. 65% of them consider that supporting non-profit goals, investing in the community, and being socially responsible is necessary for a successful and profitable business. Regarding consumers' perception of CSR practices in the Spanish market, Bianchi *et al.* (2020) state that 76.7 % of consumers spontaneously know about the phenomenon of social responsibility, 48 % claim to adopt life habits with a positive impact on society, and 39 % of the features of the perception of a good corporation are related to its management of social and environmental aspects.

It is also crucial to understand if gender and age of consumers play role in perceptions of socially responsible companies. To accomplish this and to answer the second research question, we applied the Spearman Correlation Test, to examine dependencies between variables gender and age group and respondents' perceptions. According to the Spearman correlation test results in both variables, only weak dependency was identified concerning all three statements. Gender influence has been largely discussed in consumer response to many businesses and market stimuli. It is interesting to analyze if gender influence also perception of socially responsible companies. Results show a higher value of Spearman's rho with statement S-A ($S-A=+0.254$). Results can be seen also in the percentage distribution of respondents' answers according to gender when 89 % of women absolutely agree or agree with the first statement, but only 74 % of men absolutely agree or agree with this. In the second and third statements, the intensity of correlation between statements and gender is weakening ($S-B=+0.202$, $S-C=+0.159$). It means that also intensity of probability that the gender of the respondent can have an influence on agreement or disagreement with the second and third statements ($S-B$, $S-C$) is weak. Women and men differ in their values, role behaviors, and attitudes, but in the case of attitudes towards corporate social responsibility, we can't assume that gender is a determinant of consumers' perception of this initiative. Similar results were found in the case of age groups when a positive correlation coefficient was achieved, but values of Spearman's rho in all three statements are very low (S-

$A=+0.086$, $S-B=+0.025$, $S-C=+0.014$). It can be stated, that although there is a higher probability to have an agreeable opinion towards statements for younger respondents, the influence of age is only negligible.

In this regard, our findings are in line with many studies in the corporate social responsibility field that demonstrate that consumer demographic characteristics are no longer sufficient to characterize consumer behavior (Pérez and Bosque, 2015; Virvilaite and Daubaraitė, 2011). Thus, although in the past gender and age were determining factors in the perception of socially responsible companies, women and younger consumers were more socially concerned (Arlow, 1991). Consequently, nowadays both men and women, younger as well as older consumers in Slovakia are more conscious of the CSR activities importance.

Cause-related marketing (CrM) in companies is perceived as a part of socially responsible activities. Among all the socially responsible activities, it is very important for CrM campaigns how consumers react to them. If consumers do not actively participate in cause-related marketing, no benefits and no positive impact can be achieved. Concerning the third research question, the study examined if and how Slovak consumers perceive cause-related marketing as a tool of corporate social responsibility. It was important to identify, if consumers in Slovakia know as well as perceive cause-related marketing projects, and if they believe that these initiatives are beneficial in solving environmental and social problems.

To answer these questions two approaches were used. Firstly, cause-related marketing has been included in the list of socially responsible activities in which consumers can directly engage (but without a full description of CrM, only with the statement “*I buy a product associated with a good cause*”). According to research results, overall engagement in cause-related marketing is relatively high when almost 78 % of the respondents indicated that they have already participated in CrM campaigns. It is also important to note that about 10 % of them didn't believe that buying products from CrM can have a real beneficial effect in solving social or environmental problems. A high level of awareness and engagement in cause-related marketing shows potential in the Slovak market for using this type of marketing/CSR strategy. From the analyzed list of socially responsible activities, better results were achieved in three activities – waste sorting, efficient energy, and water use, and buying environmentally friendly products. The high engagement of respondents could relate to higher support from the government and education about these activities.

After the first part, respondents were briefly introduced to the topic of cause-related marketing, through basic information about this responsible marketing tool and its application in practice. Consumers were provided with a set of five statements. They had to express their agreement/disagreement with them on a 7-point Likert scale. The results regarding consumer opinions on cause-related marketing and its use by companies in Slovakia are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Consumers' perception of cause-related marketing

Statement / Scale	Absolutely agree	Agree	More agree than disagree	More disagree than agree	Disagree	Absolutely disagree	No attitude
S ₁ . If a company uses cause-related marketing, I perceive it as a socially responsible company.	20.0 %	34.9 %	34.2 %	6.5 %	2.4 %	0.2 %	1.7 %
S ₂ . A company using cause-related marketing has a better image than its competitors.	17.6 %	35.4 %	32.3 %	9.4 %	2.7 %	0.0 %	2.7 %
S ₃ . Cause-related marketing is an easy way, how to support a good cause.	20.2 %	34.5 %	34.9 %	6.3 %	1.4 %	1.0 %	1.7 %
S ₄ . I think cause-related marketing is mostly used to increase revenue and promote a company.	14.9 %	30.8 %	28.9 %	16.1 %	4.3 %	0.5 %	4.3 %
S ₅ . I perceive a risk that CrM donations may not be distributed to non-profits.	31.1 %	36.1 %	22.4 %	5.3 %	2.7 %	1.0 %	1.4 %

Source: Authors' own research

The statements S₁-S₃ are connected to benefits and positive attributes of cause-related marketing, through statements four and five were analyzed the perception of potential concerns (research questions four and five). The analysis of respondents' perception of socially responsible companies showed that it is important for consumers how companies are acting in business and if they are responsible for business processes. As we described in the theoretical background CrM is a manifestation of corporate social responsibility and helps companies to make their responsibility visible. This is the reason why is very important to identify if consumers understand, that CrM is one of the tools of the socially responsible behavior of companies. According to research results, about 89 % of respondents are considering cause-related marketing as a socially responsible behavior of companies – almost 55 % of them agree or absolutely agree with statement S₁. This result confirms the theoretical assumption about CrM helps enhance the reputation of a socially responsible company. The second statement (S₂) gained similar results when about 85 % of the respondents indicated that they perceive companies using CrM as more attractive – with a better image. With cause-related marketing is also associated simplicity. Almost 90 % of respondents indicated some level of agreement that they consider CrM as an easy way to support a cause or charitable idea (S₃). The simplicity of cause-related marketing is not a direct benefit for a company, but it can be understood as some potential motivation factor for consumers to engage in CrM campaigns.

Results supported theoretical but also our assumption that cause-related marketing is a way how a company can manifest its involvement in corporate social responsibility and make it visible on market. Companies may be motivated to use CrM to gain a better image on market. Consumers in Slovakia mostly agreed with the statement, that using this initiative makes a company's image more attractive than competitors. Mentioned research results are in line with findings from a global context. According to the Cone (2010) cause evolution study, 85 % of consumers have a more positive image of a company when it supports a good cause they care about. According to Sinčić Ćorić and Dropuljić (2015), the success of cause-related marketing projects is often influenced by the existence and pro-activity of socially conscious consumers who are willing to help others, not only satisfy their interests.

In combination with benefits, perceiving potential concerns associated with cause-related marketing was also analyzed. From the consumer's point of view, the motives for CrM project implementation and distributing gifts to non-profit partners can be considered the most significant skepticism. It is surprising that despite the positive perception of cause-related marketing among Slovak consumers, there is a relatively high level of skepticism towards this initiative. Positive perceiving appears to be accompanied by a certain degree of distrust since 45.7 % of the respondents indicated that absolutely agree (14.9 %) or agree (30.8 %) with the statement S₄, that companies use CrM mostly as a promotion tactic for pure profit motives. Ambiguous opinion has 28.9 % of respondents when they more agree than disagree. Likewise, 16.1 % of them more disagree than agree with statement S₄.

The worst results were obtained in connection with the statement S₅, when almost 90 % of the sample have concerns about fraudulent conduct by the company in manipulation with gained donations from cause-related marketing. It can be assumed that the results in this statement can relate to the high level of corruption in Slovakia and its perception by the Slovak people (Focus, 2015). It also can affect the perception of cause-related marketing, mostly in cases when is not allowed easy access to the information about the results from the campaign.

According to our research skepticism towards cause-related marketing is relatively high among Slovak consumers. Most dangerous is distrust in the transfer of donations to non-profit partners. Moosmayer and Fuljahn (2010) support the idea of higher donations, which are generally valued more positively than smaller ones. However, consumers who face CrM offer may often not believe that the company will really donate as much as promised. Thus, it is necessary to provide the consumers with truthful information to improve their familiarity with it but also to build a base for creating all campaigns more credible.

The Spearman Correlation Test was used to examine dependencies between demographic variables (gender, age) and respondents' answers to statements regarding cause-related marketing. According to Spearman correlation tests in both variables only weak dependency in relation to all five statements S₁ – S₅ was identified (**Table 4**).

Table 4. Correlation between demographic characteristics and statements

Demographic characteristics/ Statements	S ₁	S ₂	S ₃	S ₄	S ₅
Gender	.174	.163	.192	-.103	-.253
Age	.100	-	-	-	-

Source: Authors' results

The data in **Table 4** show the correlation intensity between demographic characteristics and the statements S₁ – S₅, assuming there is a statistically significant correlation between the correlated variables (p-value <0.05). All correlations reached a weak intensity. The most significant value of the correlation (non-linear) was achieved between respondents' gender and statement S₅. We can state there is a greater tendency among men to believe that cause-related marketing can be associated with fraud and misappropriation of funds raised for charitable purposes. In the case of gender, there was another non-linear correlation regarding statement S₄. This statement expresses skepticism about the reasons why companies use CrM in their practice. Concluded, male consumers are more skeptical about cause-related marketing and have less confidence in its transparency and selflessness of its goals. Ross *et al.* (1992) state that cause-related marketing of the common good has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes. Regarding gender, this influence is stronger on women than on men. Research by Witek (2016) also confirmed that more educated younger women

have more positive attitudes towards CrM. On the other hand, although there is a dependency, the impact of gender in forming consumers' perception of cause-related marketing is not significant, which was confirmed by Moosmayer and Fuljahn (2010) and it also corresponds to our results.

A weak correlation with age was observed in statement S₁ only. Generally, younger consumers tend to agree that companies using cause-related marketing can be considered socially responsible. Galan-Ladero *et al.* (2015) also note that consumers aged between 22 and 30 years of age are most sensitive to CrM. Similarly, Youn and Kim (2008) refer to studies showing that young consumers are more receptive to CrM projects, compared to older consumers. According to Cui *et al.* (2003), younger consumers are more inclined to buy products promoted by CrM. Limited research has shown some benefits for Millennials (born between 1985 and 1999) concerning to CrM (Cosgrave and O'Dwyer, 2020). However, Zapata-Ramos and Kim (2018) point out that Millennials may have different perceptions of cause-related marketing.

The research aimed to collect basic information on the issue of cause-related marketing and to find out whether CrM as an innovative CSR tool has the potential to be used in companies in Slovakia. This research was the first of its type in our conditions. The results will be followed by further, more detailed investigations of consumer behavior and the behavior of companies in this area. Positive consumer perception of companies that engage in socially responsible activities was demonstrated. The partial research results confirmed that CrM is perceived as a responsible marketing tool and there are sufficient possibilities for its practical application in companies. Consumers consider cause-related marketing a suitable tool to support a "good cause". The findings are relevant for all companies that want to plan their future CrM activities. However, complex and consistent responsible behavior in all business activities can strengthen positive consumer perception, not only occasional one-time support of a selected "good cause" within cause-related marketing.

5. Conclusion

The CSR concept has been investigated by many researchers from different perspectives, from general and specialized areas. From all these points of view, corporate social responsibility is understood as a business initiative with growing importance. However, to help achieve the desired impact socially responsible efforts of the company must be communicated to the stakeholders. Among all stakeholders gain special position consumers. Their positive perceptions of corporate social responsibility and increasing support from them can be in future transformed into many economic and marketing benefits for companies. One of the innovative and effective CSR tools is cause-related marketing. It offers direct benefits which fulfill the social and altruist responsibilities of the company, make its responsibility visible, demonstrate the company's values, satisfy its objectives, and enhance its desired position in consumers' minds.

The conducted primary research of 415 respondents aged 15 - 65 years provided basic and unique insight into corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing in Slovakia. Firstly, the Slovak consumers' perception of socially responsible companies and CSR importance was examined. The important finding is that consumers perceive corporate social responsibility as a differentiation point in the market when they consider socially responsible companies as more trustworthy and attractive than competitors.

It is noteworthy that neither gender nor age significantly affects general consumer perception of socially responsible companies. According to statistical results, it can be stated that consumers' reaction toward CSR depends on different factors than basic demographics. Similar findings were recorded relating to the perception of cause-related marketing. Consumers in the questionnaire survey have confirmed the positive perception of CrM as a way of companies' responsible behavior. According to them, the implementation of CrM projects contributes to building a positive image of companies. The advantage of CrM projects for consumers may be the simplicity of their engagement. On the contrary, a high degree of skepticism was expressed by consumers regarding the risk that donations from the CrM project may not be distributed to non-profit partners. Concerning the motives of companies to implement a CrM project, the "business" motives of the companies were mainly criticized and unconvincing to consumers (e.g. increased revenue or company promotion).

Companies should provide transparent communication about CrM campaigns and their results using a variety of sources and evidence about cooperation with non-profit partners. The research results indicated that cause-related marketing can create a competitive advantage for companies that adopt it and help enhance better image and reputation of socially responsible companies. Aimed good results campaigns must be carefully planned, implemented, and controlled to reduce consumers' skepticism and achieve positive perception.

This study was limited mainly to the general perception of cause-related marketing as a tool of corporate social responsibility in Slovakia. It was initial research regarding the novelty of the CrM topic and its so far only less frequent use in business practice. Our findings have a unique character in the context of the Slovak market and consumers and confirm the existence of the high potential of cause-related marketing as a responsible marketing tool. Future research could be focused on a deeper and more detailed understanding of cause-related marketing by companies and factors influencing its successful implementation, positive consumers' attitudes, and their willingness to engage in CrM campaigns.

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