

## CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT ON REPUTATION AND CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR

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**Abstract.** In a modern world sustainable business development is the adaptation of strategies and actions in order to meet the needs of the organization and society for nature conservation, social welfare and economy. Increasing concern for environmental and social issues commit business to take responsibility and adopt sustainable development principles into strategic management. The research on corporate sustainability examined in this article shows significant relationship of sustainable business between the company's reputation and customers behaviour, while brand image takes the mediating role on all of them. The following theoretical model was created: the impact of corporate sustainability on customer perceived corporate reputation and customer buying decision behaviour shows the relation between these determinants.

**Key words.** *Corporate sustainability, corporate reputation, customer behaviour, impact, theoretical modelling.*

### Introduction

In today's global world sustainability is getting an increasing attention in academic and business fields. Facing nowadays' challenges, corporate sustainability plays an important role in sustainable development. Rising concern for environmental and social issues commits business to take responsibility and adopt sustainable development principles into strategic management. It can be stated that sustainability and corporate social responsibility have become an integrated part of business activity. The adoption of these principles into activity is a complex process, companies must find the best tools to implement them in order to achieve goals in all aspects of sustainability: economic, social and environmental in relation to profit maximization goal. It has been noticed that sustainable business management can benefit companies by creating tangible and intangible advantages: revenue, market share growth, new market entry, positive word-of mouth and competitive advantage. Also, it has an impact on corporate reputation and customer behavior.

Recently corporate sustainability and responsibility have been discussed in academics. The following issues have been analyzed: the impact on performance, innovation (Martinez-Conesa, Soto-Acosta, Palacios-Manzano, 2016; Lopez-Perez, Melero, Sese, 2017; Stoian, Gilman, 2017), enterprise sustainability and performance measurement (Searcy, 2016; Landrum, 2018; Wilson, 2015), sustainable management and business models for sustainability (Schaltegger, Hansen, Lüdeke-Freund, 2016; Baumgartner, Rauter, 2015; Evans and others, 2017). Some scholars investigate different areas of sustainability and responsibility different impact, such as the impact on reputation, branding (Abratt; Kleyn, 2012; Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Zabkar, 2017), customer loyalty and trust (Green, Pelozo, 2014; Wang, 2018; Wiederhold, Martinez, 2018; Boccia, Sarnacchiaro, 2018, Lee, Chang, Lee, 2017). However, it is noticed that the research of impact on customer behaviour (like purchase decision and other aspects), reputation are not common.

**The scientific problem** – how corporate sustainability impacts reputation and customer behaviour.

**The object of the article** - the impact of sustainability on reputation and customer behaviour

**The aim of the article** – to identify corporate sustainability impact on reputation and customer behaviour.

To achieve the aim, **the following four objectives** were set:

1. To analyze the concept of sustainability and its implementation;
2. To identify the coherence between sustainability, reputation and customer behaviour;
3. To evaluate corporate sustainability impact on reputation and customer behavior, based on the empirical research
4. Based on theoretical and empirical aspects, to create a model that determines the impact of corporate sustainability on company's reputation and customer behaviour.

**The methods of the article** – analysis, synthesis, classification, theoretical modeling.

## 1. Theoretical aspects of corporate sustainability impact on reputation and customer behavior

Recently corporate sustainability has gained an important attention in business and academic fields. Facing 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, business must consider implementation of sustainable and socially responsible principles into everyday business activities. According to I. Martinez-Conesa, P. Soto-Acosta, M. Palacios-Manzano (2016), corporate sustainability is a tool to gain competitive advantage and is extremely important to company's survival. Many authors agree that sustainable business practice may impact tangible and intangible advantages. Before the analysis of impact areas, the concept of corporate sustainability is discussed (1 table).

**Table 1**

**The concept of corporate sustainability**

Author	Year	Concept
Formentini, Taticchi (qt. Hassini. 2012)	2016	Business ability to conduct business with a long-term goal of maintaining the well-being of the economy, environment and society
Schaltegger, Hansen, Lüdeke-Freund	2016	Business management that deals with social, environmental and economic issues in an integrated manner to transform organizations in a way that they contribute to the sustainable development of the economy and society, within the limits of the ecosystem
Searcy	2016	A long-term business focus, promoting inter- and intra-generational equity, considering stakeholder needs and addressing the triple bottom line: economic, environmental and social performance
Landrum (qt. Vieser, 2011)	2018	An integrated, systemic approach by business that builds, rather than erodes or destroys, economic, social, human and natural capital

Source: created by the authors according to Formentini, Taticchi, Schaltegger, Hansen, Lüdeke-Freund, Searcy, Landrum

According to Table 1, corporate sustainability is defined in similar way and shows that it includes a long-term focus, promoting inter and intra generational equity. N.Landrum (2018) uses Vieser's (2011) definition and states that it is an integrated business activity, which saves economic, social, human and natural capital. C. Searcy (2016) presents a different view and defines it as long-term approach, implemented in three main areas: economic, social and environmental, which ensures generations equity and adds the importance of stakeholders' needs consideration. In M. Formentini and P. Taticchi (2016) article, the corporate sustainability concept is defined as business ability to achieve long-term business goals in relation to maintenance of society, environment and economic well-being. Schaltegger, Hansen, Lüdeke-Freund (2016) also emphasize three areas, stating that it is the business management that contributes to welfare of society, economy and ecosystem. After the analysis of the concepts, corporate sustainability can be defined as long-term business activity, implemented in economic, social and environmental areas, which ensure stakeholders' needs and future generations' equity. This concept will be followed in the article.

Sustainability is a broad and complex concept. According to R. J. Baumgartner, R. Rauter (2015), the management and implementation of sustainability are combined with corporate environmental management, corporate social responsibility (following in the article CSR) and sustainability reporting. C. Stoian and M. Gilman (2017) in their article claim that usually CSR is an important key to ensure corporate sustainability. M. E. López-Pérez; I. Melero; F. J. Sese (2017) also state that CRS is a key to ensure sustainability. Considering this fact, in the analysis of sustainability impact on reputation and customer behaviour, CRS as the element of sustainable business is also used in the article. Both concepts rely on three main dimensions, which are also emphasized in the concept, in Table 1 : social, economic and environment Fig. 1).



Source: created by authors according to Paužolienė (2010); Wilson (2015), Evans and others (2017)

**Fig. 1. Sustainable and socially responsible business areas and principles**

According to Fig. 1, sustainable and socially responsible business is based on three main domains: social, economic and environmental. Economic initiatives are implemented in market and involve ethical competition, marketing activities, sustainable supply chain and innovations management, all these activities are combined with profit maximization. Social initiatives occur in society (business engage in local community integration, contribution to community activities and collaboration with local communities (universities, etc.) and work environment (guarantee of safe and healthy workplace conditions, employees' equity and rights, labour standards and fair salary system, abilities to improve competence skills). Environmental activity management involves business efforts to minimize negative impact on ecosystems and effective waste management. As has already been stated, CSR initiatives that are based on the same three domains embrace company's efforts to manage business in a sustainable way. According to J. Paužolienė (2010), all three aspects are equally important and have to be harmonized in business strategic management. In long-term conditions, sustainable business not only contribute to sustainable country development, but also improve economic performance.

The implementation of sustainability and CSR principles into everyday business activities can benefit in some ways. The most important part is to decide in which areas and activities company has to engage in order to create the value for all stakeholders (Baumgartner, Rauter, 2015). Nowadays sustainable business management is understood as strategic investment that creates long-term positive results. The tangible and intangible impact areas, usually met in the academic literature can be classified into external and internal impact (Baumgartner, Rauter, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Pérez; Melero; Sese, 2017; Landrum, 2018):

1) internal - cost reduction, profit and revenue growth; human resources management, productivity growth;

2) external - new market entry, competitive advantage, reputation and image, customer behaviour and loyalty, brand image. It may be observed that one of the impact areas is marked out in customer behaviour and reputation aspects. These components and their coherence with sustainability and CSR are discussed further in the article.

Good corporate reputation is a valuable, unique and irreplaceable intangible asset that can help improve the company's financial performance and increase market share (Lee, Roh, 2012), marketing efficiency, customer satisfaction and quantity, reduce risk, and make it easier for new businesses to start funding (Ma, Osiyevkyy, 2017). Corporate reputation has never been more valuable or more vulnerable than nowadays. It is hard to keep a good reputation when the Internet is open for everyone and news media reports are constantly changing - corporates cannot hide mistakes that can affect reputation. Creating a valuable brand is becoming expensive, it is difficult to maintain product differentiation, customer loyalty is unstable or diminishing, and organizations are more closely controlled by stakeholders – in this situation CSR and ethical behavior are crucial (Dowling, Moran, 2012; Abratt, Kleyn, 2012). According to M. Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and V. Zabkar (2017),

communication related to CSR has a positive and significant impact on the customer's perceived value. On the other hand, any unethical behavior may seriously damage or even destroy a good corporate reputation and usually has bigger impact on reputation and customer awareness than positive sustainable activity and engagement in CSR initiatives.

Another analyzed impact area is customer behaviour. Customer decision process is influenced by external (macroeconomic, situational, social) and internal (psychological, personal, demographical) factors. According to F. Boccia and P. Sarnacchiaro (2018), nowadays consumers tend to evaluate ethical, socially responsible corporate behaviour and regard it as one of the criteria in buying decision process. It cannot be denied that all the mentioned factors affect customer behavior. However, social and personal factors (such as age, gender, CSR awareness) are more important when customer makes the decision to buy sustainable and socially responsible product (Wiederhold, Martinez, 2018; Boccia, Sarnacchiaro, 2018). In accordance to Wang (2018), Wiederhold, Martinez, (2018), customer awareness about CSR, the level of control also play an important role. This means that customers make the decision based on the information they have about sustainable business activities, on the understanding about CSR and how responsible behaviour influence positive changes on the society and environment. Considering this fact, it can be stated that companies should communicate about these activities and choose the best tools to reach their target audience. Sustainability and CSR can affect customer decision to choose responsible company, in some cases it may also impact customer willingness to pay higher price for socially responsible product. Sustainability may as well impact customer perceived reputation of a company, create company loyalty, and increase satisfaction (Boccia, Sarnacchiaro, 2018). It should be mentioned that sustainability and CSR affect customer in two ways: direct involvement through buying process and loyalty formation, as well as indirect way – image and opinion formation. It is agreed that nowadays consumer is more conscious and pays attention to the sustainability issues and CSR affects behaviour in some positive ways. However, as T. Green; J. Pelozo (2014) states, negative initiatives and unethical behaviour have a bigger impact than sustainable activities and form scepticism among customers.

*Summarizing theoretical aspects, it must be noted that sustainability is defined as long-term business activity, implemented in economic, social and environmental areas, which ensure stakeholders' needs and future generations' equity. Corporate sustainability is especially important to company future if companies want to ensure stakeholders' needs and future generations' equity. Sustainable business management is implemented through environmental management and CSR activities, which are key elements of sustainability. In accordance to increasing consumer consciousness, it is undeniable that sustainability has an impact on corporate reputation and customers' perceived value. It also influences customer behaviour and buying decision, CSR and sustainability have significant impact on consumer alternative selection when company's values match customers' beliefs and CSR perception. This brings the assumption that company should communicate about activities in order to reach target audience. Unethical actions have negative impact on customer behaviour as well as reputation and commonly is even more influential than ethical and responsible company behaviour. Further section focuses on the analysis of empirical research.*

## **2. Empirical research of sustainability impact on reputation and customer behaviour analysis**

Theoretical part revealed that one of the external impact areas of sustainable business management are reputation and customer behaviour. The effect of sustainable business performance can have positive and negative impact - it can boost corporate and brand reputation and influence customer buying decision when company behaves ethically or destroy reputation and customer willingness to choose company and its products when company manages business unethically. However, despite increasing attention to sustainability and CSR issues, there is not much research in this field. Usually research investigates sustainability, CSR impact on company performance, competitive advantage, when reputation and customer satisfaction are only one of the components. There is not much research of impact on customer behaviour, also notices that a lot of research is conducted through

CSR lens. This determines the need of the corporate sustainability impact on reputation and customer behaviour research. Before the theoretical modelling, some empirical research is analyzed. The main results are shown in Table 2 .

**Table 2**

**Summary of empirical research results**

<b>Author (year)</b>	<b>Research area/object</b>	<b>Core results</b>
Lee, Chang, Lee (2017)	An investigation of the effects of CSR on corporate reputation and customer loyalty in non-life insurance industry	CSR has significantly positive influence on corporate reputation, customer loyalty and brand image. Brand image takes the mediating role on all of them.
Arslanagic-Kalajdzic Zabkar (2017)	The role of corporate reputation and CSR between business customers and professional service providers.	Corporate reputation may be a perfect way for transferring the CSR effects on perceived customers' value.
Yasin, Bozbay (2015)	Relationship between Corporate Reputation and Customer Trust	Customers are more trustful towards firms that support good environmental and social issues

Source: created by the authors.

C. Y. Lee, W. C Chang, H. C. Lee (2017) research shows relation among CSR, corporate reputation and customer loyalty in the non-life insurance industry. Correlation model indicates that corporate reputation is related to CSR and their interrelation is very reasonable (0,758, where significance starts from 0,001). However, the model shows that brand image has a partial mediation between CSR and corporate reputation, it means that CSR can affect corporate reputation through brand image. Customer loyalty also has significant relationship with CSR (0,740, where significance starts from 0,001) and brand image also has partial mediation of CSR and customer loyalty. So, it shows that engagement in CSR activities increase customer perceived corporate reputation and customer loyalty and brings the assumption that customers are more likely to buy socially responsible and sustainable product and repeat their buying decision in the future.

Yasin, B. and Bozbay, Z. (2015) conducted research to analyze relationship between customer-based corporate reputation and customer trust related to a GSM operator in telecommunication industry in Turkey. The authors concluded that all dimensions of customer-based corporate reputation impact customer trust. As significant dimensions, which have impact on trust, the following are listed: social and environmental responsibility, product and service quality, customer orientation, reliability, financial conditions and good employer dimensions. According to research, social and environmental responsibility is the most important. Nowadays customers are very consciousness and responsible, therefore it is very important that company care about environment they are working at, such as ensuring that the environment in their operations and activities would be clean. So, the authors have concluded that companies should emphasize efforts on supporting socially and environmentally responsible activities, such as sponsorships of environmental causes, because customers would be more trustful towards firms that support good environmental and social issues.

Research conducted by Arslanagic-Kalajdzic M. and Zabkar V. (2017) analyzed the role of corporate reputation and CSR between business customers and professional service providers from a developing European country. Scientists measured the perceived CSR, perceived corporate reputation and customer-perceived functional value. All three subjects had perfect compound reliability: corporate reputation may be a perfect way for transferring the CSR effects on perceived customers' value. Well-communicated CSR activities take advantageous customer approach, support behavior, also helps to establish stronger relationships with customers. Separated communication between customers who are of long-term importance and customers who are short-term importance, gain higher perceived value in both and could result in favorable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Corporate reputation is a mix of various effects over a certain period of time, for this reason, long term orientation of a company (when corporate reputation is stable or growing) increases effect on perceived value for customers with long term strategic orientation.

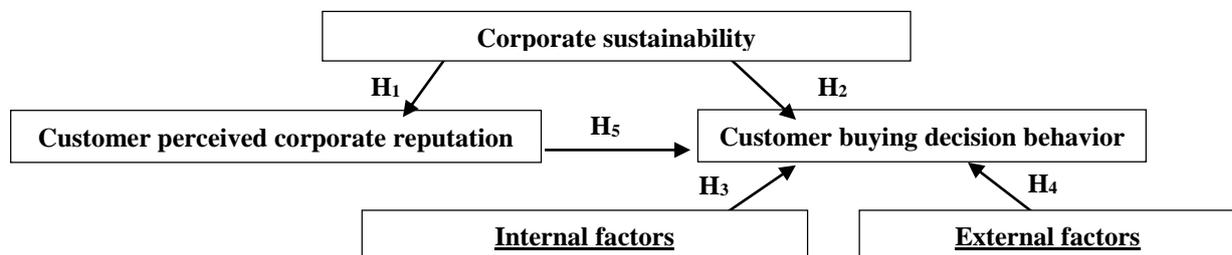
Summarizing the analysis of empirical research, it is noticed that despite the fact that there is not much research on the sustainability impact on customer behavior and reputation, reflect the aspects analyzed in the theoretical part. The Research revealed that nowadays sustainable and socially responsible business practices are extremely important to customers as they become more conscious and sustainable-aware. Analyzed authors' research summarized that CSR initiatives (environmental as well as social (in workplace and society) effect brand image, forms positive customer behaviour and increase customer trust. It also helps to build stronger relationship with customer and forms loyalty to company. This shows that CSR in some way also impacts customer willingness to choose socially responsible product in the future. Further theoretical model for the research is presented and possible future research directions are discussed.

### 3. Theoretic model of the impact of corporate sustainability on company reputation and customer behaviour

Summarizing theoretical and empirical information analyzed in the article, it can be stated that that growing attention to sustainable development not only obligates business enterprises to take responsibility and profit maximization goal combine with sustainable business principles, but also impacts customer behaviour. Recently customers have become more sustainable aware and more often include sustainable and socially responsible activity as one of the criteria in their purchase decision making process. These trends and lack of research in this area (especially in Lithuania) bring the assumption to analyze how sustainability influence customer behaviour and corporate reputation in more details. For this reason, the theoretical model for future research is presented.

Source: created by the authors.

**Fig. 2 Theoretical model of sustainability impact on reputation and customer behaviour**



As it is seen in the model in Fig. 2 three main determinants are excluded: corporate sustainability, customer perceived corporate reputation and customer buying decision (customer behaviour domain was narrowed to purchase intention considering the lack of research of this impact area and the importance to investigate if customer tend to add it as one of the purchase criteria). The first part discusses and classifies external and internal factors that affect customer decision.. According to the model 5 hypothesis, the following are promoted:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Corporate sustainability will positively influence impact customer perceived corporate reputation.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Corporate sustainability will positively affect impact customer buying decision behavior.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Customer perceived corporate reputation will positively impact customer buying decision.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** External factors will not impact customer buying decision behavior.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** Internal factors will positively impact customer buying decision behavior.

Considering the theoretical and empirical assumptions, the model shows that corporate sustainability, corporate reputation and internal factors, such as demographics (age, gender) or psychological (perception, knowledge) are more important for customer buying decision than external factors, for instance social, situational or environmental. The model is determined to show the value of sustainability for company and to test the importance of it to customer buying behaviour and reputation, which also leads to long-term relationship The authors suggest to conduct the

*research involving two companies: one must have corporate sustainability program and another does not engage in sustainable activity. In this way there is a possibility to investigate the links between corporate sustainability, reputation and impact on customer buying behavior, the perception of customer perceived value and importance of sustainable activity. It is also possible to expand the model with new determinants and investigate how corporate sustainability communication impact customer behaviour and perception, test how demographics impact sustainability perception, willingness to choose sustainable products and investigate what initiatives are important to customers.*

## **Conclusions**

1. The analysis of the concept of sustainability and its implementation showed that it is defined as long-term business activity, implemented in economic, social, environmental areas, that ensures stakeholders' needs and future generations' equity. Sustainability management consists of environmental management, reporting and CSR activity, which is understood as key element of effort to behave in a sustainable way. Both concepts rely on three domains: economic, social and environmental, which are equally important. Important decision for enterprise is to choose the activities that have actual positive impact on company, as well as all stakeholders;
2. The identification of the coherence between sustainability, reputation and customer behaviour revealed that nowadays consumers are conscious and it is undeniable that sustainability has an impact on corporate reputation and customer's perceived value. It also influences customer behaviour in two ways - buying decision process and formation of customer opinion and perception about the company. Therefore, company should communicate about sustainable activities and choose most effective marketing in order to reach target audience.
3. The analysis of empirical research revealed the significant relationship between corporate sustainable and socially responsible activities, company's reputation and customer behaviour, while brand image takes the mediating role on all of them. Moreover, customers trust companies that support environmental and social issues, then they are more loyal and more likely to repeat purchase.
4. The created model, based on theoretical and empirical aspects, shows close relationship among corporate sustainability, customer perceived corporate reputation and customer buying decision behavior. This model reveals less importance of external factors such as social, situational, macroeconomic, cultural and high importance of internal factors such as demographic and psychological to customer buying decision behavior.

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