



CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FAST FASHION TEXTILE INDUSTRY: CONCERN OR SIMULATION?

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Summary

The term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) despite being a topic that is booming due to the interest in being studied and applied by companies, the bases of this term are very old. Since ancient Greece and Rome, there were indications of principles such as charity and philanthropy to govern people's actions and do social good. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Freud, Sartre and theorists of economic and business sciences such as Pacioli, Smith, Nash, among others, are some of those who studied topics related to Corporate Social Responsibility in their time, for example, the possible improvements to sustain economic growth, the social conditions required for human life, human greed and its effects, etc. (Cancino & Morales, 2008).

But it was not until the 60s where, according to Martínez in (Duarte, 2015), the concept of Social Responsibility emerged in the United States, due to the Vietnam War, Apartheid, among other conflicts that caused citizen movements where they began to demand changes in international trade and the involvement of companies in social problems. Since then,

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there are more and more movements and concern on the part of society that have caused companies to see the need to implement Social Responsibility strategies.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, Marketing, Greenwashing, sustainability, Fast Fashion.

RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL EMPRESARIAL EN LA INDUSTRIA TEXTIL DEL FAST FASHION: ¿PREOCUPACIÓN O SIMULACIÓN?

Resumen

El término de Responsabilidad Social Empresarial (RSE) a pesar de ser un tema que está en auge debido al interés de ser estudiado y aplicado por las empresas, las bases de este término son muy antiguas. Desde la antigua Grecia y Roma, se dieron indicios de principios como la caridad y la filantropía para regir el actuar de las personas y hacer el bien social. Filósofos como Aristóteles, Platón, Freud, Sartre y teóricos de las ciencias económicas y empresariales como Pacioli, Smith, Nash, entre otros, son algunos de los que estudiaron temas relacionados con la Responsabilidad Social Empresarial en su época, por ejemplo, las posibles mejoras para sostener el crecimiento económico, las condiciones sociales requeridas para la vida humana, la avaricia humana y sus efectos, etc. (Cancino & Morales, 2008).

Pero no fue hasta en los años 60s donde según Martínez en (Duarte, 2015) surge el concepto de Responsabilidad Social en estados unidos, debido a la guerra de Vietnam, el Apartheid, entre otros conflictos que provocaron movimientos de ciudadanos donde se comienza a reclamar cambios en el comercio internacional y la implicación de las empresas en los problemas sociales. Desde entonces, son cada vez más los movimientos y la preocupación por parte de la sociedad lo que ha generado que las empresas se vean en la necesidad de implementar estrategias de Responsabilidad Social.

Palabras clave: Responsabilidad Social Empresarial, Sostenibilidad, Marketing, Greenwashing, sustentabilidad, Fast Fashion.

RESPONSABILIDADE SOCIAL CORPORATIVA NA INDÚSTRIA TÊXIL FAST FASHION: PREOCUPAÇÃO OU SIMULAÇÃO?

Resumo:

O termo Responsabilidade Social Corporativa (RSE) apesar de ser um tema que está em franca expansão devido ao interesse em ser estudado e aplicado pelas empresas, as bases deste termo são muito antigas. Desde a Grécia e Roma antigas, houve indicações de princípios como a caridade e a filantropia para reger as ações das pessoas e fazer o bem social. Filósofos como Aristóteles, Platão, Freud, Sartre e teóricos das ciências econômicas e empresariais como Pacioli, Smith, Nash, entre outros, são alguns dos que estudaram temas relacionados à Responsabilidade Social Corporativa em sua época, por exemplo, as possíveis melhorias para sustentar o crescimento econômico, as condições sociais necessárias à vida humana, a ganância humana e os seus efeitos, etc. (Cancino & Morales, 2008).

Mas foi só na década de 60 que, segundo Martínez em (Duarte, 2015), surgiu o conceito de Responsabilidade Social nos Estados Unidos, devido à Guerra do Vietname, ao Apartheid, entre outros conflitos que provocaram movimentos de cidadãos onde começaram a exigir mudanças no comércio internacional e o envolvimento das empresas nos problemas sociais. Desde então, são cada vez mais os movimentos e preocupações por parte da sociedade que têm feito com que as empresas enxerguem a necessidade de implementar estratégias de Responsabilidade Social.

Palavras chave: Responsabilidade Social Corporativa, Sustentabilidade, Marketing, Greenwashing, sustentabilidade, Fast Fashion.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Over time, the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved and expanded, considering not only economic and social aspects but also environmental ones (Duarte, 2015). This research will focus on the environmental aspects of CSR to showcase the actions taken by some companies in the textile industry to reduce the negative impact caused over the years on the planet. This includes discarded clothing, water pollution, the significant consumption of water for clothing production, the use of toxic chemicals, and textile waste.

According to Castro (2021), the textile industry, after the oil industry, is considered the most polluting and harmful to the environment due to its massive production and consumption, as well as planned obsolescence and perceived obsolescence. Planned obsolescence determines the product's lifespan, while perceived obsolescence occurs when consumers tire of products and seek replacements, even if the items still have useful life.

Marketing, advertising, photography, modeling, window dressing, and other professional areas have contributed to creating this desire in consumers to buy irrationally, far exceeding the actual need to purchase clothing simply for wearing.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Just as marketing has contributed to generating behaviors that harm the environment, it can also implement strategies and tactics for marketing products and services produced sustainably, encouraging consumers to make conscious and responsible purchases. This type of marketing is known as sustainable marketing, green marketing, or eco-marketing, and is closely related to Corporate Social Responsibility. Sustainable marketing is broader than traditional marketing, as it not only addresses the needs of customers but also considers the needs of everyone involved with the company, society, and the environment (Sabuquillo, 2021).

However, some believe that these actions are merely simulations used by brands, as an increasing number of consumers are aware of the impact textile industry companies have on the planet and choose to buy from

those that are genuinely taking measures or join the Second Hand trend. In this trend, consumers sell their clothes to other consumers, or small businesses sell second-hand products that are still in usable condition.

As a result, some companies engage in short-term strategies or campaigns to present an image of sustainability and deceive consumers. These strategies are known as greenwashing, and the NGO Greenpeace, in "Greenwashing in the Fashion Industry" (2022), describes it as deceiving consumers into perceiving the company's products and objectives as environmentally friendly.

Examples of these strategies include promoting products or services as environmentally friendly when the company's main activities are not sustainable, presenting as an achievement any environmental practices that are legally regulated, and using false labels, phrases, images, or certifications to mislead consumers into believing that products are non-polluting when they are not, which is very common in the textile industry (Duarte, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research is of an exploratory descriptive nature, investigating, through the review of specialized literature such as academic articles, magazines, videos, and theses, how the textile industry has negatively impacted the planet, the influence of marketing and advertising on the excessive acquisition of clothing, and how some companies have implemented actions and campaigns to minimize these impacts. The purpose is to identify whether these actions reflect a genuine concern by the companies to generate change or are merely simulations to attract consumer attention.

CASE STUDIES OF COMPANIES SHOWING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

H&M. This Swedish brand launched the "Go green wear blue" campaign (H&M, 2014) eight years ago when it committed to environmental sustainability. The campaign renewed the brand's image, giving it a more human perspective by showing changes in its manufacturing process that use less water, less energy, and fewer treatments to reduce its environmental impact (Sabuquillo, 2021).

A year later, H&M released a new campaign to promote clothing recycling, emphasizing the freedom to dress as one wishes but with one rule: "recycle your clothes." The video "There are no rules in fashion but one: Recycle your clothes" (H&M, 2015) features people of various ages, races, social classes, and styles, thus addressing a social issue and trying to create awareness that everyone can dress as they wish, but should do so respecting the environment (Sabuquillo, 2021).

In 2016, the brand launched its largest sustainability campaign, "H&M World Recycle Week featuring M.I.A." (H&M, 2016), aiming to raise awareness about environmental issues. The campaign invited people to join the movement to protect the planet by giving discarded clothes a second chance, communicating that they could bring unused clothes to any of their over 3,600 stores to be reused or turned into new textile fibers. For this campaign, H&M contracted the artist M.I.A. to write the song "Rewear it" exclusively for the brand's campaign (Sabuquillo, 2021).

On the other hand, the brand's communication regarding its sustainability can be contrasted with its sustainability reports. In her work "Greenwashing in the Fashion Industry" (2022), García analyzes H&M's reports and describes how the brand uses vague and ambiguous language, noting this as a characteristic of brands engaging in greenwashing. She also mentions that the brand only highlights the "more sustainable" features of its products, questioning what "more sustainable" means, and adds that the eco-labels on its garments are created by the brand itself without third-party certification.

Another reason García mentions in her research to believe that H&M is engaging in greenwashing is the lack of evidence in the disclosed information. She adds that the information regarding environmental, social, financial, and governance standards is complicated and difficult to understand on their website (García, 2022).

ZARA. On the official website of this brand, there is a section called "Join Life," which leads to a page featuring a video that states sustainability at Zara began 20 years ago as a tool to improve their products, guide their decisions, and reduce their impact to

achieve a positive future. It also mentions that they aim to achieve this by improving their processes, seeking better materials in collaboration with like-minded suppliers, and achieving zero emissions by 2040. They plan to start with eco-efficient stores and warehouses using renewable energy and a circular solutions initiative with the "Zara Pre-Owned" platform to extend the life of their products. After the video, a list of commitments to "be more sustainable" is presented, as well as a list of milestones the brand has reached (ZARA, n.d.).

However, despite having this section on their website, it is not easy to find campaigns or advertisements about this commitment or vision mentioned by the brand. Martín, in his research (Communication of sustainability of major Spanish and Italian fast fashion brands: Zara, Mango, Calzedonia, and OVS. Differences between online and physical points of sale, 2019), mentions that in Zara stores, the sustainable Join Life line garments are mixed with other clothes without any distinguishing signage. The only differentiation is the labels on these garments.

It is worth noting that regarding Zara's "Join Life" sustainability commitment, there is a video on YouTube that is not on the brand's official page but refers to this campaign. It reiterates that the textile industry is the second most polluting for the environment, polyester is the most used fiber for making clothes globally, and it takes more than 200 years to decompose. Natural fibers like cotton consume the most pesticides and insecticides, affecting land and water. Even organic cotton uses over 5,000 gallons of water in the process to create clothing, which is compared to the amount of water a person drinks over 10 to 20 years of their life, and 85% of these garments end up in the trash, generating more pollution. The video also provides information about Zara's "Join Life" campaign, matching the brand's claims on its website and highlighting some of the actions they are taking (Zara Store, 2022).

On the other hand, Zara has been accused and criticized for greenwashing, as it has not made any real changes to its business practices. The brand uses chemicals in its processes, consumes a lot of energy, fails to address the issue of textile waste, and has been accused of using recycled materials without disclosing it to consumers. Additionally, Zara has faced

allegations of underpaying workers and employing refugee minors. Therefore, while the brand takes actions to reduce its environmental impact, these efforts are insufficient and even irrelevant compared to the overall damage caused, such as the implementation of paper and/or fabric bags (Márquez, 2022).

LEVI'S. The main characteristic of this brand is its quality in terms of durability. On its website, in a sustainability section, it states that quality is the first step toward sustainability. If a garment is highly durable, it will last for many years and pass through more than one owner before reaching the end of its useful life and being discarded. Levi's mantra is "Buy better. Wear longer," and the company highlights innovations in the manufacturing of its garments, such as the use of cottonized hemp and other techniques to use fewer resources and generate less waste. Levi's even mentions that its philosophy of durability goes beyond daily use, as its products are designed to improve with age (Levi Strauss & Co., n.d.).

Regarding advertising spots, searches reveal official brand videos featuring talks with activist influencers, fashion designers, and Levi's team members.

In the first talk, the topic of sustainability is discussed, including what it is and the difference between sustainability and other practices. They talk about actions consumers can take to reduce pollution, the actions Levi's is taking, and the benefits of practices like recycling, reusing, and reinventing fashion. They also explain greenwashing and how some companies implement strategies to attract consumers by making small changes in some manufacturing processes or promoting the care and recycling of clothing, without making a real change (Levi's, 2020).

The second talk focuses more on the issue of water. It reveals that creating a single garment requires an enormous amount of water, as mentioned earlier in the research. They discuss actions consumers can take, such as washing their clothes less frequently, wearing them 3 or 4 times before washing, and even cleaning Levi's garments by placing them in the freezer overnight and wiping them down with a cloth. The talk also explains the methods Levi's uses to reduce water consumption, including having plants to clean the water used in the washing process and holding a patent on a method to reduce water use in manufacturing. In this

second video, a Levi's employee admits that the brand is not 100% sustainable and that there is still much to do, but sustainability is a core value and a plan they aim to achieve in the coming years, unlike other companies that mention much longer timelines in their sustainability reports (Levi's, Sustainability Talks, Edition 2: Water in the Fashion Industry | Levi's@ Mexico, 2020).

In a third video, they revisit the concept of sustainability and describe why Levi's is becoming a sustainable brand, addressing not only environmental issues but also social responsibility with its employees. The video mentions that cotton, despite being natural, is one of the raw materials that most affects the environment due to the pesticides and other chemicals used in its cultivation and the amount of water it requires. Many people, like influencer Yuya, believe cotton is environmentally friendly because it is natural. Therefore, the talk emphasizes the importance of being informed and conscious about which products are truly environmentally friendly. Levi's also offers garment repair services at low costs and promotes this practice, encouraging people to repair or repurpose their clothes instead of discarding them. At the end of the video, they highlight the importance of not only having awareness and practicing sustainability in the fashion industry but also in all aspects of life, such as buying reusable products, recycling, and being informed about the production of all products to ensure they are environmentally friendly. This is something everyone should practice (Levi's, 2020).

4. RESULTS:

The topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is not new. However, due to climate changes, globalization, and technology, it is now easier for consumers to recognize when companies engage in actions that harm the environment and society. This, along with various movements and phenomena in recent years, could be some of the reasons why this topic has gained importance for companies, leading them to become socially responsible organizations.

Marketing has influenced consumer behavior, prompting people to acquire products like clothing in an irrational manner, buying not only out of necessity but

also out of a desire to stay fashionable, belong to a group, or create a personal style and identity. In this regard, just as marketing has contributed to generating this behavior, a version of marketing has emerged that seeks to promote responsible and conscious product acquisition. This type of marketing aims to design strategies and influence the creation of sustainable products and services, recognizing the need to change processes and reduce or eliminate the negative impacts that companies have on society and the environment.

When a company implements actions to care for the environment and communicates through its channels that it is a socially responsible company, it is crucial that the company has taken measures throughout its value process to avoid harming the environment or society. If consumers learn that the company is harming the environment or society in any way, they will see the actions and campaigns as merely a façade to create a good image and increase sales, a practice known as greenwashing.

In the case of H&M, we can observe how the brand communicates in its campaigns that it is a sustainable company that cares about the environment, promoting the care of the planet by inviting consumers to recycle their clothes, care for them to use them longer, or bring them to one of their stores for reuse instead of discarding them in a way that harms the environment. However, an investigation analyzing the company's sustainability reports and website revealed that H&M engages in greenwashing. Despite implementing sustainability actions by producing garments with recycled and/or organic materials, not all of its value chain processes are sustainable, nor are they clear or third-party certified. This raises concerns that the actions are merely to attract consumers rather than a genuine commitment to sustainability.

In the case of Zara, understanding its strategies to be a socially responsible brand is challenging due to the limited communication on the subject and the scant information provided on its website. Like H&M, there is no third-party certification validating the sustainability of

Zara's garments, making it difficult to discern if their actions are merely attempts to attract consumer attention, given the limited advertising in spots on YouTube and the differentiation of Join Life collection garments only through labels.

In contrast, Levi's presents fewer criticisms of greenwashing compared to H&M and Zara. The brand has conducted sustainable talks with designers, activist influencers, and brand members, discussing this issue and highlighting the problems the industry has caused and continues to cause to the planet. They explain the actions Levi's is taking in more detail and emphasize the importance of implementing measures that make a real change, not just to attract consumers. Since the foundation of their sustainability is tangible through the guarantee of their products' durability and by conducting talks where they expose the issues and how Levi's addresses or minimizes these problems as much as possible, we can conclude that Levi's actions are not just a façade for a good consumer image but reflect a genuine concern for their environmental impact.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite being used as a strategy to attract consumers, such as through greenwashing, the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is of utmost importance and should be implemented in organizations in a genuine and as comprehensive a manner as possible across all processes and operations. It should not be viewed merely as a trend that brands must adopt but rather as a necessity in addressing the various issues CSR aims to tackle. It is also crucial that brands engaging in CSR, sustainability, or environmental responsibility maintain consistency in their communication regarding these actions. If there is evidence that these actions are false or involve practices contrary to these concepts, it will be very difficult for them to be seen as genuinely sustainable, responsible, or socially conscious. Consumers will perceive these actions as mere simulations rather than genuine concerns.

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