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Exploring Corporate Social Responsibility Practices in the Clothing Industry: the Case of Polish and British Companies

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has captured great attention and importance in recent years, particularly in the clothing industry. Currently, in order to respond to market requirements, clothing companies are increasing their focus on aspects related to production, working conditions and respect for human rights. The paper examines selected Polish and British clothing companies through the prism of CSR implementation in their business practices. The research objective of the paper is the assessment of the state of CSR advancement in Polish and British clothing companies. The paper presents the results of a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with mid-level managers of these companies. The empirical study described in this paper shows how social responsibility is understood by the representatives of Polish and British clothing companies, what kind of CSR activities are pursued by these companies, and how they benefit from these activities.

Key words: *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), clothing companies, Poland, United Kingdom.*

Introduction

Nowadays, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a current issue in business practice. This is due to the fact that at the same time it impacts various aspects of business performance as well as the future of societies [1-2]. Therefore, in recent years CSR has gained the particular attention of business entities, and in economies it is currently regarded as a strategic issue [3-4]. While considering the need to incorporate the CSR concept into business practice, there are some industries that really feel the pressure exerted by customers, the media, communities, NGO's, etc. The clothing industry is one such industry. At present, clothing companies should be particularly interested in activities aimed at reducing or preventing their negative environmental impact while contributing to the achievement of their competitiveness and profitability [5]. As customers are increasingly aware of several social and environmental issues, nowadays clothing firms need to concentrate on aspects regarding clothes production i.e. working conditions with a special focus on human rights. In today's economic reality, more and more time is devoted to discussing the ways of incorporating the CSR concept into business strategies and operations as well as to the outcomes of this. The paper is an attempt to exemplify the experience of eight domestic and British clothing companies operating in this field. The research objective of the paper is the assessment of the state of CSR advancement in Polish and British clothing

companies. We regard to this aim, it is a response to the research gap in studies on the practices of European (particularly Polish and British) clothing companies through the prism of CSR. The literature survey mainly indicates works dealing with such issues with regard to developing countries, for instance, India, China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Cambodia, etc. [6-9] While studying research works in this field, one can find just a few works related to CSR practices pursued by European clothing companies [10-12]. Therefore, this work is an attempt to fill part of the existing research gap in the area studied.

The idea, practices and benefits of CSR – a literature review

CSR is a complex and multifaceted concept that is still evolving. In turn, over the past decades business scholars have provided various definitions of CSR, highlighting diverse aspects regarding a firm's management. Despite some differences in explaining the nature of CSR, the common point of these definitions refers to the idea that business entities should not only be concerned with making profits but also should be engaged in actions appearing to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and issues required by law regulations [13]. Thus, CSR represents a theoretical framework clarifying the role of contemporary business in society [15-16]. To be considered as a responsible organisation, a company has to exceed the criteria that are formally required. In other words, it should

voluntarily pursue such activities as increased investments in human resources, environmental protection as well as relationships with its stakeholders [17-18]. Over the last few decades, CSR has evolved through concepts such as firm citizenship [19], corporate philanthropy [20-21], stakeholder theory [22-23] and corporate strategy [24] which is closely related with financial and competitive firm performance. However, while analysing definitions of CSR, one can easily notice two lines distinguished according to the drivers of the CSR concept. The first line explains CSR as stakeholder driven. Stakeholders include the owners of the firm, employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, public interest groups, governmental agencies, trade associations, financial institutions, and the community [1, 23]. A firm's engagement in CSR activities that stakeholders perceive to be important can bring about several benefits because these groups might otherwise withdraw their support for the firm [14]. According to this line, CSR is perceived as a firm response involving activities that are voluntary by definition and demonstrate the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with the firm's stakeholders [25-26]. Another angle describes CSR as driven by the performance and benefits anticipated by the company [24]. It explains the idea of CSR by focusing on the reasons for a firm's CSR engagement. Through incorporating CSR into their strategies, companies strive to increase their operational efficiency, reduce costs and risks,

enhance their corporate reputation, respond to customers' needs and generate their loyalty, create better a work environment, retain valuable employees, and get access to new markets [12, 27-29].

CSR, as a multifaceted concept, is set up on the following three pillars: social, economic and environmental [13], which means that a business unit implementing the CSR concept voluntarily incorporates the various principles, regarding the aforementioned pillars, beyond the scope of its legislative obligations and corporate governance. The relevant literature provides a variety of practices reflecting the adoption of the CSR concept in companies [12-13]. Analysis of the CSR activities pursued by companies leads to distinguishing between internal and external aspects. Internal aspects refer to employees' welfare and safety, job design as well as intellectual property. In turn, external aspects are related to environmental issues, products offered by the firm, suppliers, communities as well as human rights. Examples of CSR include support given to the local community, participation in charitable events, promotion of non-discrimination activities, improvement of employees' safety at work, expansion of workers' benefits like healthcare and work-life balance, operating efficiently, generating profits, ensuring transparency of business activities, enhancing product quality safety, and reducing pollution and other negative environmental impacts [1, 26-27].

Considering the different actions and forms of incorporating the CSR concept into business practices raises questions regarding the benefits of it. Analysis of the literature allows to identify several benefits of implementing CSR activities [9, 21, 28-29]. First of all, the literature emphasises that implementing CSR positively influences a firm's competitive advantage [12, 21], which is directly related to building the company's reputation as well as product differentiation [29]. Nowadays, customers are increasingly aware of some social or environmental benefits that are additional properties of the products marketed. This particularly regards the textile and clothing industries, resulting from the fact that in these industries a large part of production takes place in developing countries, with working conditions, child labour and some other aspects often being discussed in this context. Also, industrial impacts on the environment related to production, the use

of chemical paints, etc. are frequently debated in public [1]. While discussing the enhancement of a firm's competitive advantage through CSR activities, Boehe and Barin-Cruz [29] as well as Mullerat [30] point out that for companies located in less developed markets, following the CSR rules enables access to some bigger markets, due to the fact that developed countries usually require applying certain international standard certificates in companies willing to trade with them. Another advantage of implementing CSR activities refers to the firm's relations with investors [12]. Due to implementing CSR in company practice, the company's goodwill can increase significantly and thus attract new investors. Additionally, socially responsible companies are usually characterised by a less volatile stock value [9, 31]. The next benefit resulting from pursuing CSR activities refers to the higher motivation and engagement of the firm's employees. Due to introducing several activities aimed at providing employees with proper and safe working conditions, ways of organising work (to ensure work-life balance) as well as possibilities to develop their skills and competences, their satisfaction and motivation are enhanced [9, 21]. Moreover, implementing CSR practices has a significant impact on employer branding. In consequence, such an approach offers the company the possibility to position itself as an attractive employer.

■ Research methodology

The aim of the study was the assessment of the state of CSR advancement in Polish and British clothing firms. In order to achieve the main aim of the paper, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: How do the representatives of Polish and British clothing firms understand the CSR concept?

Q2: What activities are undertaken by Polish and British clothing firms in the field of CSR?

Q3: What are the main benefits resulting from the activities undertaken by Polish and British clothing companies in the field of CSR?

The study was conducted in 2017 and at the beginning of 2018. We based our analysis on a qualitative study conducted in 4 Polish and 4 British clothing companies identified through non-probability sampling. The number of firms is in line with the literature suggestions, wherein

researches consider a number of studies from three to eleven [32].

The firms participating in the research were purposely selected on the basis of their ability to offer a deep level of understanding of the area studied. The clothing companies selected are leaders in the Polish and British clothing industries, characterised by recognisable brands as well as declaring advanced use of various CSR practices. Among the Polish clothing firms there were two big companies that sell their products in popular chain stores and two producing elegant female clothes. The first of the abovementioned big clothing companies produces clothing garments for five own brands and sells them in 1700 chain stores in 20 countries. The second company has just one brand and sells its products in 850 chain stores in Poland. The two other Polish clothing firms, producing elegant female clothes, are listed on the Polish stock exchange. The first sells its products in 60 stores and the second delivers its clothes to 85 brand stores in Poland. In the group of British clothing firms there were also two big companies delivering products to chain stores and two producers of clothes of premium brands. The first of the big British clothes producers is listed on the British stock exchange and sells its garments in 500 chain stores in 16 countries, and the second delivers its products to over 350 chain stores in 12 countries. As far as the British companies producing premium clothes are considered, the first one is listed on the British stock exchange and sells its products in 70 brand stores mainly located in Great Britain. The last British firm under study sells its clothes in 57 stores on the domestic market. Due to data confidentiality, in the following part of the paper, presenting the research findings, each company is marked with a symbol, where the first element – a prefix (PL; UK) stands for the company's country of origin; the second element – a letter (A–D) represents the individual company, and the last element – a figure (1-3) represents the identity number of each company representative investigated, given by the researchers during the stage of data analysis. The qualitative approach was chosen as it is considered to be appropriate for research that seeks to address real-world issues in a meaningful way [9, 32]. In this case the qualitative approach provided us with the possibilities to study clothing companies implementing the CSR concept, including particular CSR areas and activities, CSR placement

in an organisational structure, integrating CSR activities into the operational activity of clothing companies as well as benefits resulting from the implementation of CSR in clothing companies. The method of collecting data was a semi-structured interview with mid-level managers employed in these enterprises. 24 managers of mid-level that participated in the research had been chosen purposely as in big companies quite frequently they are responsible for passing down the company's policy to employees as well as customers. Half of the managers participating in the study represented Polish and half British clothing companies. All of them had been working in their companies for more than two years and hence should know these firms' specificity and policies, also with regard to CSR. In the first step of the research, an in-depth interview guide and code book were prepared for further analyses. The interview guide included questions which were simple, open-ended and grouped into the main research issues. The average time of a single interview ranged from 30 to 40 minutes, and each was recorded and transcribed. Based on the empirical material collected, we prepared transcripts that were subjected to two-stage coding (in the second coding stage the MAXQ-DA program was used). In order to reduce subjectivism, the ordering, coding, reduction and interpretation of the material collected were carried out in parallel (and at the same time independently) by at least two people. In the final phase of each stage, the results of work done by individual people were collated in order to work out a final version.

Clothing companies' CSR in Poland and the United Kingdom – empirical perspective

As CSR is said to be a vital part of operating a successful modern business in the clothing industry, the research aimed at identifying how it is understood and practised in the companies chosen. Therefore, in the first stage of the interview, each manager was asked the following question: 'What is CSR?'. Posing such a question was aimed at detecting whether medium-level managers possess some knowledge about the CSR concept. What was really surprising was that none of the representatives of the Polish and British clothing companies was able to provide a precise explanation of the idea of CSR. While answering this question,

most research participants mentioned issues regarding the quality of jobs they create and their social consequences, as well as producing clothes with the use of 'good' fabrics. Only two respondents pointed out aspects concerning employees' welfare, such as arranging kindergartens for employees' children or improving working conditions in the firm [PL-A2; PL-B3]. Four further research participants pointed to the problem of the firm's responsibility towards the natural environment [PL-A1; UK-A2; UK-C2; UK-D3] while none of the interviewees mentioned the issue of how the market is broadly understood, which is also one of the main areas of enterprises' activities in the field of CSR.

In the second stage of the interview, before asking further questions, each research participant was briefly explained what CSR is and in which areas companies pursue activities related to this concept. Then, each interviewee was asked whether his/her company implements a socially responsible policy. While answering this question, all respondents declared that the firms they are employed in implement CSR policies. However, a problem arose when managers were asked to indicate what particular activities their companies conducted in this area (each interviewee was asked to indicate the three most common activities pursued by his/her firm). It is interesting that not every interviewee was able to identify three socially responsible activities that are conducted by his/her company. This is even more surprising due to the fact that this question was posed after a short introduction to the topic. In the case of both Polish and British managers, the most frequent answer to this question regarded the creation of corporate social responsibility reports. This answer was indicated by 19 out of 24 research participants. Furthermore, while pointing to the CSR practices implemented by their companies, the majority of research participants mentioned producing clothes with the use of 'good' fabrics. Another area referred to by respondents regarded relations with employees, with a certain focus on working conditions. Most respondents highlighted the following: "our firm constantly focuses on improving employees' working conditions, cares about them" [PL-A3]; "there is a strong focus on avoiding mobbing and creating a positive work atmosphere at work" [PL-A2]; "we do not practise child labour when producing clothes in Asia..."

[PL-D1]. Also, caring for the natural environment was mentioned as the area of CSR activities pursued by the clothing companies investigated: "in our company there are many changes to reduce water use and pollution" [UK-B2]; "our firm takes care of its impact on the natural environment" [UK-C1]; "our firm cares for the natural environment..." [PL-D3; UK-B3]. Some research participants also declared their companies' involvement in creating positive relations with widely understood stakeholders: "our firm cares about the relations with suppliers who produce our clothes" [UK-D3]; "CSR is very important for our shareholders, especially investment funds, which often have investment strategies involving the purchase of shares of socially responsible companies" [PL-C1]; "in our company the way to build good relations with shareholders and other companies is often discussed" [PL-D1]; "our firm aims at good relations with stakeholders..." [PL-C3]. Another area of CSR activities conducted by the clothing companies under study refers to providing employees with development opportunities: "... the firm takes care of employees" [PL-A3]; "our company cares about its employees and promotes their professional development" [UK-C2]; "employees are able to develop their competences, they have the opportunity to make professional progress" [UK-B1]; "in our company employees are flexible, they are able to develop their skills, they know they may be promoted while increasing their competences" [UK-C3]. A further issue raised during the interviews referred to the existence within the organisational structures of firms of particular departments or positions dedicated to dealing with corporate social responsibility issues. It is worth noting that only five of the managers interviewed declared that his/her company employed people who only deal with CSR matters [PL-A1; PL-A3; UK-A1; UK-D1; UK-D2].

Another problem raised in the research was related to the assessment of the activities pursued by the Polish and British clothing firms in terms of their repeatability. While discussing this issue during the interview, interviewees were provided with some hints, such as frequent (e.g. quarterly or annual) charity support for sports teams, schools, etc., organising collections of used goods for charity or periodical help for employees who have low living standards. What is really regrettable (and again alarming) is that only one

of the mid-level managers representing the Polish clothing companies declared that his/her company carries out systematically any CSR activities [PL-A1]. The CSR practices conducted by the Polish clothing companies are *ad hoc* in nature. Practically none of the managers interviewed indicated specific activities that would be permanent, repeated, communicated to employees and fitted into the operational activity of their companies. The results of interviews conducted with managers of the British companies prove that in this case the situation seems to be better. Some of the mid-level managers investigated representing the United Kingdom noticed that CSR activities carried out by their firms are repeatable and continuous [UK-A2; UK-A3; UK-C1; UK-D1; UK-D2]. Examples of such activities include “*giving funds to poor children from time to time*” [UK-C1] or “*financially supporting cultural and sports events in the local community*” [UK-D2].

The next significant issue concerning the interviews alluded to the benefits that the enterprises derive from the implementation of socially responsible practices. Very interesting (but at the same time alarming) is the fact that generally the interviewees were not able to say whether CSR activities pursued by their firms actually translate into any positive (or negative) results. Just a few managers representing a British clothing company stressed such benefits of implementing CSR as lower costs or better company image: “*...thanks to these activities we do not pay penalties for environment pollution*” [UK-B2]; “*CSR strengthens our corporate image among customers*” [UK-B3]. The above-mentioned benefits show that companies adopt a policy-based compliance approach focused on the costs of doing business and minimising potential harm to the business as well as building its corporate image. Unfortunately, we did not find any CSR outcomes related to the companies’ operational efficiency, investor relations, risk management or simply delivering benefits to society at large.

■ Discussion

The results of the research presented in the paper prove that there is a significant disproportion between declarations regarding the implementation of socially responsible activities by clothing enterprises and their actual activities in

this area. The mid-level managers interviewed were not able to explain the main idea of CSR or at least indicate some socially responsible activities described in the reports of their firms presented on corporate websites. Moreover, the research outcomes generally do not allow to determine whether activities related to the implementation of CSR bring about any positive result for the firms. Just a few respondents pointed to some benefits of CSR practices conducted in their companies. Those mostly mentioned by the interviewees regarded enhancing the company’s image or cost reduction achieved through activities aimed at the natural environment. These findings are in alignment with the evidence found in the relevant literature. The literature sources include several empirical investigations which highlight that implementing CSR activities by companies in the clothing industry leads to enhancing their image [33-35]. Some authors also claim that investments in CSR practices focused on natural environment protection pay off over time thanks to cost savings and risk reduction [12, 36]. However, it seems that mid-level managers participating in the study concentrated just on the direct outcomes of CSR practices of their firms. Meanwhile, as claimed by Battaglia et al. (2014), implementing CSR practices brings about several indirect benefits [12]. Firstly, creating a better working environment for employees positively influences their sense of appreciation as well as impacts their work engagement and organisational commitment [37]. Secondly, providing employees with opportunities to develop their competences and make progress impacts not only their attitude towards the company and work but also allows to retain them in the organisation. Moreover, implementing CSR practices has a notable impact on employer branding [12, 38], as such an approach offers the company the possibility to position itself as an attractive employer. Taking into account that today all kinds of organisations are facing increasing competition to attract suitable, well-qualified employees, this approach seems to be the proper way to attract people who will allow the firm to enhance its performance and competitiveness. Based on the aforementioned issues, we assume that the practices pursued by the firms represented in the study are not included in their strategies. In agreement with Carrigan et al. [33] and Oelze [39], incorporating sustainability issues into the overall corporate strategy

greatly enables efficient implementation of a firm’s CSR policy. However, the lack of CSR involvement in corporate strategy might be the consequence of the fact that the companies investigated, despite being leaders of their domestic markets, do not follow global initiatives like Global Compact or international standards and principles, such as AA1000, EMAS, ISO 14000, ISO 19011 etc. By doing so, not only are the practices conducted by the company consistent with its strategy, the data presented in the company’s CSR reports is consistent with the reality. Thus, in the light of the research results, the question “Where is the problem?” seems to be interesting. Does it refer to the issue of communicating the activities pursued by the companies or to the fact that the companies’ CSR reports are just focused on creating a positive corporate image? Several authors highlight that companies in the clothing industry use CSR practices as a marketing device to influence market players [34, 40-41]. When trying to explain this phenomenon, it is worth noting that Visser [42] presents the evolution of business responsibility by dividing it into five overlapping ages – the Ages of Greed, Philanthropy, Marketing, Management and Responsibility. Each of these manifests a different stage of CSR and is named as follows: defensive CSR, charitable CSR, promotional CSR, strategic CSR and systemic CSR. Visser claims that firms tend to move through the aforesaid ages and stages of CSR, although they may conduct activities in several modes at once. The Age of Greed is related to defensive CSR, characterised by the fact that a firm’s CSR practices are limited and undertaken only if it can be shown that shareholder value will be protected as a result. Charitable CSR refers to the Age of Philanthropy, which involves firm donations and sponsorship focused on empowering community groups or civil society organisations. Promotional CSR is related to the Age of Marketing, where a firm’s responsibility is perceived mainly as a public relations opportunity to enhance its image and reputation. Strategic CSR refers to the Age of Management. Being at that stage means relating CSR activities to the firm’s core business, often through adherence to CSR codes and implementation of social and environmental management systems that typically involve cycles of CSR policy development, goal and target setting, program implementation, auditing as well as reporting. Strategic CSR is focused on the micro-level, which aims

at supporting social and environmental issues that happen to align with the firm's strategy but without necessarily changing it. The last stage proposed by Visser is systemic CSR, referring to the Age of Responsibility. Systemic CSR focuses on identifying and tackling the root causes of a firm's present irresponsibility through innovating business models, transforming the firm's processes, products and services and lobbying for progressive national and international policies. Contrary to strategic CSR, systemic CSR focuses on understanding interconnections at the macro-level, including society, communities, the economy and ecosystem. It also aims at changing the firm's strategy to optimise the outcomes for larger human and ecological systems [41].

The findings of the study presented confirm that the clothing companies investigated, while progressing over the ages and stages of CSR, are still mainly in the stages of charitable and promotional CSR (some may be even in the stage of defensive CSR). Activities in the field of social responsibility conducted by them are mainly focused on reputation building and avoiding some penalties. Moreover, they seem not to be included in any social or environmental management systems that involve cycles of CSR policy development, goal and target setting, then program implementation as well as auditing, which is typical of Strategic CSR. The advancement of CSR implementation in the clothing companies investigated may be inhibited by several factors. Several authors point out that despite the lack of strategic prioritisation of sustainability issues already mentioned, the companies in the clothing industry frequently lack corporate structures and procedural advancement for CSR policy implementation [38, 43-44]. This, in turn, results in a lack of intrinsic motivation and understanding of the concept [45]. Another inhibitor of CSR advancement in the clothing industry refers to fact that according to various research, most customers make price-conscious buying decisions. Despite the fact that consumers are showing increasing awareness towards socially responsible-produced clothes, price and style are still the dominant motivating factors while purchasing clothes [32, 46]. Thus, clothing firms do not advance CSR practices as it requires additional costs that cause an increase in the product price to balance these costs [40].

■ Conclusion

Concluding, we judge that the paper's objective has been achieved. The paper's contribution is the assessment of the state of CSR advancement in Polish and British clothing companies. The results of our research confirm that CSR implementation was evidenced in all clothing firms investigated. Based on the analysis conducted, we find all the companies analysed moderately advanced in implementing CSR in business practice. In our research we have sought to answer three research questions: How do the representatives of Polish and British clothing firms understand the CSR concept? What activities are undertaken by Polish and British clothing firms in the field of CSR? and What are the main benefits resulting from the activities undertaken by Polish and British clothing companies in the field of CSR? The analysis conducted allowed to answer the research questions that have been addressed. In general, the managers interviewed from both Polish and British clothing firms are aware of the CSR idea. However, they mostly perceive it through the lens of production issues, namely using proper fabrics, providing good working conditions and focusing on employees' welfare. The activities pursued by the clothing firms analysed are mainly of a philanthropic and marketing character, being defensive and based on compliance-seeking motivation. Unfortunately, the research showed that both Polish and British clothing firms lack CSR activities based on the values embedded in their strategies and core management processes. Still, British clothing companies seem to be more advanced as at least in some of them CSR activities are repeatable and continuous. Also, three out of four British companies employ people who only deal with CSR matters. On the contrary, CSR practices pursued by the Polish clothing companies investigated are piecemeal and reactive, undertaken *ad hoc* when necessary. Regarding CSR advancement, British clothing firms are paying more attention to the issues of employee development opportunities. As far as the benefits resulting from CSR activities of the firms investigated is concerned, the study shows that the main benefits of pursuing CSR activities regard lowering the company's operating costs or improving the firm's image. However, these benefits are not perceived by all the managers investigated. Moreover, the managers interviewed do not notice other benefits

of the CSR activities of their firms. Thus, among the implications of our study inspiring further research, we point to the need for analysing the barriers to realising the benefits of CSR activities pursued by clothing firms. This would allow to answer the question posed in the paper: "Where is the problem?" in regard to benefiting from CSR both in terms of corporate image and firms' performance. Such research could be based on ethnographic studies using the technique of a free-form interview, participatory observation or focus group interviews with managers and employees. The results presented in the paper are in agreement with the evidence found in the relevant literature. The problem of CSR practice advancement in the clothing industry has been discussed by several authors [12, 39-41, 45]. Combining our research findings with those of the abovementioned authors proves that implementing CSR in the clothing industry involves several problematic issues inhibiting its advancement, such as the supply chain lacking transparency, a lack of proper structures and processes, and a lack of demand for socially responsible-produced clothes.

We are aware of the limitations of our study. The data collected regarding understanding of the CSR idea, the fields and activities of CSR implementation and firms' benefits from this are based on assessments by selected mid-level managers of the Polish and British clothing companies selected. Despite the fact that we attempted to conduct an interview each time with a person who can provide the necessary review of the issue, because of his/her responsibilities, there is a risk that the person presented a subjective picture of the organisation. □

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