

PROMOTING SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DECISION ON SAFE FOOD CONSUMPTION VIA ON-LINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Abstract

Purpose – to determine the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decision on safe food consumption.

Design/methodology/approach – analysis of scientific literature, synthesis, case study of an online social networking site sveikasvaikas.lt.

Findings – the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decision on safe food consumption is described. Trends for further research revealed.

Research limitations/implications – this research paper is the background in order to create a socially responsible consumption model based on the impact of active participation at on-line social networks. Limitations of this paper are as follows: empirical analysis for promoting socially responsible decisions is carried out only by case analysis of a particular online social networking site sveikasvaikas.lt; in order to create socially responsible consumption model a deeper empirical analysis is necessary (a quantitative analysis is planned for the further research).

Practical implications – in the era of globally advertised non-natural food production the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decision on safe food consumption is growing: giving the right information about the composition of the production, helping to come to a decision to use safe food. Case study reveals the possible types of social technologies to be used in this process.

Originality/Value – the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decisions on safe food consumption is revealed in this paper. Only socially responsible business can remain and grow in the market.

Keywords: socially responsible consumption, corporate social responsibility, social technologies, decisions, public interest.

Research type: case study.

Introduction

Global socio-economic changes have impact on food consumption habits of society. The idea of socially responsible consumption is recognized as a willingness to express economic, social and environmental worries through consumption choices. Therefore, the active performance of consumers is wanted by most of the corporate social responsibility campaigns. However, there is still a challenge to promote socially responsible decision on safe food consumption via on-line social networks and to spread this idea rapidly and widely in today's society.

The goal of this paper is to determine the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decision on safe food consumption. In order to reach the goal analysis of scientific literature, synthesis, case study of an online social networking site sveikasvaikas.lt are executed. This research paper is the background in order to create a socially responsible consumption model based on the impact of active participation at on-line social networks. This paper forms a framework for deeper analysis in the topic by executing empirical analysis for promoting socially responsible decisions carrying out only by case analysis of a particular online social networking site sveikasvaikas.lt, and by revealing spheres for a quantitative analysis's questionnaire.

Thirst chapter presents theoretical background on the topic. The second chapter presents case study on sveikasvaikas.lt. In conclusions the scope of on-line social networks in promoting socially responsible decision on safe food consumption is described and spheres for design of a qualitative analysis questionnaire.

Reasons and Initiatives for Socially Responsible Consumption

Famous American expert on industrial marketing strategy and organizations F. E. Webster was one of the first who had started discussing about the concept of socially conscious consumer. In 1975, he stated that the consumers are self-conscious, socially fair and responsible, if they value the public consequences of their personal consumption or seek the social changes using their buyer-power (Vilkė, 2012).

In the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR), the socially responsible consumer (SRC) behaviour express the activities which base the choice of purchase and usage of products and disposition of by-products, in order to reduce or eliminate any harmful effects and improve the long-term advantageous impact on society and environment (Paek and Nelson, 2012).

The goal of each consumer is to understand how to react to the negative impacts of consumption upon society and it is expressed through consumer purchase behaviour. The choice to buy and use any production or contraposition is as the reflection of consumers to the activities of corporations: impact on the society and environment, ethics, the voluntary reduction of consumption levels and other (Caruana, 2007).

The definition of socially responsible consumption (SRC) is still not clear and easy to explain its volume (Durif *et al*, 2011). The concept of SRC behaviour includes wide variety of consumer activities.

Talking about socially responsible consumption, there are used and other powerful expressions to explain such special profiles of consumption, e.g. green, organic, healthy, sustainable, efficient, rational, ethical, activist, conscientious, responsible and so on. Durif *et al* (2011), Fontelle (2010), Freestone and McGoldrick, (2007), Honkanen (2006) and others tried to explain the differences between these definitions (look table 1).

Table 1. Different profiles of socially responsible consumption

Profiles of consumption	Explanation
Green/organic consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – avoids products that might endanger the health of the consumer or others; causes significant damage to the environment during manufacture, use or disposal; consumes a disproportionate amount of energy; causes unnecessary waste; use materials derived from threatened species or environments; involve unnecessary use or cruelty to animals [or] adversely affect other countries; – avoids products which are produced with pesticides, herbicides, inorganic fertilisers, antibiotics and growth hormones (animal welfare is important, and bioengineering and genetically modified foods are not accepted); – seeks to preserve nature;
Healthy consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – preserves health;
Sustainable consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – tries to guarantee that resources are not going to come to an end;
Efficient/rational consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – are consumed the minimum necessary amounts;
Ethical/activist consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – involves beliefs and values aimed at supporting a greater good that motivates consumers purchases; – is seen as a conflict area (only exists as a collective movement);
Conscientious consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – concerns with the individual impacts of consumption;
Responsible consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – tries not to cause damage; includes all the previous categories;
Socially responsible consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – purchases products perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or patronizes that attempt to effect related positive social change (two distinct aspects: the environmental aspect and the social aspect).

Source: composed by Durif et al. (2011), Fontelle (2010), Freestone and McGoldrick (2007), Honkanen et al (2006).

Different profiles of consumption are based on the personal motivations of consumers. As follows, the new multidimensional socially responsible purchase and disposal scale reflects three aspects (Durif et al, 2011):

- *the influence of firms’ SRC performance on consumer purchase behaviour,*
- *consumer recycling behaviour and*

- *consumer avoidance and usage reduction of products harmful to the environment.*

It is still analysed why value of social responsibility has a weak impact on the decision-making process when actually purchasing foodstuff is vital in understanding and changing behaviour of each consumer towards sustainable consumption (Young *et al*, 2010). European Commission (2007) had identified main factors influencing food choice, which include:

- biological determinants (hunger, satiety, gustatory qualities, taste, sensory aspects);
- economic determinants (income, cost, availability of foods);
- physical determinants (ease of access to food, education, specific skills, time constraints);
- social determinants (culture, family, peer-group pressures, meal patterns);
- psychological determinants (mood, stress, guilt);
- beliefs, attitudes and knowledge about food.

The knowledge, innovations, modern technologies and finances have changed the patterns of production and consumption in the entire world in the period of economic globalization. The combination of technologies and greater supply of cheap labour were involved in transforming raw materials and adding different additives into saleable foodstuffs. As a result, there were outspread the range of production at the international market (Strange and Bayley, 2008).

The drastic changes in food production and consumption in Europe Union are still necessary in successfully facing the challenges of deficiencies and making the European agro-food system more elastic in the periods of growing instability. Inspired by this fact Europe tries to solve different socio-economic problems, including esurient of consumers welfare. The opportunities to be the first in winning the stable place in the world market and positively address the challenge for sustainable producing healthy and safe food in a nowadays world of uncertainty and scarcities should be weighted by the agro-food sector in each country (European Commission, 2011).

In “A Renewed EU strategy 2011-14 for Corporate Social Responsibility” is stated that *“the revision of the Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan may provide an opportunity to identify new measures to facilitate more responsible consumption”*.

Moisander (2007) was analysing the reasons and objectives of socially responsible consumers’ actions and practices engaged in selecting, purchasing and using products and services. He had highlighted that the socially responsible consumers drastically reduce the purchases of production to minimum because they truly care for the environment. The consumers strictly refuse to buy any foodstuff that is not absolutely necessary. It should be noted, that such a radical environmentalist approach of consumption is quite hard to adopt in consumption-oriented and increasingly convenience society. Unfortunately, it is quite hard to define the socially responsible consumption strategies by the fact that there are still no agreed common criteria for which foodstuff

are ecologic, healthy or safe and which are not. Any general features of green production may be outlined.

Kronenberg and Iida (2011) had identified that the socially responsible consumption is refinement rather than simplification of the consumption habits that reveal with economic globalization, innovative and technological progress and the development of trading flows, open access to variety of goods from far away. Even when newfangled food production is *“more environmentally friendly, overall environmental pressures related to their consumption are likely to increase because of in-creased consumption levels”*(*ibid*).

The active performance of consumers purchasing the foodstuff is wanted by most of the CSR campaigns. The social activists, non-governmental organizations and businesses in food sector carry out surveys, believing that if consumers state they would like to buy and use safe and healthy production, food sector companies will certainly follow out it and suggest socially responsible production (Devinney *et al*, 2006).

Each consumer personally makes a decision to support socially responsible practices which may have an effect on his/her own purchase behaviour. Nevertheless, the food sector companies need not only to reflect to consumers needs and wishes, loyalty and willingness to pay an extra price, but to manage the brand image, reputation and resilience compared with the competitors too. (Smith, 2007).

Socially responsible initiatives of business help companies to deal voluntary with their social and environmental effects which go beyond regulatory or/and legal requirements. Such initiatives are frequently accepted as business strategy in which consumer demands drive corporate responsibility and sustainability (Smith *et al*, 2010).

The sustainable consumers could be described as those who assess their own motivation by interest or dissatisfaction and buy products labelled with eco-friendly or fair trade symbols. Karsaklian and Fee (2012) had identified four prototypes of sustainable consumers:

- *the “idealists” – recycle and save energy,*
- *the “able and willingly” – choose environment over economic growth,*
- *the “OK, I’ll do it” – buy ethical products because others do, and*
- *the “unwilling responsibility-takers” – buy ethically, despite not accepting environmental protection as their responsibility.*

Accelerating the demand for more environmentally friendly, healthy and socially responsible food consumption as a rule is not always correspondent with the productivity of company’s activities. Hereby, *“sustainable demand shifts are translated into sustainable supply shifts”*. In recent years, *“consumers become more and more conscious of the impact they have on the environment and on their own health through their food choices”*(European Commission, 2011). As a result they pay much more attention to CSR-related issues, but sometimes they face with significant barriers: requirements to pay an extra price for “extra quality and safety”, insufficient or inadequate awareness and lack of easy access to the information, which are necessary for right decision making. Some organizations (enterprises, NGO’s, concerned groups) help consumers make sustainable choices (Renewed EU strategy 2011-14 for CSR, 2011).

For today's society, the effects of labels are of two kinds. Firstly, they distinguish the different types of products that are offered in the market. On the other hand, labels give information to consumers about the quality of products and therefore promote their willingness-to-pay for CSR, this means more money to gain the welfare (Etile and Teyssier, 2012). Consumers prefer correctly labelled foodstuff and ethical brands.

One example of an on-line social networking (sveikasvaikas.lt) in exploring the labels of food products are be discussed in the next chapter of this paper. In the case study of sveikasvaikas.lt website background is presented, web design and social networking activities are analysed.

Case study: on-line social networking at sveikasvaikas.lt

Healthy food topic is popular in various types of social networking sites: blogs, social networking platforms (twitter, facebook, etc.), and among special online networks. For the analysis of a particular social networking site analysis sveikasvaikas.lt was chosen for two reasons: (a) it is the biggest healthy food promoting site in Lithuania; (b) it has a healthy food catalogue (unique feature of social networking sites on healthy food in Lithuania) which is growing fast and going to international sphere (already working in United Kingdom). Case study is executed using information on sveikasvaikas.lt and follow-up pages.

Sveikasvaikas.lt site is moderated by public organization *Sveiko vaiko institutas* (eng. *Institute of Healthy Child*). Site is being developed since 2009 March. Site began as a healthy food catalogue which was being created not only by creators of the page, but visitors of the page as well. During first three days page received 70 000 visitors. The same year sveikasvaikas.lt at Internet awards “Login” was given a prize for the best internet initiative. By 2011 sveikasvaikas.lt decided to go international, and since 2012 sveikasvaikas.lt is producing healthy food products.

Sveikasvaikas.lt is keeping socially responsible its management also. Philosophy, value, goal, and principles of activities and actions are declared (see table 2). Website design is chosen simple, with clear structure. Colour panel is kept with green shades. Green is well chosen for the topic of the site, as green represents sincerity (Labrecque and Milne, 2012).

Table 2. Philosophy, values, goals, and principles of activities and actions at sveikasvaikas.lt

Philosophy	<i>Everything you put in your tummy is becoming a part of you. Happy tummy, happy you.</i>
Value	<i>Transparency. You can ask us everything. As a mother.</i>
Goal	<i>Credibility. Our products are on our tables every day.</i>
Principles	<i>Our products are: safe, beneficial, in high level of quality.</i>

Source: sveikasvaikas.lt (translated by authors)

At sveikasvaikas.lt social networking is carried out in 4 ways as follows: *social networking facebook plugin in sveikasvaikas.lt website*; *facebook page, blog*, and the most important two ways *food product catalogue* and *eco route*.

Social networking facebook plugin in sveikasvaikas.lt website. Social networking facebook plugin allows creating easy way discussions, engagement in wanted topic with registered and non registered visitors of the page. Sveikasvaikas.lt uses facebook plugin in their section *Kurkime kartu* (eng. *Lets create together*). In this section visitors are requested to give their opinion on developing sveikasvaikas.lt project (sveikasvaikas.lt website and other sites or activities evolving from the idea of sveikasvaikas.lt). Visitors are able to give positive/negative feedback on activities carried out under the name of sveikasvaikas.lt, or to give suggestions what they are expecting to find in the page. As those discussions are organized via facebook tool, all comments are personal, in case someone engages in lively discussion, they know with whom are they consulting and they are able to discuss more privately if they wish to. In this way live network of safe food enthusiasts is being affirmed via networking tool.

Facebook page. Facebook it is a wide profile social networking platform, which increases possibility to real time sharing of various information. Users may communicate in three ways on Facebook platform: personal messages, posting “on wall“, sharing comments in shared information section. Sveikasvaikas.lt facebook page has over 16 thousand followers. Facebook page is used to announce 4 major types on information: (a) activities announcements; (b) engagement in site development invitations; (c) competitions announcements; (d) information on articles in media on food products. Though information in a facebook page is rarely updated, followers’ number is growing, discussions on food products and activities of sveikasvaikas.lt are happening.

Blog. Term “Blog“ is derived from words “weB“ and “LOG“ and is given a meaning of internet diary. Sveikasvaikas.lt is keeping their blog with articles about (a) activities of sveikasvaikas.lt and (b) information on articles in media on food products. Each topic creates a discussion: support or knowledge sharing between enthusiasts of safe food.

Food product catalogue. In food product catalogue there are given food products from local grocery stores. Each product is described with picture, title and E supplements (see example in Figure 1). E supplement list with detailed explanations is given. All food supplements are taken from given sources. Information is freely uploaded, with no tendencies to a product or supplier. Page moderators ask for page visitors to inform about any peculiarity they see in already existing product information. Each product after registration is checked and given one of five safety categories (from *ecological* to *banned in some countries*). It is possible to mark product as “possibly with animal origin substances” which allows including vegans to the social network, and “products with GMO¹”. Inside each product description there is registrar marked, there is possibility to give feedback on product information, or to give more detailed description. Open discussions are encouraged.

¹ Genetically modified organisms.



Figure 1. Example of product description at lt.inbelly.com¹

Eko maršrutas (eng. Eco route). Eco route is a separate page in sveikasvaikas.lt domain. Page was designed to assist consumers and organic farmers more easily find each other. It was created with the help of European Union financing. Page seeks for Eco route to lead to responsible farming, and later on to responsible ecological country. Page moderators state: “*Due to inappropriate agricultural activities, we get not only harmful to health products, but irreversible nature. Harmful substances in the soil enter the groundwater and prolong our streams and lakes, and most importantly, dug wells, which consume more than one-third of Lithuania. Page designed to help consumers and organic farmers more easily find each other.*”². Eco route is being developed by farmers and consumers. Farmers may register their farms in this page if their production corresponds to ecological product criteria. Consumers contribute to Eco route by registering purchased ecological products. This way a social web and internet map of ecological product providers is being created.

Sveikasvaikas.lt is fast growing project which in five years of existence has created three related online social networking platforms and began healthy product line. In marketing healthy food sveikasvaikas.lt uses various social technologies, main of which /digital social media/ is making the biggest impact on consumers decision to consume ecological food products.

Conclusions

Different profiles of socially responsible consumption behaviour are based on the wide variety consumers' activities and their personal motivations.

¹ Green leaf sign marks ecological product.

² Translated by authors.

The active performance of consumers should be encouraged by the socially responsible business to ensure the welfare of society and remain prosperous in future.

To encourage socially responsible decision digital social media type of social technologies was used in the case study. Digital social media was adapted via three levels on integration of decision making for socially responsible consumption: informing, consulting, integrating.

In order to reveal full effect of digital social media on decisions for safe food consumption, a quantitative analysis of digital social media users is necessary.

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