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Corporate and Consumer Social Responsibility in the Italian Food Market System

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Abstract

Nowadays, the modern consumer is paying more and more attention to the consequences of purchasing decisions in terms of social, ethical and environmental aspects. In the Italian food system also, the purchase of products requires consumers' decisions that are increasingly dependent on factors linked not only to quality/price relationship but also to issues of production, the environment, human and animal rights. The aim of the chapter is to offer a view of the relationship between Italian consumers and their social responsibility; to show the role of corporate social responsibility on food production (where the basic instrument of CSR, social audit, is only still a voluntary business choice) and to underline knowledge and importance of it to consumers and their willingness to purchase the products of ethically oriented companies. This chapter is based on empirical research: 933 city-based families filled in a survey. The most important points emerging from this study were that consumers' lack knowledge about responsible corporate initiatives or do not trust them, but also that quality and affordability are important.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, consumer social responsibility, consumer behavior, food safety, marketing strategy, animal welfare, workers' rights

1. Introduction

The debate on corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not new: firms tend more and more to sponsor social, environmental and charitable activities to improve their image, but it does not always benefit consumers. Modern consumers pay much more attention to social problems than previously and require that firms do not operate only in accordance with profit logic, but also take into account social and environmental considerations. The European Commission

has defined CSR as the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society, and it is important in the agri-food system above all. CSR should be company led. Public authorities can play a supporting role through a smart mix of voluntary policy measures and, where necessary, complementary regulation. Companies can become socially responsible by: following the law; integrating social, environmental, ethical, consumer and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations.

In Italy, in recent years, CSR started as a response to new consumption paradigms interesting to our society which, in times of globalization of production processes, sees the eradication of the enterprise from the area of production and an increased need for the same to make its way of acting visible; however, social audit (the basic instrument of CSR) is still a voluntary choice, unlike in other European countries. CSR contributes to value creation and is therefore able to generate a competitive advantage for the company; it should not be considered as a cost, but as an element that, when integrated into corporate governance, positively affects the performance of the company and its competitiveness by improving its development prospects in a long-term perspective and, at the same time, by reducing the risk profile. In this way, CSR can be considered a true corporate philosophy or a direct decision as strategic response to major competitors' actions or a marketing policy for offsetting past immoral behavior toward consumers.

The main functions of a company entail the creation of value through the production of goods and services, generating profits for its owners and for its shareholders, as well as wealth for the company, in particular, through a continuous process of job creation. Firms are aware of the possibility of contributing to the sustainable development of society, managing their operations in a way that strengthens the economic growth and competitiveness without harming the environment, neither fleeing from their social responsibilities nor neglecting the interests of the consumer. In this context, an increasing number of firms has adopted the concept of social responsibility in the following ways: by adopting a socially responsible behavior beyond the legal requirements; by taking into account the economic, social and environmental impacts of their activities; by considering social responsibility not as an additional element to fundamental activities, but as correlated with the type of business management.

Companies disclose their socially responsible initiatives through the adoption of social, environmental and sustainable audit and reports, that is, through the reporting of CSR activities that they have spontaneously launched. It is the practice of adopting socially responsible management systems (management of the environment, human resources, suppliers, information security and accuracy). Certification by third parties is also very widespread. In this context, it is possible to understand the importance of environmental compatibility brands and quality brands; in the financial field, the ethical investment funds, rating and development are important.

2. The evolution of national context: corporate social responsibility

In Italy, social audit, the basic instrument of CSR, unlike in other European countries, is still a voluntary choice and not a legal obligation. Social audit is a public document drafted periodically and addressed to social interlocutors who, directly or indirectly, are involved in activities

of the company. Therefore, the recipients of social audit are all stakeholders and the community at large; information on social outcomes helps create and spread a certain reputation of the company that is able to encourage dialog with all the stakeholders [1]. This term refers to an individual, a community or an organization that, directly or indirectly, influences the operations of the company or suffers its repercussions. Stakeholders are, therefore, all those who have an interest in the activity of the company which allows a better functioning of it. As a matter of fact, the company is part of a network of interactions and relationships, exchange with multiple social interlocutors, capable of influencing, in a positive or negative way, the destiny of the company. Only a careful management of this system of relationships allows the company to obtain the resources and contributions essential for the prosecution over time of the activity and the realization of its purposes.

Therefore, companies do not limit themselves to undertake CSR, but often choose to make the stakeholders aware of such conduct, in an attempt to improve the corporate reputation and business results. Therefore, it permits a synergy between businesses and consumers: consumers' choices affect companies' policies, which (if properly communicated) are able to influence purchases. Considering the profile of modern consumers (careful of the consequences of its purchasing decisions in terms of social, ethical and environmental aspects), it is possible to identify the role of CSR for consumers through a study on critical, ethical and responsible purchase of products [2]. In this context, a wide range of factors are able to contribute to a positive reputation, including accounting measures of profitability and risk, market value, media visibility, institutional stock holdings, dividend yield, firm size and demonstration of social concern (but also other reputational factors, including customer satisfaction, stakeholder familiarity, corporate campaigns and corporate citizenship programs). Nowadays, consumers are more sophisticated than 30 years ago, thus, they may have a different understanding and awareness of CSR, and in this way, they might prove to be more receptive to a different style and approach to corporate initiative and communication. If it is correct, the changed features of consumers are possibly more distinct and noticeable considering the older and younger generations or differences in genders: which is what this study focuses on. In other words, an intent of this study was to either confirm or not a role in people's perception of proper ethical conduct of factors such as age or gender through the proposed statistical methodology.

In this context, ethical marketing becomes the function linking the company and the market through the synthesis between ethical decisions and economic consequences, respecting in any case the interests of the various stakeholders. In Italy, for historical reasons deriving from the importance of the cooperative movement, as well as for structural motives, given the prevalence of small and medium enterprises, the sensitivity toward the context of social relations in which companies operate, constitutes a significant part of the national economic system. In the beginning of the new millennium, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies launched the CSR-social commitment project aimed at the development and promotion of social responsibility. The project is based on a voluntary approach to CSR the companies elect and aims to promote the culture of social responsibility within the socioeconomic system and to increase awareness of sustainable development. In this way, it is possible to provide a response to information requests on CSR made by the stakeholders, pursuing the European Commission's goal of identifying a common language and reference framework [3].

The project assigns importance to the diffusion of ethical behaviors among companies, but what characterizes it is the widening of this vision through the dimension of social interventions, called social commitment, which has the aim of promoting the real participation of companies in supporting national and local welfare system according to a modern logic of public-private integration [4]. In particular, the role of the government is to identify areas of intervention, that, at a national and local level, require specific action and direct funding on priority projects [4]. Companies can join on a voluntary basis and contribute to the financing of welfare policies, while social intervention is managed directly by the associations and by voluntary work.

Government's objective is to develop the ethical supplementary funds. The standard proposed by the ministry envisages a system articulated on two levels [5]: the first level, called CSR level, easy to access and articulated on the basis of already known schemes (e.g., the International Organization for Standardization approach), has the main purpose of promoting the culture of social responsibility; the second level (social commitment level) requires the company to co-finance social projects in order to benefit from tax bonuses and facilitates access to the financial market through ethical funds. For companies wishing to participate in the reward system, an easily usable, simple and innovative tool was developed: the social statement. This is a self-assessment device for social responsibility activities and a support in the drafting of a report whose objective is to guarantee transparency of performance in the field of social responsibility.

Lastly, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies established within the framework of the commitments undertaken in the context of the Third European Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility, the Italian multi-stakeholder forum for corporate social responsibility [6]. The initiative was to encourage the dissemination of CSR among Italian companies and organizations by increasing the level of awareness of the importance of relations between CSR and sustainable development; facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices; promote transparency and convergence of CSR practices and tools, with particular attention to the needs of small- and medium-sized enterprises, and, lastly, to promote the sharing of partnership experiences between institutions, companies and organizations and civil society.

3. Consumer social responsibility

With socioeconomic progress, there has been an increase in household incomes followed by demand increase and differentiation that have stimulated the transition from a craft production to an industrial production, stimulating in turn a profound innovation of products and processes [7]. Environmental protection, seen as a capital belonging to all humanity, has made it possible to develop consumers' sensitivity toward their assets, particularly toward food products: sensitivity especially forced by scandals that have interested the agri-food sector, particularly in recent years.

Nowadays, the subjective component of the demand attributable to the preference of the consumer is subordinated to cultural and natural factors, level of education, age, and social context that takes a leading role in the market [8]. The consumer, with his/her preference and his/her taste, is able to modulate the demand and, consequently, the market itself, structured on

the basis of the variables on which the consumer focuses, ranging from quality/price ratio, to packaging of the product, to ethics of workers' rights, ecology, respect for the environment, diet, health, and so on [9].

A scenario which highlights that a consumer, with the purchase of the product, tends to satisfy more needs than in the past, ranging from food safety, in terms of compliance with hygiene rules and nutritional properties, to sustainability, in terms of use of renewable resources during the production process and in relation to respect for the living conditions of animals [10]. Lastly, as already stated, there is also the interest for safety in the workplace and the respect for workers' rights [10]. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the dynamics of the consumption of quality products, expression of a growing 'modern consumer' sensitivity toward nutritional and ethical content: a post-modern consumer, considered as one of the main stakeholders of the company because, compared to the past, s/he chooses, buys, uses products and services in a conscious way.

The level of wealth that has characterized Western society leads individuals to make informed purchase choices, based not only on affordability, but also on issues such as quality of life and responsibility toward future generations [11]. The modern consumer becomes 'gatekeeper of the market' through actions that can be negative, positive, individual or collective: as a consequence s/he asks the companies for increasingly high quality and ethical standards. The figure of the modern consumer, that is, much more critical and careful toward the products and services offered by the market, it is one of the most significant transformations of Italian consumption patterns in recent years. This means that we are faced with a new subjectivism of consumption especially in the agricultural and agri-food sector.

4. Social and economic development

In this context, the sociodemographic changes connected to economic development, product and process innovations [12] have pushed consumers toward an increasing sensitivity in terms of the safety of food. This sensitivity has been sharpened by food scandals and health emergencies that have hit the agricultural and agri-food sector on a global scale in the years between the old and the new millennium [13].

However, not only the food risks are important, but also the tendencies and sensitivities spread toward issues closely related to food and its processing (that includes the treatment of raw materials, the phases of preparation and the packaging of the product), from ecosystem pollution to biodiversity loss, from the conditions of animal breeding to genetic manipulation and from the new forms of labor exploitation to the increase in social inequalities [14]. It follows that the subjective component of the demand attributable to personal consumer's taste, considered enduring in the past, now is highly influenced by factors of a cultural and sociodemographic nature (education, age, social context), taking a leading role in the market. This component allows a better interpretation of the demand (not just the food one) and its transformation, since the traditional explanatory variables (price, relative prices and income) are no longer sufficient [15].

For at least three decades, markets have been structured according to the different variables that consumer can converge each time: affordability in terms of price, opportunity of purchase, ease of use, durability, packaging, quality, ecology, ethics, respect for workers' rights, pleasure, health, diet and gluttony. In Italy, a scenario is evolving in which the citizen-consumer is driven to look for food products to satisfy a multiplicity of needs [16]. These needs range from food safety, in terms of hygienic and nutritional characteristics, to environmental sustainability, in terms of prevalent use of local and renewable resources, of the use of natural products and processes and of the respect of living conditions of farmed animals, up to a whole series of ethical components, from workplace safety to workers' protection, from social cohesion of the community to the enhancement of rural production areas and local food and wine traditions.

The evolution of Italians' eating habits and consumption in the last 40 years has enucleated the characteristics and the main economic indicators subdividing them into five stages, each corresponding to just as many periods (source: Istat data—the Italian National Institute of Statistics) [17]. From the post II World War period until the 1970s, it is possible to observe: progressive satisfaction of basic needs; consumption grows by about 300% in real terms during 15 years. Then, income increases; consumption and savings grow; food consumption at home dominates; almost 50% of the households have two income earners; food expenditure is one-third of the total expenditure. During the 1980s, income increases; the new acquisition consumption starts; food consumption experimentation shows new trends, signs of excesses as income rises further. Later, as financial incomes take off, consumption continues to grow, including food consumption, but at a slower pace; the organized large-scale distribution develops (supermarkets, ipermarkets, etc.); about 50% of marketing takes place through the organized large-scale distribution. In the end, since 2000, the race to high levels of consumption stops; attention to quality, safety, eco-social impact grow; eating out counts like eating at home; the organized large-scale distribution is the main sales channel; there is a reduction in the per-capita spending. The latter can be related to the global economic crisis.

5. The responsible purchase of food products: an empirical study

After presenting an overview of the theme of social responsibility and its related issues in the Italian context, from different institutions' point of views, companies' and consumers' perspectives, in this section, the important issue of agri-food is deliberated using an empirical position. Here, our own quantitative survey conducted on Italian consumers is discussed, in order to try and understand how Italians consider their relationship with the theme of social responsibility. We explore the manner in which they interact with companies, in particular, agri-food companies and their products. Therefore, a survey is presented (based on a previous study [18]), aimed at analyzing the responsible consumption in general and in relation to particular ranges of products. The analysis was conducted with the computer-assisted web surveying method (online questionnaires) considering a representative sample of 933 families of 1000 functionally chosen for the purposes of the work and distributed equally among the main Italian cities such as Milan, Rome and Naples. It represents a detailed study to try to better understand the perception of consumers regarding types of little known food products. This study can generally be considered similar to eco-compatibility or responsible consumption issues.

5.1. Consumer survey: objective and methodology

The research has set itself the objective of investigating in detail the role of social responsibility of the company in relation to the impact that it can have on consumption of agri-food products. We take into consideration the knowledge and opinion that buyers have about the product. The analysis is also aimed at highlighting the importance that consumers give to corporate social responsibility when purchasing agri-food and the receptivity of consumers toward the sustainability strategies implemented above all by the main companies of the sector.

The degree of knowledge of particular categories of food products other than conventional (organic, fair-trade, genetically modified, etc.) was also measured and, lastly, the readiness of consumers to buy products of ethically oriented companies was measured, even when involving a higher payment. The research was carried out through the administration of a survey aimed at investigating preferences, behavior and participation regarding the theme of responsible consumption.

In this context, in order to formalize the research, three factors that play an important role in determining consumer behaviors were identified: knowledge, attitude and behavior that could influence the consumers' behavior toward CSR. The important meaning of the variables also stems from their role in other studies [18] that have focused on knowledge, attitude and practices or perception or training needs. The formulated research hypotheses are as follows:

Hp1: Attitude is positively related to Behavior;

Hp2: Knowledge is positively related to Behavior.

5.2. Features and results of the survey

The analyzed sample is composed of 46% for men and 54% for women. The considered sample appears to be fairly well distributed also with respect to age. As a matter of fact, 29% of respondents are aged between 20 and 30 years; 28% of respondents are aged between 30 and 45 years; 26% of respondents are aged between 45 and 60 years and 17% are over the age of 60.

With regard to social and age variables, the role attributed to the company can be influenced by level of education obtained and by professional status. Among the respondents, 3% have obtained an elementary school diploma; 11% have obtained a middle school diploma; 50% have obtained a high school diploma and 36% have obtained a complete university degree. Therefore, from this point of view, the criterion was balanced but the participant sample was skewed toward the better educated one.

This situation is similar when the professional status of the sample is assessed. Namely, 16% are self-employed; 21% are employees; 11% are retirees; 6% are unemployed; 19% are housewives and 28% are students.

5.3. Social responsibility and consumer

The results of the survey highlight the different degrees of confidence that consumers show toward the companies that control the production, the management and the distribution of agri-food products. The analysis showed that the majority of respondents, 97%, do not have

confidence in companies (considering also those who have a limited trust) (**Figure 1**). The level of distrust grows with the increasing of the levels of education; as a matter of fact, 33% of graduates showed they lacked confidence in companies. Those who show a greater degree of trust are, instead, those who have obtained only an elementary diploma or a middle school diploma.

The theme of social responsibility is certainly not new, even if only in these last few years, it became more widespread among consumers, who are becoming more and more interested. Nowadays, there are many companies that make considerable efforts to understand consumers’ preferences, not only in relation to their actual consumption needs, but also with respect to initiatives considered fundamental in terms of CSR, since it represents fundamental information for the company in order to change its market strategies and achieve the best results.

The survey showed that the percentage of consumers who are aware of the role played by socially responsible business initiatives, within civil society, is still too low: namely, most of the sample, that is, 57% of participants (**Figure 2**) has heard about it for various reasons. We find 25% of graduates being informed; however, better informed are those who are aged between 30 and 45 years (15%) and between 45 and 60 years (24%). This shows that younger people are not well-informed and too little concerned with relevant issues such as social responsibility, despite the level of education achieved.

In recent years, companies’ charitable initiatives have considerably increased. The companies tend to sponsor social and environmental initiatives, or solidarity ones, to improve their image to the eyes of consumers. However, what has just been said is not reflected in terms of benefits to consumers in the survey conducted (**Figure 3**): more than two-thirds of the respondents admit that they do not remember any initiative being put in place to protect the environment or human rights by agri-food companies. Individuals who are less informed about the initiatives implemented by companies are aged over 45 years and have a middle school diploma or less.

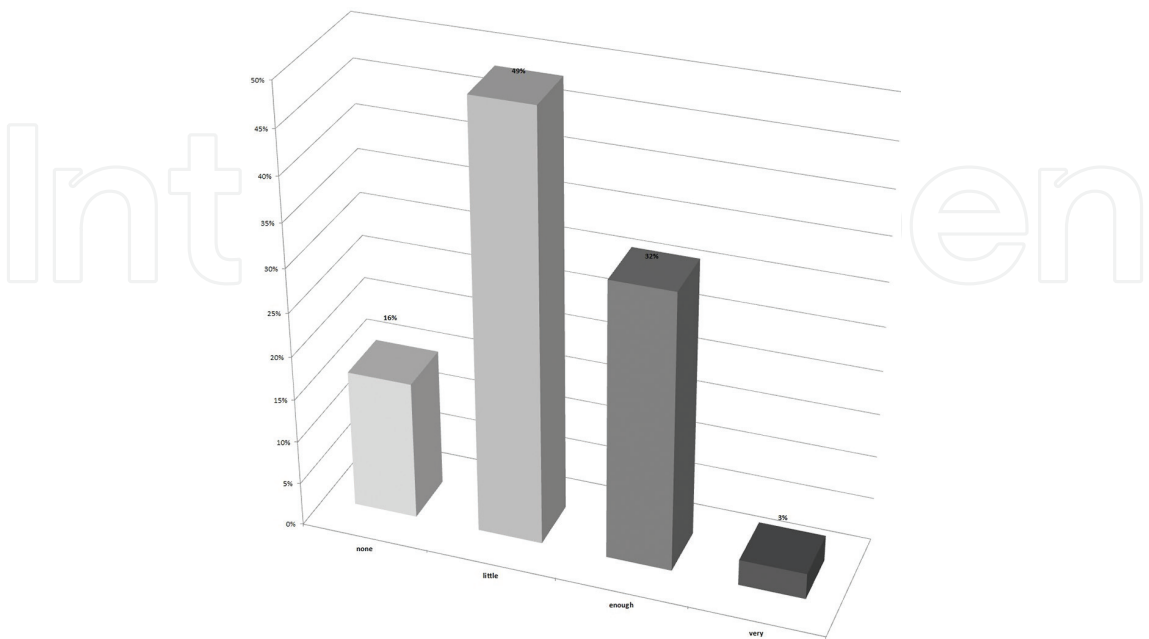


Figure 1. Degree of confidence toward companies.

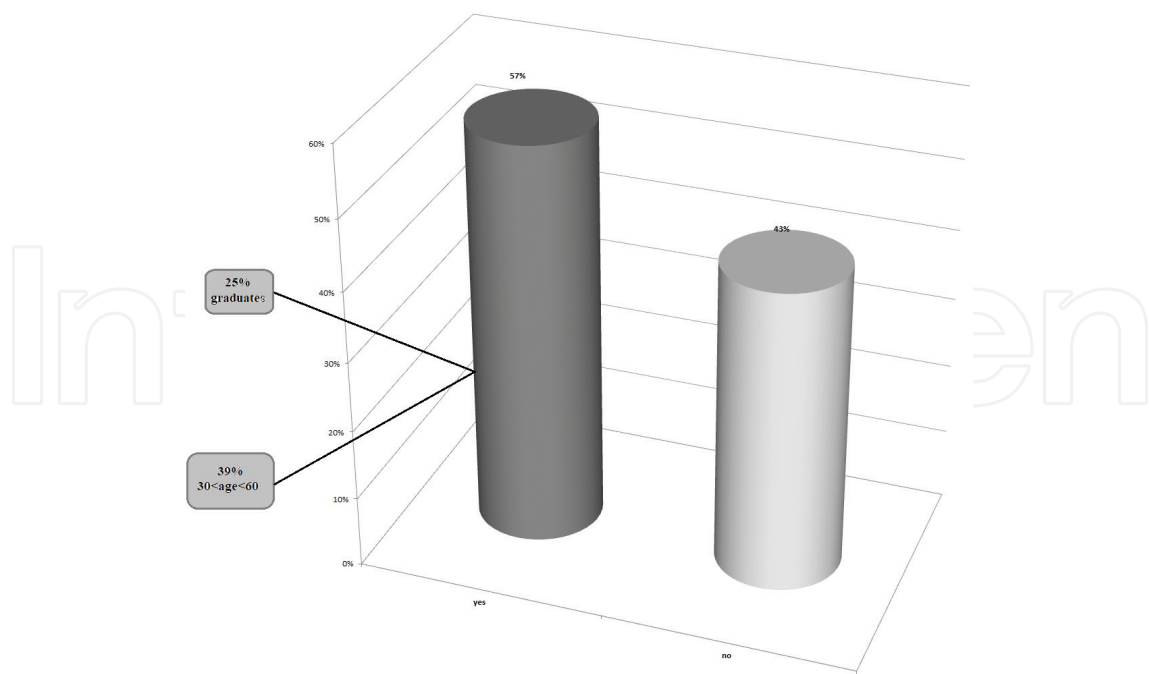


Figure 2. Degree of knowledge on the CSR.

Modern consumers, much more attentive to social problems, require the company to not just operate on the basis of the logic of profit, but also show a commitment to improve the milieu in which they operate, both from a social and environmental point of view. As a matter of fact, the survey showed that the vast majority of respondents agree about the need of the company

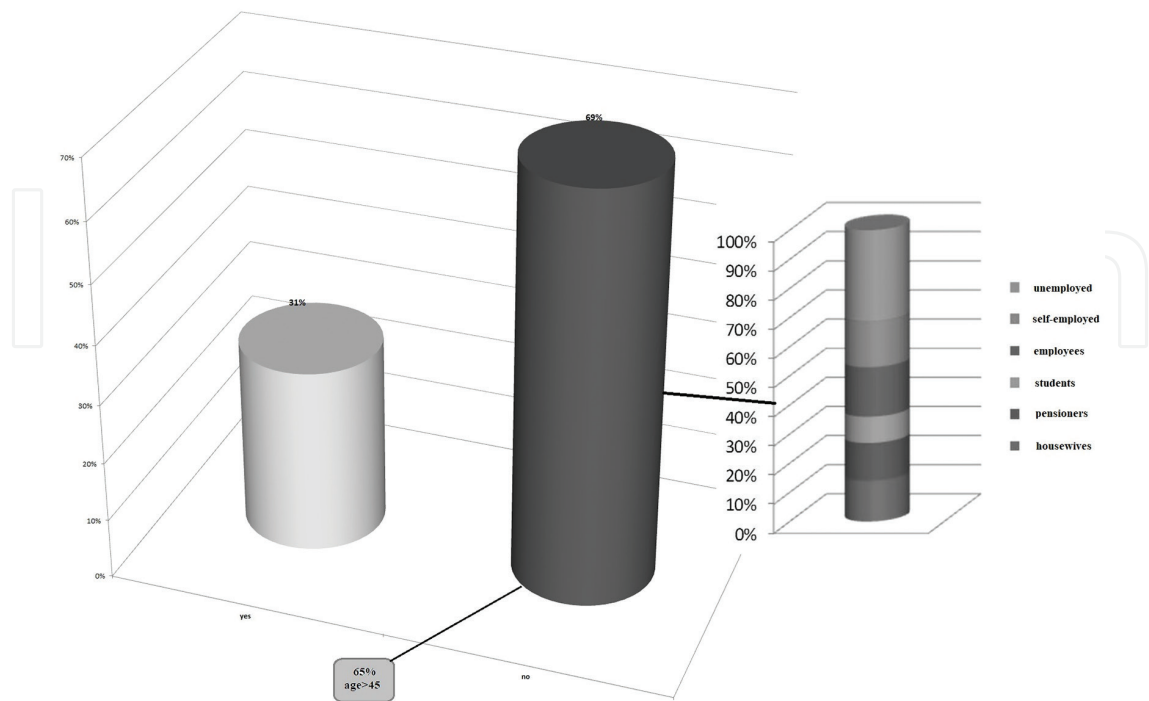


Figure 3. Knowledge on business initiatives toward protecting the environment or society.

to deal with the issues of social importance (**Figure 4**): this confirms an ever-increasing need of the company to take on responsibilities that go beyond the simple profit. Consequently, it can be said that social responsibility should not be understood as a mere cost or a bond, but as a real investment from the point of view of functional marketing strategies, which, over time, contributes to the development of the company and creates value for all the actors involved, not just those pursuing the goal of sustainable development.

At present, the role of the company, in addition to the production of wealth, is based on philanthropic donations or on financing cultural, scientific and environmental activities, and also remembering that for Italy, the social audit, the basic instrument of CSR, unlike in other European countries, is still a voluntary choice and not a legal obligation. A large proportion of respondents evaluate these initiatives as advertising maneuvers (37%): according to this point of view (**Figure 5**), the company acts in a socially responsible way without being driven by an effective interest toward society or by ethical considerations, but in an opportunistic way to obtain a greater profit; 18% of the sample considers these initiatives as episodes that are completely sporadic, therefore, inadequate to solve social problems; 24% claims that charitable initiatives are no more than a way to make up for previous cases of unethical actions carried out ordinarily; lastly, only 21% believe that they are useful in resolving social problems.

5.4. Purchase, responsible consumption and willingness to pay

As highlighted earlier, the contemporary consumer is much more selective, competent and demanding, therefore, s/he is no longer passive toward the inputs (behavioral, of satisfaction of his/her needs, of accessory needs, etc.) of the companies. The consumer is now an active subject with whom the company must interact continuously and progressively, having to take into account its new needs not strictly linked to personal consumption requirements. The study shows that few of the consumers who, when buying a product of a certain brand, are aware of the link between that particular product with the big agri-food production company, even if the latter is known to them. The reason probably lies in the greater renown of the specific brand of the product compared to the name of the (often big) company that produces it (**Figure 6**).

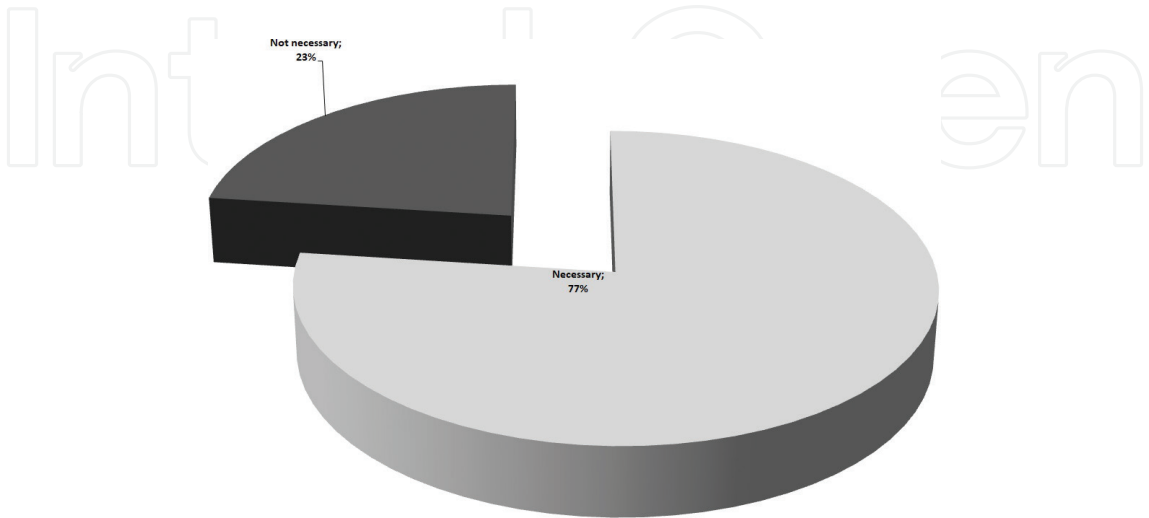


Figure 4. Need for the company to take an interest in socioenvironmental issues.

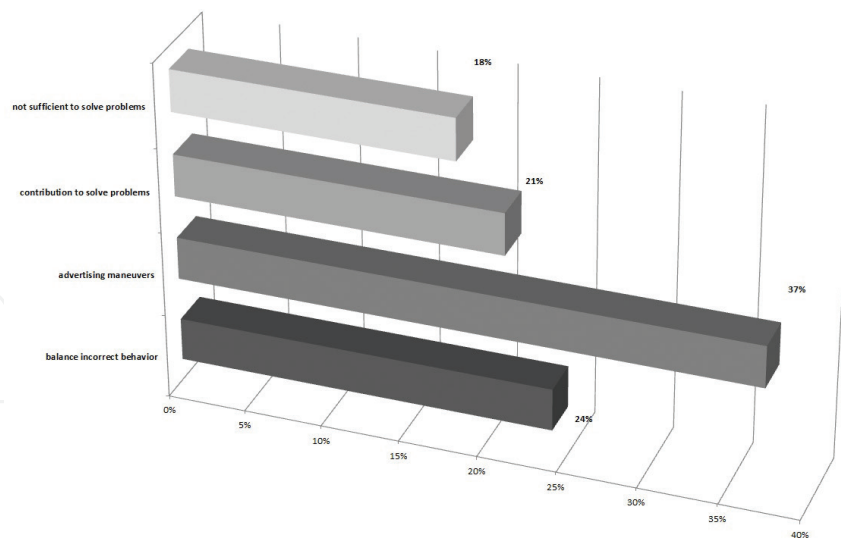


Figure 5. Role of charitable initiatives implemented by companies.

At the time of purchase, the consumer is driven by motivations that lead him/her to choose a specific product of a range of possibilities. The survey shows that (**Figure 7**) the majority of individuals surveyed chooses the product on the basis of a good price/quality ratio, a discrete group chooses on the basis of the trust it has toward the manufacturing company (21%) or because, instead, it takes into account the prominence of the brand (20%), thinking that a more successful brand is automatically a guarantee for the buyer because it is indicative of a qualitatively superior product. The others take into account, at the time of purchase, the social and environmental policies implemented by the company.

Nowadays, the consumer is very attentive in the evaluation of products and, therefore, labels are essential to help them in their choice. As is known, labels contain a great deal of information related to the product, including nutritional content, ingredients, provenance, the name of the manufacturer, location of the establishment and data according to current regulations (from organic farming, denominations, etc.). Nowadays, it is also possible to understand if

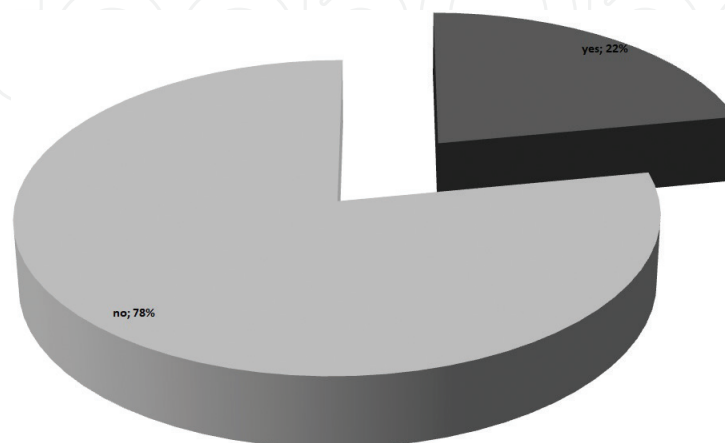


Figure 6. Knowledge of the consumer of the product—big company bond.

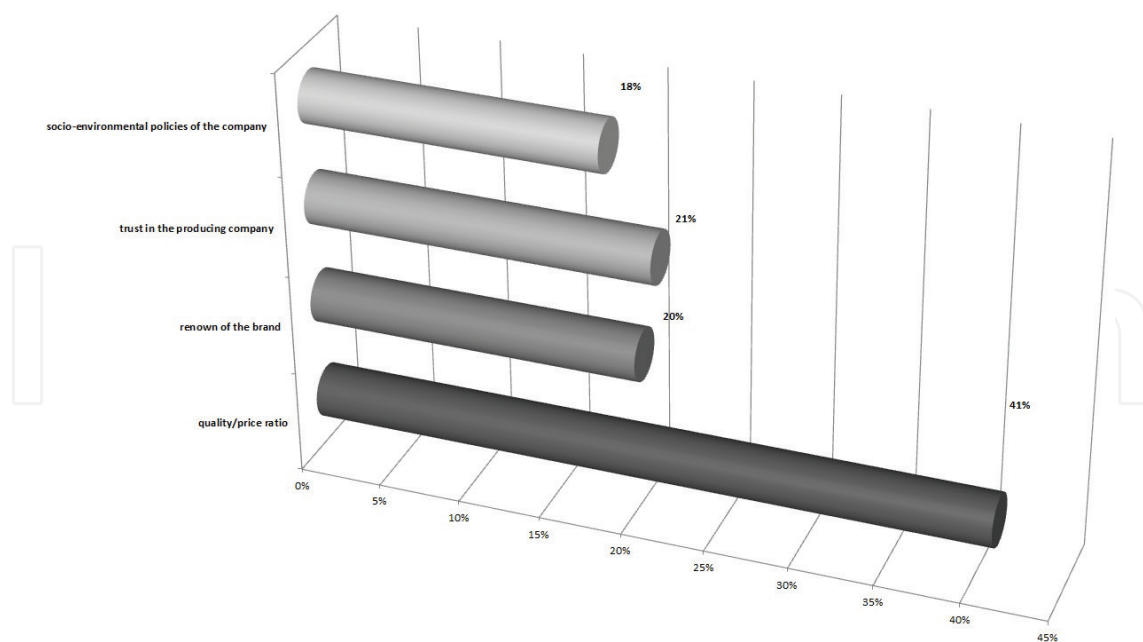


Figure 7. Reasons for buying a product.

the product satisfies the criteria of eco-sustainability and the protection of human and animal rights. The survey showed that (Figure 8) the majority of the respondents considers fundamentally the nutritional content and the origin of the product (among these, there are, above all, those who are over 45 years old), while lower percentages are found for other reasons: 11% is concerned only with the origin of the product, 17% only of the nutritional content, the remaining 25% (including most people aged between 20 and 45 years) shows to be interested in the link between product and the environmental and social protection (greater attention by the younger population toward this type of problem).

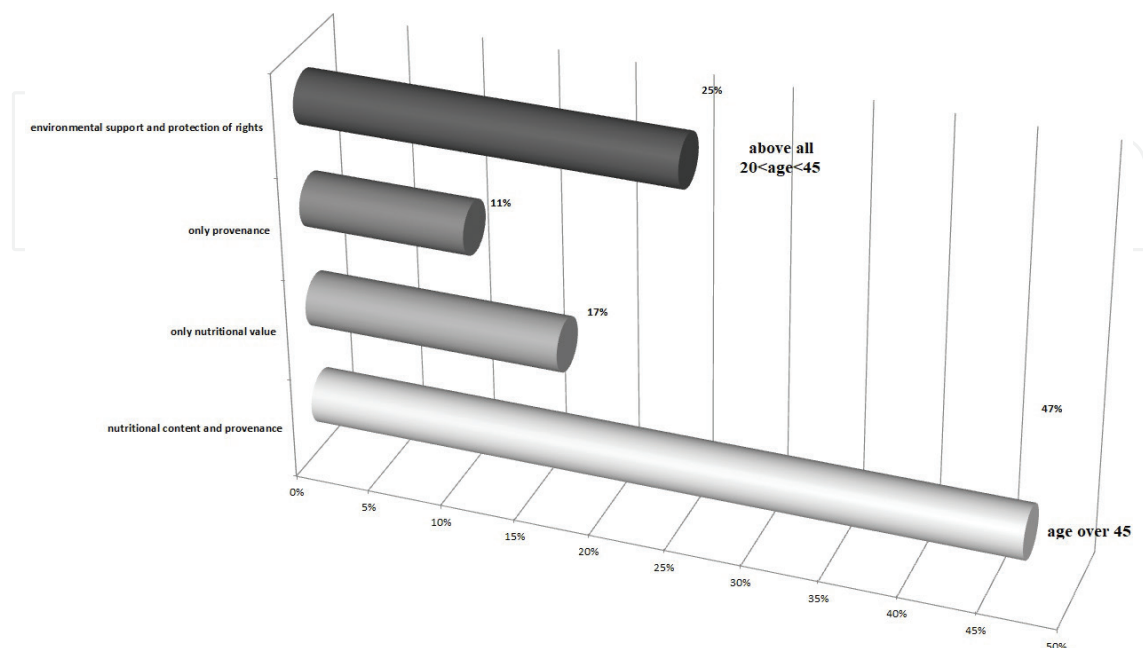


Figure 8. Information deemed most important on label.

Often, the idea of responsible and ethical consumption is immediately linked to that of the purchase of fair-trade products. As is well known, this type of trade allows appropriate earnings and good job opportunities to craftsmen and peasants who come from the poorest regions of the planet. Most of the respondents (34%) say they know about these products. These are mainly young people aged between 20 and 30 (24%) and between 30 and 45 years (15%). The degree of knowledge decreases with the increasing of the age. The difference between men and women, instead, does not appear to be significant.

Such result is a good indicator of the fact that the sample demonstrates a responsible consciousness. There is a lower propensity to purchase organic products, probably due to higher price compared to other types of products. As a matter of fact, only 23% of the surveyed said that they had purchased organic products, and the individuals less inclined to purchase have an age ranging from 45 years (**Figure 9**). Lastly, regardless of considerations regarding the healthiness or unhealthiness of transgenic products, about which the debate is wide ranging, not definitive and still susceptible of major changes, it was possible to observe how almost all the participants (98%) declared that they had never purchased genetically modified foods or had no knowledge of the subject, while a very few of the sample has consciously purchased them; this shows the strong skepticism still existing toward this category of food products.

The last section of the questionnaire shows that less than half of the consumers are willing to buy a good at a higher cost, provided that it is produced by a company that is fulfilling initiatives in favor of the community, workers or of the environment. As many as 41% (**Figure 10**) of the respondents would be willing to purchase a product at a higher cost. It should be noted that among these, we find a large percentage of pensioners (17%), housewives (15%) and self-employed workers (19%). Moreover, between the three price ranges considered (less than 1 euro, 1–2 euros and more than 2 euros), the choice of the consumers surveyed always fell on the first option (i.e., the lowest price range).

Of considerable interest is also the identification of the areas which the respondents would prefer the economic efforts of the companies were directed (**Figure 11**): the most important ones are education and training, as well as health and research, while only 21% indicated the main preference as the aid to third world and 7% the attention to the environment (above all they are aged over 60 years—it could be because the older population is not really aware of the consequences).

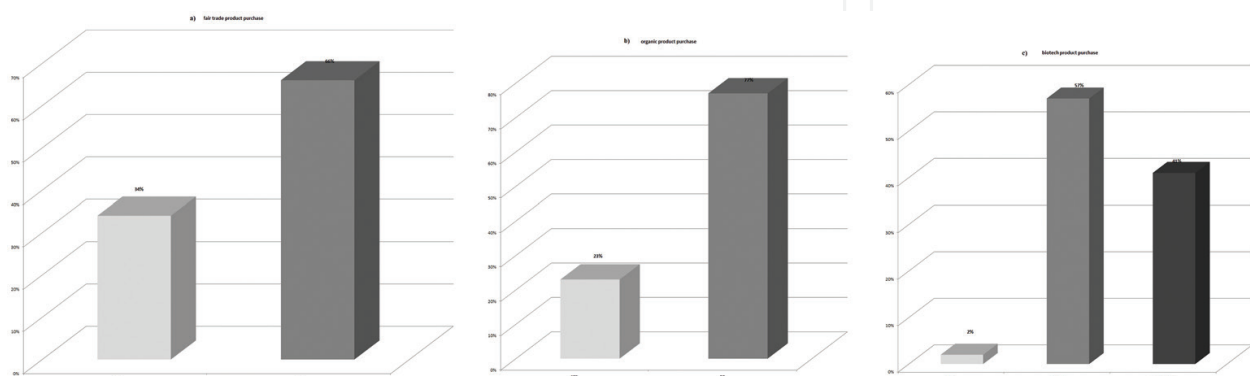


Figure 9. Consumer relationship with alternative purchases: (a) fair trade; (b) organic; (c) biotech.

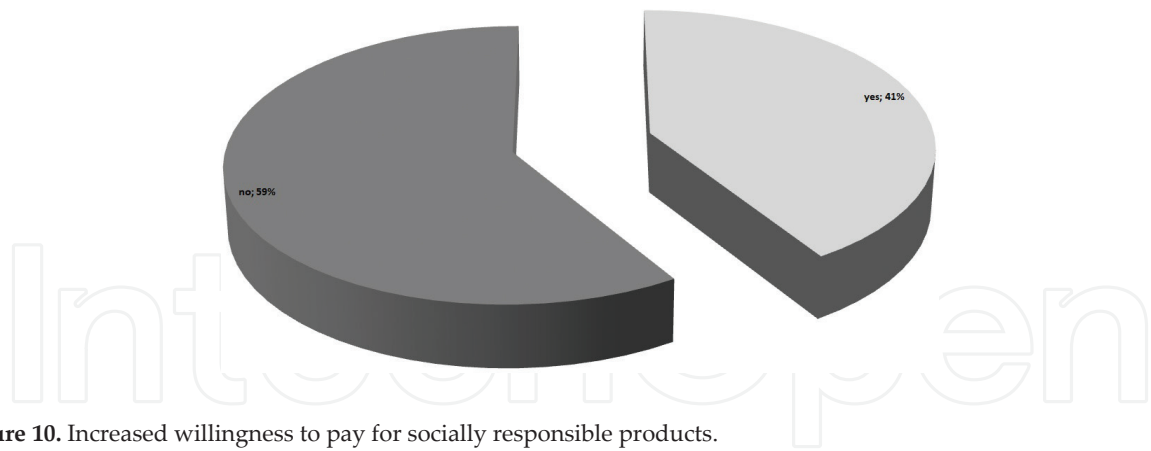


Figure 10. Increased willingness to pay for socially responsible products.

5.5. Summary considerations on the survey

Nowadays, the debate on ethics has become of central importance in Western countries, involving both companies and consumers. Due to the new attitude of the last decades and under pressure of new spending capacities and ever-increasing attention to everything related to the production of a food product, a new context has emerged, in which companies assume an attitude of greater responsibility toward all the stakeholders and, therefore, also to the consumers.

This chapter analyzes how consumers’ knowledge and attitude influence the perception of CSR (which is generally better accepted and valued by the general public than economic practices). Then, the effect of some variables on CSR perception was analyzed. The findings obtained from the analysis lead to a better understanding of the influence of the value structure of Italian

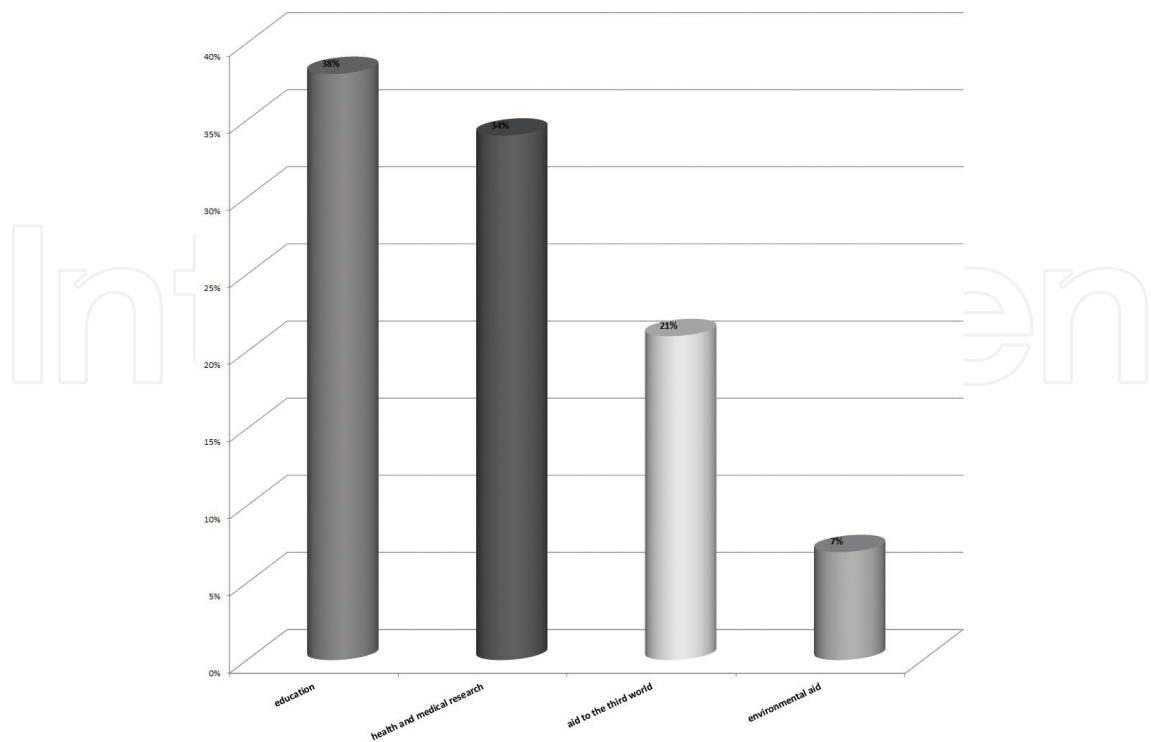


Figure 11. Conditions for willingness to pay for socially responsibly produced foods.

people on ethical performance and confirm both the beginning hypotheses, that is, both attitude and knowledge are positively related to the behavior. The results can help the corporate sector to devise business ethics programs and can also help managers to develop strategies for the success of a social initiative. From data analysis, the most significant element in the research is the knowledge of the consumer when s/he buys. According to the obtained results, although the initiatives of enterprises with regard to CSR are important, they appear to have little effect because of the lack of knowledge that consumers show about responsible corporate initiatives. The reasons may be different: low degree of diffusion of information about CSR through different ways of mass communication, not explanatory packaging and absence of valid education. From the analysis, it has become evident that only consumers who know the actions of CSR buy products of companies that actually implement responsible initiatives; other consumers buy above all considering price, brand and perceived quality. We argue that a different, more focused strategy of information and sponsorship is important to change this trend.

It is no longer a novelty when companies show off behaviors, sometimes even in a blatant way that seems to be ethical. As a matter of fact, most of the companies exhibit a code of conduct that aims to demonstrate their commitment to positively affecting the environment that surrounds them. From the data of this research, it has emerged that contemporary consumers are more sensitive and, therefore, willing to reward, within the limits of their possibilities, through purchasing choices, those companies that they consider to be more socially responsible, punishing, as a consequence, those that do not comply with these standards.

Overall, it seems that the respondents are well aware that companies often do not adopt a responsible behavior by virtue of a real social commitment, but they do it following a sometimes temporary trend linked to the need to take care of their image, sometimes even in relation to cases of amoral behaviors. The initial aim of this research was to assess the knowledge of social responsibility among consumers; in this context, significant indicators were obtained.

Not all the respondents are equally sensitive to these subject matters because of the disparity in education and availability of information. The concept of corporate social responsibility is known and better understood by the more educated population, who are more knowledgeable and informed individuals. Many consumers tend to be seen as passive victims of a system that sometimes tends to manipulate their choices. Nowadays, consumers should be more attentive to the motivations that lead them to choose a brand rather than another, since the purpose of choice can no longer be linked only to economic convenience, but to a whole series of indicators. As the survey demonstrates, the percentage of individuals, who choose a company rather than another for its social commitment is still too low. On the other hand, the concept of ethical consumption has passed the embryonic stage: educated individuals demand a fairer behavior from those companies with which they come into daily contact through the act of purchasing.

6. Conclusions

In summary, it is possible to state that there are several factors that have contributed to make ethics a fundamental element for companies. First of all, a change in public opinion has meant that

today the company is evaluated not only for the ability to generate wealth and work, but also, and above all, for the benefits it can generate for the whole society, not only for its shareholders.

Another important factor is the advent of the era of online communication, which has exponentially increased the ability of associations and opinion movements to mobilize citizens worldwide. Indeed, up until 30 years ago, the protest toward companies was entrusted to pamphlets, leaflets and demonstrations, today's scenario includes websites, blogs and e-mails, which allows an acceleration and an effect of the protest campaigns that was unimaginable before. The nature and scope of globalization have now created powerful economic actors, who can exert considerable influence on political decisions and, therefore, have an impact on people all over the world.

Lately, consumer attitudes are oriented toward ethical evaluations, which go beyond the intrinsic quality of the product, including the intangible properties of the same. From this study, it emerged that critical or responsible consumption, forms of boycotts, fair-trade and solidarity buying groups are only some of many alternative consumer experiences that are spreading among the population. It is therefore not a matter of a return to the past, but rather it is the search for new models that are compatible with respect to the environment, for natural resources and local communities.

Changes in consumer behavior have repercussions on business strategies. Through the analysis carried out, it was possible to ascertain the degree of knowledge of consumers about corporate social responsibility. It emerged that most of the respondents who know about CSR have high levels of education. Furthermore, it has been shown that, at the time of purchase, very few consumers know that, by buying a certain brand, they actually buy a product from a particular company. The people who have a greater knowledge of this phenomenon are quite young. In addition, the survey showed some parameters (social and environmental policies implemented by companies), which, at the time of purchase, only a small percentage of respondents took into consideration. This very low percentage highlights the low interest of consumers toward social policies implemented by companies, or a lack of confidence in their initiatives, or even a lack of knowledge about them (while a greater attention to other factors is determined, such as price).

Furthermore, the analysis showed that consumers buy more fair-trade products than supposedly high-quality products, despite the fact that many organic products are more easily traceable than fair-trade products. The reason could be found in the fact that supposedly high-quality products have a much higher price. Lastly, for the majority of respondents, it was important that the company carries out corporate social responsibility strategies, even when, in the majority of cases, they are not willing to pay a higher cost for the product. Therefore, despite thinking that the motivations that push a consumer to choose one product over another are social in nature, in reality, economic motivations continue to prevail.

These considerations, together with those referring to the purchase of particular categories of food products and the reactions of companies to modern consumers' demand, have provided important insights into the Italian scenario of today's consumer and its relationship with the reality of social responsibilities of companies. These findings can represent the starting point for further research that has as primary objective the in-depth analysis of a theme relevant to the context of today's agri-food system.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

Notes/thanks/other declarations

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