CSR communication to consumers in clothing markets - Mapping consumer interest, awareness, attitudes and expectations

International Business Communication

Master's thesis

Lotta Kivekäs

2013

CSR communication to consumers in clothing markets.
Mapping consumer interest, awareness, attitudes and expectations

Objective of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate consumer perceptions of CSR (corporate social responsibility) and CSR communication in order to improve company ability to effectively communicate on CSR. The study was motivated by research indicating low consumer awareness of and trust in CSR. The study focused on the clothing industry as clothing companies have increased their CSR investments following pressure from stakeholders.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The empirical part of the research consisted of a self-completion questionnaire distributed online and completed by 166 Finnish nationals. Based on the theoretical framework, consumer views were investigated in the survey in three levels: CSR interest, CSR awareness, and attitudes and expectations towards CSR communication. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. The latter were analyzed using quantitative content analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

Firstly, the findings indicate a higher consumer interest in corporate responsibility than previous research from the clothing industry. Secondly, consumer awareness of CSR initiatives taken in the industry appears fairly limited. Thirdly, the findings add to knowledge of consumer attitudes and expectations on CSR communication. Concerning message content, consumers wish clothing companies to address environmental issues and to offer information on the impact of their CSR initiatives. Regarding channels, the findings indicate that clothing companies are likely to achieve highest awareness for and trust in their CSR messages by communicating through product labels and company websites. The findings provide guidance for the strategic design of CSR communication.

Key words: CSR, CSR communication, clothing industry, consumer awareness, consumer perceptions

Yritysvastuuviestintä kuluttajille vaatemarkkinoilla.
Kuluttajien kiinnostus, tietoisuus, asenteet ja odotukset

Tutkimuksen tavoitteet

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli kartoittaa kuluttajien näkemyksiä yritysvastuusta ja sen viestinnästä. Tiedon avulla yritysten on mahdollista viestiä tehokkaammin vastuullisuushankkeistaan. Motivaationa tutkimukselle oli aikaisemmissa tutkimuksissa todettu kuluttajien vähäinen tietoisuus yritysvastuusta sekä alhainen luottamus yritysvastuuviestintään. Tutkimuksen kohteena oli vaateteollisuus, sillä vaateyritykset ovat lähivuosina lisänneet yritysvastuuinvestointejaan sidosryhmäpaineiden seurauksena.

Tutkimusmenetelmät ja teoreettinen viitekehys

Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin internetin kautta kuluttajakyselyllä, jonka täytti 166 suomalaista. Teoreettiseen viitekehykseen pohjautuen kuluttajien näkemyksiä tutkittiin kyselyssä kolmella tasolla: kiinnostus yritysvastuuta kohtaan, tietoisuus yritysvastuuhankkeista sekä asenteet ja odotukset yritysvastuuviestintää kohtaan. Kysely koostui monivalintakysymyksistä ja avoimista kysymyksistä, joista jälkimmäiset analysoitiin käyttäen kvantitatiivista sisältöanalyysia.

Tutkimuksen tulokset ja johtopäätökset

Tulokset osoittavat suurempaa kiinnostusta yritysvastuuta kohtaan kuin aiempi tutkimus vaatealalta. Kuluttajien tietoisuus alalla toteutetuista yritysvastuuhankkeista vaikuttaa suhteellisen rajalliselta. Lisäksi löydökset lisäävät tietoa kuluttajien asenteista ja odotuksista yritysvastuuviestintää kohtaan. Viestinnän sisältöön liittyen kuluttajat toivovat vaateyritysten käsittelevän ympäristökysymyksiä ja tarjoavan tietoa vastuullisuus-hankkeidensa vaikutuksista. Viestinnän kanaviin liittyen vaikuttaa, että tietoisuutta ja luottamusta vaatealan yritysvastuuhankkeisiin voidaan parhaiten kasvattaa viestimällä tuotemerkinnöillä ja yrityksen verkkosivuilla. Löydökset toimivat ohjeistuksena yritysvastuuviestinnän strategiseen suunnitteluun.

Avainsanat: yritysvastuu, yritysvastuuviestintä, vaateteollisuus, kuluttajien tietoisuus, kuluttajanäkemykset

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporations increasingly need to take into account the consequences of their actions to the surrounding environment (Cornelissen, 2011). In each industry, various groups of stakeholders from investors and the media to consumers and non-governmental organizations are affected by or can affect corporate operations. Acknowledging and responding to the needs of these groups has become a prerequisite for successful business (Argenti, 2007). Thus, a growing number of companies are paying attention to the environmental and social impacts of their operations for example by engaging in nature protection, improving their labor practices, or donating to a social cause. These types of actions are referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Cornelissen, 2011).

While companies may engage in CSR for a genuine concern for their stakeholders, the initiatives are often expected to be profitable for the business as well (Du et al. 2010; Caroll & Shabana, 2010). Thus, companies need to be concerned with how they communicate their CSR initiatives to stakeholders (Argenti, 2007, p. 82; Du et al. 2010; Dawkins, 2004). From the business perspective, consumers form a particularly important audience of CSR communication because of their power to reward or punish companies (Du et al. 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). According to Du et al. (2010), consumer support for CSR can be shown for instance as brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth or readiness to pay higher prices. Ultimately, investments in CSR need to turn into increased purchases in order for responsible corporate behaviors to be sustained (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009).

In order to generate positive responses to CSR, companies need to be aware of consumer views regarding CSR and CSR communication. Research indicates that the majority of consumers see corporations should address ethical aspects of their operations (Dawkins, 2004) and wish to receive more CSR information than they have been provided (Pomering

& Dolnicar, 2009; Mohr et al., 2001). However, particular challenges have been identified which affect consumer response to CSR communication. Firstly, consumers naturally cannot react to CSR in any form if they are unaware of companies' responsibility efforts. Nevertheless, consumers appear to remain poorly informed on specific CSR initiatives (Pomering and Dolnicar, 2009) and the majority seems to ignore that a large amount of firms engage in CSR (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Secondly, a lack of trust in CSR communication is a challenge for companies (Du et al. 2010; Argenti, 2007). Stakeholders are often skeptical towards firm motives for engaging in CSR as well as towards the different CSR communication channels used (Du et al. 2010). Recognizing the attitudes and expectations of stakeholders and designing communications accordingly has been suggested to be essential in order to generate company support behaviors through CSR (Dawkins, 2004, Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009, Du et al., 2010). In light of the identified challenges, the aim of this research is to increase knowledge on consumer perceptions regarding CSR and CSR communication.

In order to limit the research scope this study takes an industry-specific perspective. The clothing industry is particularly suitable for the field of international business communication research because of its highly globalized nature. Major apparel brands are universally established, promoting similar fashion trends to consumers in all of their locations. Moreover, studying the role of CSR communication in the industry is important since CSR issues have been strongly present in global clothing markets in recent years (Jegethesan, Sneddon & Soutar, 2012). Western companies have largely moved their production to low cost countries (Emmelhainz & Adams, 1999, p. 52) and consequently, have been accused for paying too low salaries to workers, neglecting safety and health issues, and using child labor (Rudell, 2006; Dickson & Eckman, 2006). Environmental issues such as the use of harmful chemicals have also been brought forward (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010). According to Jegethesan et al. (2012) clothing companies have reacted to

the criticism at industrial and brand levels. Leading global brands have developed programs to advance responsible clothing production and new labels positioned on ethical attributes have experienced significant business growth (Joergens, 2006).

The increased attention to CSR in clothing markets has sparked much academic research on consumer interest in clothing companies' responsibility efforts. It appears that consumers are concerned over social and environmental problems in clothing production (Dickson, 1999, 2000; Hustvedt and Bernard, 2010) but this might not be reflected as increased purchases for responsibly produced clothing (e.g. Jegethesan et al. 2012). Naturally, consumer support for CSR may be inflated in surveys as respondents may be inclined to choose the socially correct answer (Zikmund, 1997, p. 211). However, it is also important to recognize that concerning clothing markets, Dickson (2000) and Joergens (2006) have suggested that better communication about CSR initiatives would be needed to support ethically concerned consumers in their purchases. As discussed above, communication has a great impact on how stakeholders respond to CSR initiatives (Du et al. 2010; Argenti, 2007). For clothing companies increasingly investing in CSR, knowledge of consumers' communication expectations would appear essential in order to generate support behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty and increased purchases.

Despite the importance of communicational aspects in CSR, few studies have concentrated specifically on the role of communication in clothing companies' responsibility efforts. Research has mainly been conducted on the impact of informative CSR product labels on consumer attitudes and behavior (eg. Hyllegaard et al., 2012; Dickson, 1999, 2000; Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010) which provides very limited guidance for companies on CSR message content and channels. In the light of the research gap, the current paper focuses on consumer perceptions concerning CSR and CSR communication in the clothing industry. Firstly, the study investigates consumer interest in and awareness of CSR. Secondly, the

paper investigates consumer attitudes and expectations towards CSR communication content and channels. This will help companies to target their audience with the right messages and through the right channels in order to increase CSR awareness and trust and, consequently, generate company support behaviors.

1.1   Research questions

As identified above, the objective of this research is to find out how consumers perceive CSR and CSR communication in the clothing industry in order to improve company ability to effectively communicate on CSR. The research questions are the following:

1. To what extent are consumers interested in CSR in the clothing industry?
2. To what extent are consumers aware of CSR in the clothing industry?
3. What are the attitudes and expectations of consumers regarding CSR communication in the clothing industry?

1.2   Structure of the thesis

This paper is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the study area and the research niche and presented the research objective and questions.

Chapter 2 reviews previous research related to the current study. The literature reviewed is divided into four themes. Section 2.1 discusses CSR and section 2.2 CSR communication. Section 2.3 focuses on CSR communication to consumers. Section 2.4 looks at the global clothing industry and its relation to corporate social responsibility. In section 2.5, the theoretical framework of this study is presented.

Chapter 3 presents the methods of data collection and data analysis for this study.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. The findings are presented in three sections according to the research questions for this study.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the present study in relation to previous research and the implications for companies.

Chapter 6 concludes the paper with a research summary. In addition, limitations of the study as well as suggestions for further research are presented.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews previous research conducted on the themes of this paper: CSR, CSR communication, the relation of consumers to CSR communication, and CSR in the global clothing industry.

2.1 CSR

This section presents the concept of CSR and the argumentation for CSR from a business perspective.

2.1.1 Concept of CSR

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become strongly established in international business (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 233; Carroll & Shabana, 2010). The aim of the CSR function is to build strong relationships between the company and the communities with which it interacts.

According to Cornelissen (2011, p. 233), corporations were traditionally expected to make profits and be responsible only towards themselves and their shareholders. This view has been replaced with the thinking that companies cannot operate in a vacuum. In the 1980s, stakeholder theory was originated as a response to dramatic changes in the business environment brought about by globalization, information technology and the liberalization of states (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & de Cole, 2010, p. 3). There was seen to be a need to revise how business was understood. According to stakeholder theory, value creation and trade cannot be considered separate from ethical questions rising from globalization. Instead, all people engaged in value creation and trade are seen as

"responsible to those groups who can affect or be affected by their actions" – in other words, to their stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 9).

Carroll and Shabana (2010, p. 85) trace the origins of CSR even further. According to the authors, the idea that corporations have other than financial responsibilities towards the society is centuries old. However, it grew in popularity during the post-World War II period and the social movements of 1960s. Ihlen et al. (2011, p. 6-7) argue that requirements for corporate responsibility have been voiced more loudly since the late 1990s partly due to globalization. Many Western companies have extended their presence to areas with questionable democratic and human rights principles and widespread corruption. In addition, companies are faced with environmental and outsourcing challenges in their domestic countries. These changes have sparked discussion on the role and responsibilities of companies versus governments and the civil society.

In addition to CSR, various terms have been used to describe the corporate-society relationship, such as corporate citizenship, business ethics, sustainability and corporate social performance (Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 86). Cornelissen (2011, p. 233) describes that 'corporate citizenship' refers to the actions companies take to fulfill their responsibilities towards the society. These actions can include philanthropic initiatives, corporate volunteerism, support for health and education programs, and environmental efforts, among others. Although not required by law, these types of initiatives are expected from responsibly operating corporations. According to Cornelissen (2011, p. 236), CSR can then be understood as the moral commitment from businesses to deliver societal value beyond shareholder and market value. In a similar vein, Ihlen et al. (2011, p. 8) define CSR as "the corporate attempt to negotiate its relationship to stakeholders and the public at large".

CSR remains the dominant term used in academic research and in business practice (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 8; Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 86) and thus it is also the term applied in this paper. Based on the discussion above, the present study defines CSR as the corporate attempt to take into account the impacts of its operations on the society and environment.

2.1.2 Business case for CSR

The idea of CSR has not been accepted without criticism. The famous counter-argument by Friedman (1970) holds that the one and only concern of business should be to maximize its profits. The free market system would resolve social problems and if not, it is the duty of governments and legislators, not companies. Moreover, Davis (1973) has argued that companies do not have the expertise to handle social activities since managers are oriented towards financial and operational decision-making. Yet, in the business world, support for CSR has grown as companies have realized that the changed expectations from society towards companies can also bring business benefits (Cornelissen, 2011). For instance, according to Du et al. (2010, p. 9), company engagement in CSR can generate favorable stakeholder attitudes and support behaviors such as purchasing from or investing in the company. In the long term, corporate image and stakeholder relationships can be improved. Maignan and Ferrell (2004) and Sen and Bhattarcharya (2001) argue that CSR can be a source of competitive advantage for companies. Moreover, Carroll and Shabana (2010, p. 101) add that CSR can benefit firms through cost and risk reduction, legitimacy and improved reputation.

In sum, the "business case for CSR" has become strongly established (Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 101; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 10). Yet, CSR does not always lead to favorable results for the company (Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 102; Argenti, 2007, p. 82). For instance, corporate attempts to "do good" may actually backfire if stakeholders perceive that CSR efforts are pursued only to clean the corporate reputation. According to

Carroll and Shabana (2010, p. 102), CSR can only lead to business returns when CSR initiatives are conducted with support from the company's stakeholders. Thus, the role of stakeholder communication in CSR is looked at next.

2.2 CSR communication

As discussed above, companies increasingly find that investing in CSR can be a strategic and reputational asset (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 236; Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 102). Naturally, stakeholder responses are crucially affected by how companies communicate their CSR initiatives. This section discusses CSR communication.

According to Argenti (2007, p. 82), CSR communication should be strategically designed. The corporate communication strategy framework by Argenti (2007, p. 35) in Figure 1 illustrates how to approach the task of making CSR efforts known to the public.
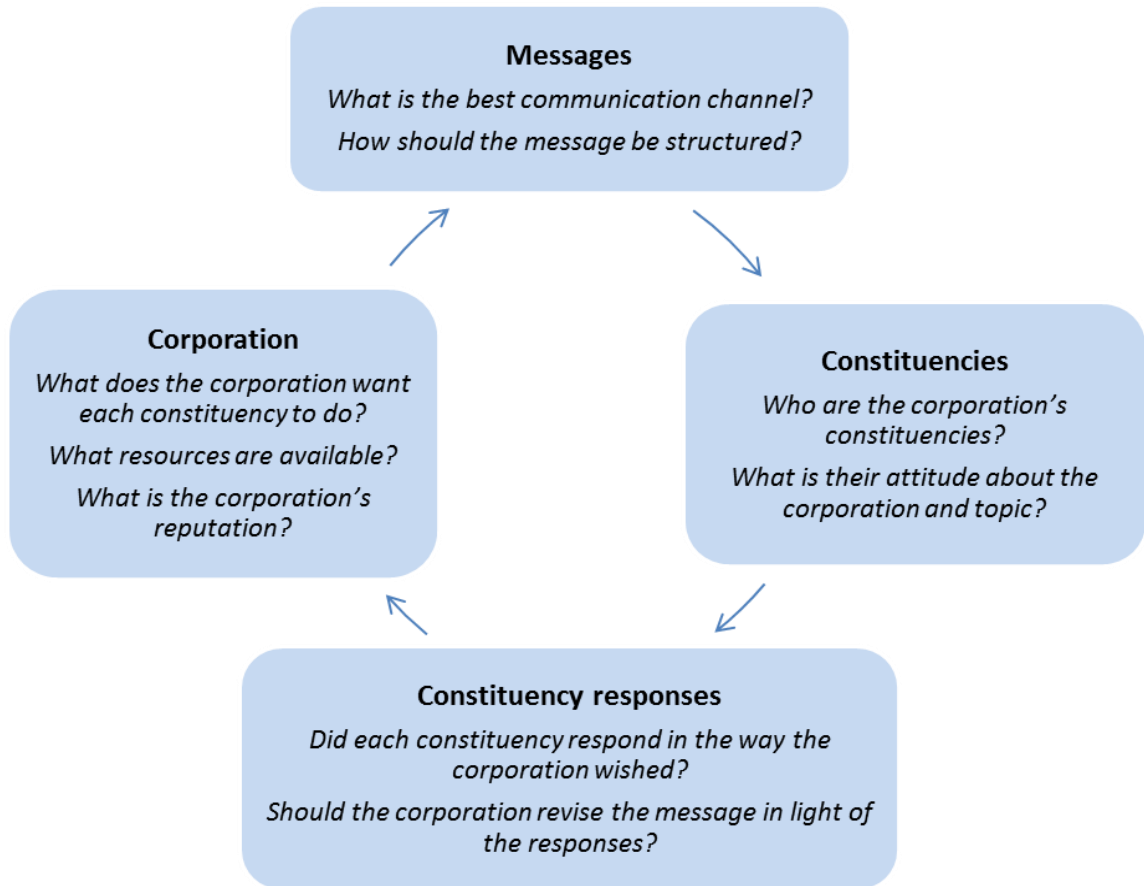
Figure 1. Expanded corporate communication strategy framework (Argenti, 2007, p. 35).

As depicted in Figure 1, the company should identify its key constituencies and map their attitudes and previous knowledge of the topic in question. If a company knows its audience, it can design the right kind of programs and structure the messages effectively. Moreover, it can decide on the best channels to deliver the message. Finally, the communication of CSR efforts should be followed by an assessment of constituency responses in order to measure success.

Various researchers have pointed out that not enough attention has been paid to the role of communication in CSR in business and academic research (Ihlen et al., 2011; Du et al., 2010; Pomering and Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004). For instance, Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) claim that companies cannot expect their responsibility efforts to lead to financial returns if they fail to make these efforts known. Dawkins (2004) draws attention to the lack of audience segmentation. According to her, CSR communication is typically characterized by uniform communications directed at all audiences. Companies fail to acknowledge that the information needs, expectations and channel preferences of different stakeholder groups vary concerning CSR. These differences have to be recognized for CSR communication to be effective (Dawkins, 2004; Du et al, 2010; Pomering and Dolnicar, 2009).

Consequently, Dawkins (2004) has divided the audiences of CSR communication into two categories. The first group, opinion leaders, consists of stakeholders who seek information proactively, such as investors, legislators, non-governmental organizations, and the business press. Information needs within this group may vary for example concerning the priority given to business versus societal goals and the importance attached to different ethical issues. However, the opinion leader groups are all characterized by their willingness to actively follow companies' CSR behaviors.

In contrast, the second group, which Dawkins (2004) names the general public, does not proactively look for CSR information about a company even with regard to issues they consider as particularly important. They do not tend to be the target audience of specialist communication channels like CSR reports. Nevertheless, the general public has an interest in receiving CSR-related information. Consumers wish to be informed on CSR to use their purchasing power to reward or punish companies (Dawkins, 2004). Despite their lack of proactivity, consumers are a crucial audience of CSR communication for companies

expecting positive business returns from CSR (Du et al., 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009).

This section has established that corporate efforts to respond to the expectations from society have increased. Companies can generate positive stakeholder responses through CSR but this requires strategic communication designed to the needs of different audiences. The next section discusses consumers as an audience of CSR communication.

2.3   CSR communication to consumers

In the previous section, it was established that communication has a central role in CSR and it needs to be designed to the needs of different stakeholders. The present section discusses the stakeholder group of consumers. Firstly, the link between CSR and consumers is shortly presented. Consequently, important aspects of CSR communication to consumers rising from research are discussed.

2.3.1 Consumer interest in CSR

As discussed in section 2.1, investments in CSR are increasingly justified from a business perspective (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Du et al., 2010). Thus, consumers are among the most important stakeholders of CSR because of their power to reward corporations for responsible business practices (Du et al., 2010, p. 9). Consumer support for CSR can be shown for instance as brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth or readiness to pay higher prices. Investments in CSR ultimately need to turn into increased sales in order for companies' responsibility commitments to be sustained (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009).

Research suggests that consumers appear to be increasingly willing to purchase from companies perceived as responsible (Dawkins, 2004; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004; Maignan, 2001). Meanwhile, companies that fail to address consumers' ethical concerns risk being

punished in the market place. For instance, organizations judged as unethical have increasingly become the target of public protests and boycotts (Auger, Burke, Devinney & Louviere, 2003, p. 281). A growing number of demonstrations have been directed for instance against Nike and the World Trade Organization and reporting of these incidents spreads quickly in the global media.

Following the increased support for CSR, research has attempted to find out how consumers wish to be communicated on corporate responsibility. Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) studied customers of Australian banks that executed CSR communications. The authors report that while consumers seem to be most interested in receiving core product information from companies there is also a stated interest in CSR-related issues. However, consumers appear to be unsatisfied with the amount of CSR information they are provided and there is an information gap to be fulfilled. Similarly, Mohr et al. (2001) report consumers to be interested in learning about corporate responsibility but the information is seen to be poorly available. Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) suggest that if companies fail to communicate effectively on CSR issues consumers hold as important it may appear as a lack of commitment and weaken the validity of CSR claims in consumers' eyes.

Moreover, according to Dawkins (2004), three out of four consumers state that if they had more CSR information it would affect their purchase decisions. She also reports that the majority of consumers wish companies to spend money on public CSR communication, even if this means less is invested in the CSR initiatives themselves. According to Dawkins, this suggests that people are increasingly aware of the power they can exercise on companies as consumers. She sees more effective communication on CSR is needed in order to support consumers in their decision making.

The research reviewed suggests that consumers wish to be better informed on companies' CSR behaviors and that the information could affect their purchase decisions. However, it should be noted that consumer research on CSR is subject to a social desirability bias (Zikmund, 1999, p. 211). This means that respondents may exaggerate their support for ethical behaviors in survey situations and select answers that are perceived as socially correct. Therefore, consumer support for CSR may actually be lower in the market place. Nevertheless, companies certainly cannot expect their CSR efforts to pay off if they do not even communicate about them to the public. In fact, strategic planning of CSR communication can have a great impact on how stakeholders react to CSR, as discussed in section 2.1. Consumer views on communicational aspects of CSR thus deserve a closer look. In the next subsection, the challenges of CSR communication to consumers are looked at.

2.3.2 Challenges of CSR communication to consumers

As presented above, companies may benefit from informing consumers better about their CSR efforts. However, particular challenges have been identified concerning CSR communication to consumers (Du et al., 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004). These include creating awareness of CSR initiatives and reducing skepticism towards CSR. The two issues are discussed in detail below.

2.3.2.1 Low consumer awareness of CSR

Companies naturally cannot expect their CSR investments to lead to consumer support behaviors if consumers are unaware of the CSR efforts (Du et al. 2010). Many scholars (Du et al., 2010, Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009, Maignan, 2001, Mohr et al., 2001) have criticized previous research for assuming CSR awareness or artificially creating it when studying

consumer responses to CSR initiatives. The findings based on simulated situations do not offer appropriate knowledge to base CSR communication strategies on.

More recent research has attempted to find out actual levels of consumers' CSR awareness in real situations. According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2004, p. 14), consumers' level of awareness and knowledge of companies' CSR initiatives varies notably. The authors identify a small group of consumers that follow companies' CSR behaviors actively. Yet, the majority of the public is unaware that most companies carry out CSR initiatives. A large part of consumers only recognize those companies to be engaged in CSR which have positioned their brand on responsible business practices, such as Ben and Jerry's.

Similarly, Dawkins (2004, p. 115) reports that the general public remains fairly unaware of companies' CSR efforts despite increased company spending on CSR. In her study, two thirds of consumers were unable to name a company that helps the community or society and only one third could name a company they saw as particularly environmentally, socially or ethically responsible. Dawkins emphasizes that companies clearly need to improve their CSR communication if they wish to reach the large masses. Most consumers are not proactive seekers of CSR information but learn about it through mainstream channels.

Moreover, findings from the banking industry by Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) reflect the research above. The authors differentiate between awareness of specific CSR initiatives and general awareness of CSR initiatives. Firstly, it was found that most consumers were unable to identify a company behind a particular CSR campaign. Secondly, with regard to general awareness of CSR initiatives by banks, consumer awareness was also very low. Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) note that many of the banks in the study were running CSR advertising campaigns during the time of the study. Thus, the authors suggest that

companies need to consider their CSR communication strategies more carefully and tailor messages according to varying audience interests.

Finally, Auger et al. (2003, p. 289) have studied consumers' knowledge of ethical attributes of products in purchase situations. The results show that only 5-10 per cent of consumers remembered the ethical features of sports shoes and soap they had bought. Meanwhile, respondents were relatively confident in knowing the products' functional features. With respect to ethical issues in general that were related to the purchased products, consumer awareness was also low (Auger et al., 2003, p. 299).

In sum, the research reviewed indicates that consumers are not well aware of CSR initiatives. It is suggested that company efforts to communicate on CSR need to be improved in order to reach consumers more effectively. Next, the challenge of generating trust in consumers is discussed.

2.3.2.2   Consumer skepticism towards CSR

Research indicates that stakeholders are often suspicious of firm motives for responsibility efforts (Du et al, 2010; Argenti, 2007, p. 83). Companies are thus faced with the challenge of establishing trust in their audience which requires very delicate communication.

Du et al. (2010, p. 10) argue that CSR communication triggers more skeptical responses in stakeholders than company ability-related communication, such as product claims, because CSR messages include fundamental, enduring and distinctive aspects about corporate identity. Consumers aim to evaluate the underlying motives behind these types of claims. According to Du et al., stakeholders may perceive company motives for CSR as extrinsic, meaning profits are seen to be prioritized, or as intrinsic, meaning the company is seen to act unselfishly and out of a genuine concern for a cause. However, unlike previously

assumed, stakeholder skepticism of CSR is not linearly related to the extent to which company motives are perceived as extrinsic (Ellen, Webb & Mohr, 2006). Instead, stakeholders are often able to identify both intrinsic and extrinsic motives in CSR activities and respond most positively to the CSR claims where both motives are present. Consequently, Du et al. (2010) have suggested that stakeholders are increasingly willing to adapt a view that both society and businesses should benefit from CSR.

This subsection has identified the challenges of CSR communication to consumers as low awareness of CSR and skepticism towards CSR communication. These issues have an impact on how consumers respond to corporate responsibility initiatives. Consequently, it is important for companies to carefully consider their CSR communication strategies.

2.3.3 Designing CSR communication to consumers

Companies who wish to gain positive business returns through CSR need to try to overcome the challenges identified in the previous subsection. This subsection discusses how companies can design their CSR communication to consumers to increase consumer awareness of CSR and trust in CSR.

According to Du et al. (2010), CSR message content and channel are crucial aspects to consider as both factors affect consumer trust in the communications. Naturally, message content and channel are also related to CSR awareness since they impact how effectively a message reaches its audience. CSR message content and channels are discussed in detail below.

2.3.3.1   CSR message content

Concerning CSR message content, companies can either choose to promote a social issue itself or the company's involvement in a specific issue (Du et al., 2010). Typically, most companies' CSR messages focus on the company involvement. In this context, Du et al. (2010) identify four factors companies can emphasize in their communication: CSR commitment, CSR impact, CSR motives and CSR fit.

CSR commitment and CSR impact

In its CSR communication, a company can choose to emphasize the commitment it has made to a social cause (Du et al. 2010, p. 11). This can include providing donations, in-kind contributions, or company resources such as human capital or marketing expertise. Companies may highlight one or various aspects of its commitment, such as the amount and consistency of input, or durability of commitment. Moreover, a company can choose to emphasize the impact of its CSR efforts (ibid). This can include the societal impact of the CSR investments or the actual benefits that the target group has gained or will gain. For example, consumers can be told how many lives were saved with vaccines donated by a company. Pomering (2009) suggests that illustrating CSR commitment and impact through numbers may be a particularly effective strategy. In his research, quantitative information on the duration of CSR engagement and impacts of specific activities significantly increased consumer trust towards the company.

CSR motives

CSR message can also focus on company motives for engaging in CSR (Du et al. 2010, p. 12). Companies may decide to emphasize intrinsic, unselfish motives communicating that they engage in CSR because it is the right thing to do. On the other hand, firms may justify CSR by its business benefits saying they invest in CSR because their stakeholders wish for

it. As mentioned above, Ellen et al. (2006) suggest that consumers are most supportive of companies that convey both other- and self-centered motives in their CSR messages. Companies should also note that stakeholders attribute motives for CSR efforts based on information on CSR commitment, fit and impact (ibid). For instance, consumers appear to take a short commitment to a CSR initiative as a sign that the company participates only because of outside demands, not because of CSR is part of their organizational principles. This decreases consumers' purchase intent.

CSR fit

Du et al. (2010, p. 12) also identify CSR fit to have an important role in the CSR message. CSR fit refers to the congruence perceived between a company's core business and the cause it supports through CSR. CSR fit may be evaluated based on brand-cause associations, such as product dimensions, relation to target segments, or corporate image resulting from the company's past behavior. Research indicates that a lack of CSR fit is likely to lead to less favorable consumer responses since the company motives are seen as egoistic (Bigné, Currás-Peréz & Aldás-Manzano, 2012; Du et al, 2010; Ellen et al., 2006). Du et al. (2010) suggest that companies can help stakeholders to see a logical association between their brand and the cause by explicitly stating the connection in their CSR communication.

In addition to the above identified factors, stakeholders' interest in the topic of the CSR communication should be considered (Du et al. 2010, p. 16; Dawkins, 2004, p. 110). Support for the focal issue impacts stakeholder motivation to process the CSR information. Thus, communication on initiatives that are important or personally relevant to the audience is more likely to be noticed. Pomering and Dolnicar (2009, p. 298) suggest that due to differences in consumers' information needs and processing abilities, segmenting consumer according to their interests could be useful. Informing the groups about specific initiatives

fitting their interests could increase CSR awareness. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean companies should focus only on CSR issues that consumers recognize as important (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Companies can also take an educative role informing the public about a CSR issue when prior awareness of it is low (Du et al., 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). This strategy may also lead to increased consumer support. For instance, Auger et al. (2003, p. 299) report that consumers stated higher intentions to buy ethical products when they were presented relevant information on the ethical issues related to those products.

Finally, Maignan (2001) highlights that it is necessary to know what consumers include in companies' responsibilities in order to communicate on CSR effectively. According to her, past research has indicated support for CSR without identifying which type of actions are seen as responsible by consumers. Maignan found that consumers establish a difference between corporations' economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic duties. This means that combining all of these aspects under the umbrella of CSR may not be purposeful when studying consumer perceptions of CSR. Moreover, there appears to be variance in definitions of CSR between nations (ibid). For example, American respondents saw economic duties of the corporation as far more important than French and German respondents. Thus, companies should be aware of issue priority among the audience of their CSR communications.

This subsection has discussed the message content aspects that are central in CSR communication. Next, the aspects related to communication channels are presented.

2.3.3.2 CSR communication channel

In addition to the message content, companies should carefully consider their choice of CSR communication channel (Du et al., 2010; Argenti, 2007). The communication channel

affects consumers' awareness of CSR as well as their trust in the CSR information provided. Companies can choose where to communicate on CSR from various channels (ibid). These can include official documents such as CSR reports, press releases, or a CSR-focused section on the company website. Moreover, stakeholders can be reached through TV or magazine advertising or by providing CSR information on the product packaging.

There are also a growing number of company external communicators who transmit CSR information (Du et al. 2010, p. 13). These include the media, customers, and non-governmental organizations, among others. A company can control communication by these sources to varying extents or not at all. For example, a company can exert some level of control over its value chain members, but can hardly control what is spoken of it in the media.

Choosing the right communication channel for CSR may be difficult because of contrasting research findings. Du et al. (2010) claim that company control on a communication channel affects stakeholder trust in the CSR information provided. The authors argue that stakeholders are more skeptical towards CSR information when it is received from corporate sources than from independent sources because communication by the company is seen as self-interested. The authors thus suggest that companies should try to get their CSR messages across through independent channels. Similarly, Pomering and Dolnicar (2009, p. 288) note that while consumers have high trust in company-controlled sources for product-related information they rely more on independent sources, such as the media, for CSR information. Thus, the authors see companies might benefit from directing their CSR communication from advertising towards public relations. Moreover, Du et al. (2010, p. 14) advise to spread CSR information through informal channels such as word-of-mouth which appears to be highly trusted among consumers.

Contrasting findings are presented by Dawkins' (2004, p. 116). She reports that 60 per cent of consumers have trust in company-controlled CSR channels which is only slightly less than the trust in NGO sources. As consumers do not look for CSR information proactively, Dawkins suggests targeting the public through mainstream channels such as cause-related marketing to get the message through. Another company-controlled channel, the employees, was also regarded as particularly credible source of CSR information in Dawkins' (2004) study.

In addition to source trust, it is important for companies to consider which communication channels are followed by consumers. Based on Pomering and Dolnicar (2009, p. 295), it appears that the most trusted CSR communication channels are not necessarily the ones consumers actively use. For instance, independent experts are seen as the most credible CSR source but only a fraction of consumers says to use this channel to look for bank industry-related information (ibid). On the other hand, while advertising is a common way for consumers to learn about their banks advertisements tend to generate skepticism when used for CSR purposes. Also Morsing and Schultz (2006, p. 331) suggest that consumers do not prefer corporate advertising as means of CSR communication. In their study, 60 per cent of consumers wish companies to use more subtle forms of CSR communication, such as annual reports and websites. Again, this is contrast with Dawkins (2004) who argues that consumers should be targeted through mainstream channels.

Both consumer trust and preferences concerning CSR communication channels have been taken into account in a study by MTT Agrifood Research Finland (2012). The results indicate that reports, press releases and websites of independent public authorities and research institutes are the most credible sources of CSR information in the food industry. Meanwhile, media news reporting is seen as a convenient way to learn about CSR. Product packaging and labels are the CSR channels that consumers both like and find credible.

In summary, the choice of channel appears to be an essential question affecting consumer response to CSR communication yet choosing the appropriate channels can be complex. Firstly, companies need to consider which channels consumers trust. In general, it appears that CSR information from third parties, such as the media, non-governmental organizations, public authorities and research institutes, is trusted more than company-controlled sources (MTT Agrifood Research Finland, 2012; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004). However, CSR communication by independent sources is naturally much harder for companies to control. On the other hand, reported levels of consumer trust in corporate sources, especially employees, vary significantly among studies (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004). Also, while Dawkins (2004) suggests to target consumers through mainstream channels such as advertising consumers may be skeptical towards this information source (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; MTT Agrifood Research Finland, 2012).

In addition to communication source trust, companies should consider communication source preferences if they wish to increase CSR awareness. Consumers may trust CSR information provided by a certain source but do not follow that source actively (MTT Agrifood Research Finland, 2012; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). For companies, it would be relevant to know the channels that are both convenient and trustworthy in consumers' eyes in order to reach the audience effectively and generate favorable reactions.

This section has established consumers as an important target group of CSR communication. Research suggests that consumers are interested in CSR information but in order to generate positive consumer responses companies need to increase CSR awareness and generate trust in consumers. In this process, identifying consumer attitudes and expectations concerning CSR message content and channels is necessary.

The next section looks at CSR in the industry in focus of this study, the clothing industry.

2.4 CSR in the global clothing industry

In order to limit the scope of this study the decision was taken to focus on a single industry, the clothing industry. This section presents the global clothing industry and discusses the role of CSR in the industry. In this paper, the term 'clothing industry' is used to refer to the design, production, distribution, marketing and sale of clothing. In other research, the terms 'fashion industry' and 'apparel industry' are also used.

2.4.1 CSR risks in the global clothing industry

Laudal (2010) suggests that certain industries are more vulnerable to risks related to corporate responsibility than others. According to the author, CSR risks are strongly present in the global clothing industry due to six particular features of the industry.

First, Laudal (2010) argues that production in the clothing industry is labor-intensive and relies heavily on traditional technology which increases the likelihood of poor working conditions. Second, low cost levels in production countries imply that environmental and social standards tend to be loose and there is a higher chance of corruption. Third, the clothing market is a buyers' market where large retail groups have significant pressuring power and intense competition can lead to resource overexploitation among manufacturers. Fourth, short deadlines and low predictability of orders in the market can trigger overuse of resources. Fifth, low transparency concerning manufacturing sites can indicate more breaches of CSR standards. Finally, the communication barriers typically present between manufacturers in developing countries and retailers in developed countries are likely to reduce the ability to take social and environmental concerns into consideration.

The six features presented indicate that risks related to corporate responsibility are strongly attached to the global clothing industry (Laudal, 2010). Moreover, general features of the global economy, such as unequal distribution of wealth, increase potential for CSR problems in the industry. Importantly, Laudal (2010) adds that from a company's point of view the CSR risks also represent an opportunity to improve relations with stakeholders by taking their concerns into account. Thus, it could be beneficial for clothing retailers to invest in CSR not only to avoid reputational damage but to proactively enhance stakeholder engagement.

The growing role of CSR issues in the clothing industry is also discussed by Emmelhainz and Adams (1999, p. 52). According to them, the expansion of global trade has led to wider geographical separation between producers and consumers of goods and the clothing industry has experienced significant changes. For example in the United States, outsourcing of operations has resulted in imports from more than 150 countries, many of them underdeveloped. According to Rudell (2006, p. 283), manufacturing overseas has become a highly effective means to cut down production costs, fueled by consumer demand for cheap fashion.

2.4.2 Impact of CSR risks on the clothing industry

Following the globalization trend, the ethics of corporate practices in the clothing industry have risen to the attention of the media and consumers. Western clothing companies have been accused for example of the use of sweatshop manufacturing where workers are paid under minimum wage and safety and health laws are violated (Dickson & Eckman, 2006; Rudell, 2006; Emmelhainz & Adams, 1999). Another major issue has been the use of child labor in factories in developing countries (ibid). Also ecological problems have been attached to clothing production and consumption. For instance, use of environmentally

harmful chemicals and the 'fast fashion' trend leading to increased product disposal have been brought up (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2010).

According to Jegethesan et al. (2012) and Emmelhainz and Adams (1999), the increased attention to corporate practices in the clothing industry has led to changes at industrial and company levels. Leading global apparel companies have taken efforts to advance responsible clothing production and retail. As an example from Finland, Marimekko (2012) describes the growing attention to corporate responsibility on its website:

> *"The impact of globalisation on our business will continue to grow. This sets continual new demands on operations. Our stakeholders' interest in the origin of products and the various stages of the sourcing chain has grown markedly…For this reason we have set the job of improving the corporate responsibility of sourcing chain management as the most important subdivision. In the long term it is our goal to make the entire sourcing chain more transparent, to reduce the risks of purchasing, and to further improve the management of supplier relationships."*

As further examples, sports apparel retailers Nike and Reebok have made their factory audits public through the Fair Labor Association (Berman, 2003) and H&M is increasingly using recycled and organic cotton in its products to reduce its ecological impact (H&M, 2012). Moreover, alongside CSR efforts by established clothing companies, new apparel brands positioned on ethical attributes, such as American Apparel, have experienced significant business growth (Joergens, 2006).

While investments in CSR are increasing clothing companies should be concerned with how they communicate on their responsibility efforts to consumers. As discussed in section

2.2, communicational aspects may significantly impact how consumers react to CSR initiatives. CSR communication in the clothing industry is turned to next.

2.4.3 Consumer interest in CSR the clothing industry

This subsection discusses consumer interest in ethical issues in the clothing industry and the role of communication.

Consumer attitudes towards ethical questions affecting the clothing industry have been measured frequently. Dickson (1999) and Shaw, Hogg, Wilson, Shiu, and Hassan (2006) have studied consumer concern for labor problems in clothing production. Both authors find consumers to be concerned over the malpractices in manufacturing such as low wages and inappropriate working conditions. Hustvedt and Bernard (2010) also include environmental concerns in their study and find that information about the environmental impact of production was less important to consumers. In contrast, Jegethesan et al. (2012) report that consumers seem to be prioritize environmental over labor issues.

Research has also demonstrated that even though consumers are concerned over the ethics of clothing production they might not be acting on it. In a US study by Dickson (1999) approximately half of respondents stated to have a concern about ethical problems in apparel manufacturing. Yet, the majority of consumers believe they do not know about socially responsible clothing business, nor that they are informed about issues in clothing manufacturing. Despite their lack of knowledge of actual manufacturing conditions, consumers are forming positive and negative attitudes toward the clothing industry based on their beliefs (Dickson, 1999). Later research by Dickson (2000) shows that most consumers are not prepared to take ethical issues into account in their buying decisions, despite their concerns for manufacturing practices. Dickson suggests consumers may feel their choice is restricted by the products offered by responsible companies. On the other

hand, "consumers may not feel restricted…but simply be overwhelmed by the number of attributes that can be used in decisions to purchase clothing" (Dickson, 2000, p. 28). She suggests that more education would be needed to help ethically concerned consumers in their purchase decisions.

Following business growth of relatively new 'ethical' brands Joergens (2006) raises the question whether responsibly produced clothing could become mainstream. However, in line with Dickson (2000), the focus group interviews and survey by Joergens reveal that ethical issues seem to have very limited influence on mainstream consumers' fashion purchase decisions. Instead, personal appeal of the clothing and price constitute the essential shopping criteria. Nevertheless, some interest in CSR does exist. Ethical issues affecting buyers' personal health, such as chemical use, are seen as the most important leading Joergens to suggest that consumers care particularly about the ethical aspects of products that are directly linked to the consumer.

Joergens (2006) and Dickson (2000) suggest that consumer willingness to choose ethically produced clothing could possibly be increased by informing consumers better about CSR efforts. According to Joergens (2006), all major fashion labels seem to appear equally unethical for consumers and they do not find they could make a difference with their purchases. In addition, research by Auger et al. (2003) and Gupta and Hodges (2012) indicates that companies investing in CSR may also benefit from educating consumers about environmental and social issues in general related to clothing production. Auger et al. (2003) studied the importance of CSR features of products in relation to product quality features. The authors demonstrate that providing consumers with information on the ethical dimensions of products they had bought increased the value consumers placed on ethical product features in relation to product quality features. However, initially consumers were poorly aware of the ethical issues related to the products. Auger et al. thus suggest that CSR

information can have a significant effect on purchase intentions if presented in an adequate way.

In summary, research suggests that while consumers claim to be concerned over malpractices in the clothing industry more effective communication may be needed in order to increase consumer support for responsible corporate behaviors. The attitudes and expectations of consumers regarding clothing companies' CSR communication is looked at next.

2.4.4 Consumer attitudes and expectations concerning CSR communication in the clothing industry

Attempts have been made to find out how consumers' wish to be informed on clothing companies' responsibility efforts. Much of the research has focused on clothing labels. Dickson (1999, p. 50) interviewed women on possible solutions for advancing responsible corporate practices in the clothing industry. Approximately two thirds of respondents wished for a label indicating if the product was made under responsible conditions. Yet, other communication-related options were not offered in the study and thus the results offer a very restricted view concerning channels.

Hustvedt and Bernard (2010) and Hyllegard et al. (2012) studied how ethical information on product labels to affects consumer attitudes. According to Hustvedt and Bernard (2010), complexity of CSR information on the clothing label (long or short sentences) does not have an effect on consumer willingness to purchase an item. Yet, the nature of the CSR information appears to have an effect with labor issues prioritized over environmental issues. Moreover, Hyllegard et al. (2012) suggest that positive attitudes towards the company can be generated by featuring explicit CSR messages and logos on clothing hang tags.

While the findings from the above studies offer valuable insight, there is clearly a need for further consumer research concerning CSR communication in clothing markets. First, as presented in this section, it appears unclear to what extent consumers are interested in CSR in clothing markets. Second, consumer awareness of clothing companies CSR efforts has not been studied. Third, consumer attitudes and expectations regarding CSR message content and channels require further study. It needs to be clarified which CSR issues are important for consumers and what type of information they wish to receive on these topics. Moreover, the channels from which consumers wish to receive CSR information and their trust in different sources needs to be studied more extensively concerning the clothing industry.

2.5 Theoretical framework

Based on the literature reviewed in this chapter a theoretical framework was composed. It is illustrated in Figure 2 below.
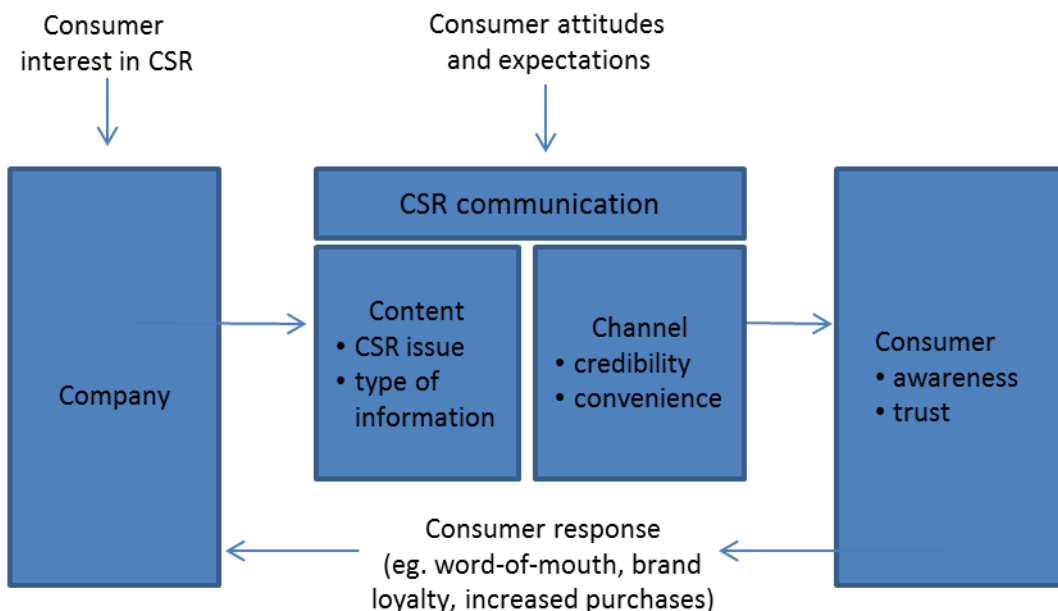

Figure 2. Theoretical framework

In the framework in Figure 2, the company is the originator of CSR communication directed at consumers. The decision of the company to communicate on CSR is affected by the extent to which consumers are interested in CSR (among other factors not included in this study). The company's CSR communication includes two critical components: message content and channel. Companies need to know the attitudes and expectations of consumers towards CSR communication in order to target them with the right messages and through the right channels. First, companies need to choose which CSR issues they address and the type of information they offer on these topics. Second, companies need to consider which channels are convenient and credible in consumers' eyes. The message content and channel impact the extent to which consumers become aware of CSR and how much they trust the information provided. Based on their awareness and trust, consumers form their response to CSR which again affects the company. For the company, the goal is to generate favorable responses in the form of for example positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty or increased purchases.

The aim of this research is to improve clothing companies' ability to communicate on CSR in a way that generates awareness and trust and, consequently, favorable responses towards the company. Thus, the paper concentrates on three aspects of the framework. Firstly, the extent to which consumers are interested in CSR is investigated because consumer interest has an effect on whether companies invest in and communicate on CSR. Secondly, the extent to which consumers are currently aware of CSR is studied. This will provide companies with background knowledge for executing their CSR communications. Thirdly, consumer attitudes and expectations towards CSR communication are investigated. This information will provide guidance on the right message content and channels to choose to increase consumer awareness of and trust in CSR.

3. DATA AND METHODS

This chapter presents the method of data collection, the survey design and the data analysis for this study. Discussion on issues of trustworthiness regarding the sample and the data analysis is included and a thorough example of the data analysis provided.

3.1   Data collection

The research method used for data collection in this study was a self-completion questionnaire. According to Bryman and Bell (2003), a self-completion questionnaire is one of the main methods for data collection using a social survey design. There were two main reasons justifying the use of a questionnaire in this study. Firstly, as the research focus was on consumers – a large and heterogeneous group – it was preferable to have a more extensive representation of respondents than would have been possible using for example interviews or focus groups. Secondly, using a self-completion questionnaire was chosen because of the time and resource limits of this study. A posted questionnaire is quicker and cheaper to administer than interviewing, especially when the target group is geographically dispersed (Bryman & Bell, 2003, p. 142). As an additional advantage, the data gathered through a self-completion questionnaire does not suffer from interviewer effects such as personal characteristics (ibid).

The data sample was obtained using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a method of obtaining units or people that are most conveniently available for the research (Zikmund, 1997, p. 428). Convenience sampling is typically used when there is a need to gather a large number of completed questionnaires economically and in little time, as was the case in this study. A limitation of convenience sampling is that it may lack objectivity. The results should be taken to reflect only the specific sample.

In this research, the sample was gathered by sending a link to the online survey to 120 Finnish nationals through Facebook and email. The survey was open for seven days in September, 2012. Most of the recipients of the survey link were aged between 18 to 35 years. Both sexes were included. Recipients of the survey link were also able to distribute the link forward thus enabling the gathering of a larger sample. In total, 166 respondents completed the survey which is a highly sufficient number for the purposes of this study.

3.2   Survey design

The survey was designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The survey questionnaire included 13 questions out of which five were open-ended questions and eight were closed questions (Appendix 1). Five of the closed questions also included an option for respondents to add complementary answers in their own words.

The survey questions were designed with certain precautions in mind. Firstly, according to Bryman and Bell (2003), the questions in a self-completion questionnaire should be easy to understand and answer because of the absence of an interviewer. Therefore self-completion questionnaires usually have fewer open questions than structured interviews and the survey design is easy-to-follow. Secondly, self-completion questionnaires tend to be relatively short to encourage respondents to answer all questions.

The important aspects in relation to CSR communication to consumers were identified in the literature review and the questions designed accordingly. Firstly, respondents were asked about their interest in CSR and the effect of CSR on their purchase decisions concerning clothing and other products. Secondly, the survey aimed to track consumer awareness of CSR efforts by clothing companies. Thirdly, consumer expectations on CSR message content and their attitudes (i.e. preferences and trust) concerning communication channels were investigated. The terms corporate responsibility and global clothing industry

were explained briefly in the beginning of the questionnaire in order to provide all respondents with the initial knowledge needed to be able to answer the questions. The definitions provided were:

The global clothing industry refers to all companies concentrating on clothing production and retail.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) means that a company aims to take into account the impacts of its operations on the society and environment.

Regarding the sample, it should be noted that since the survey investigated consumer opinions on CSR, it is likely that consumers with an existing interest in ethical issues and corporate responsibility were more eager to participate. Meanwhile, consumers without interest in CSR may have been more likely to ignore a survey titled "CSR in the clothing industry". Therefore, the survey sample may include a higher percentage of ethically concerned consumers than would be representative of the total population. Ethically concerned consumers can be assumed to be better aware of CSR issues and more willing to receive CSR information (e.g. Dawkins, 2004).

In addition, the survey responses are subject to the social desirability bias (Zikmund, 1997, p. 211). For instance, some respondents may have said to take ethical issues into account in their shopping because it is perceived as the right thing to do but they might not always act accordingly in real life situations.

3.3 Quantitative content analysis

According to Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 193), quantitative content analysis is a method for quantifying written or visual content in terms of predetermined categories. The analysis should be carried out in a systematic and objective manner to provide reliable findings.

Objectivity refers to assigning data into categories in a transparent way in order to minimize any influence of researcher's personal biases. A systematic approach means that the rules according to which the data is categorized are followed consistently. In theory, anyone should thus be able to replicate the categorization procedure and arrive at the same results. Nevertheless, the categorization procedure may always suffer from personal biases.

Following Holsti's (1969, in Bryman & Bell, 2003, p. 194) definition, content analysis can be applied to many different forms of unstructured information, not only to mass media communications to which it is traditionally used. Therefore, it also provided an appropriate approach to analyze the data generated for this study through open-ended questions.

The answers for survey questions 2 and 9 were analyzed using quantitative content analysis. The data analysis for question 9 is illustrated below. The other three open-ended questions did not provide sufficient data to produce valid findings.

Survey question 9 was: "*In your opinion, which social and environmental issues, if any, companies in the clothing industry should address?"*. The aim of the question was to identify the social and environmental issues that consumers see are the most relevant in clothing companies' CSR. Based on the research discussed in section 2.3, certain CSR themes were expected to rise from the data. These themes were initially chosen as the categories for content analysis:

- child labor
- working conditions in supply chain
- environmental impact of production
- usage time of products
- product safety

Moreover, three additional categories emerged from the data:

- economic sustainability
- consumers' body image
- CSR communication to consumers

The complete list of categories and the topics included in each category are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Categorization of CSR topics

Category (code)	Issues
Child labor	use of child labor
Working conditions in supply chain	worker health and safety, salary and working hours, education on employee rights, treatment of women
Environmental impact of production	environmental impact of product materials and chemicals, use of recycled materials, animal rights, water use, renewable energy use, transportation distances
Product safety	impact of product materials and chemicals on product users
Usage time of products	durability of products, length of clothing lines seasons and problem of "disposable" fashion, possibility for product repair
Consumers' body image	impact of marketing on consumers' body image
CSR communication	information provided for stakeholders on corporate responsibility
Economic responsibility	economic questions on industry and company level

The different codes (categories) emerging in each open response were counted and the data was manually assigned into the categories presented. If an answer by one respondent included multiple codes referring to a single category, these were only counted as one mention for that particular category because the aim was to reveal the *number of*

respondents that perceive a particular CSR category important. For instance, the following answer given by one respondent was divided into the categories of child labor (a), environmental impact of production and logistics (b), and working conditions in supply chain (c):

> *"Child labor (a),*
>
> *environmental degradation and responsible use of natural resources, emissions to the environment (b),*
>
> *low salaries and working conditions, worker protection and wellbeing (c)"*

4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from the empirical part of the research. In line with the research questions, the findings are divided into three sections: consumer interest in CSR, consumer awareness of CSR, and consumer attitudes and expectations concerning CSR communication in the clothing industry.

4.1   Consumer interest in CSR in the clothing industry

The first research question of this study was: *"To what extent are consumers interested in CSR in the clothing industry?"*. Consumer interest was measured in terms of consumer demand for CSR information, the effect of CSR on purchase decisions, and the importance of CSR in clothing purchases in relation to other purchases. The findings are discussed in the following two subsections.

4.1.1 Importance of CSR in the clothing industry

The objective of this research was to find out how consumers perceive CSR and CSR communication in the clothing industry in order to improve company ability to effectively communicate on CSR. Thus firstly, it was necessary to have background information on how relevant CSR is for the survey group in question. The survey results are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 below.
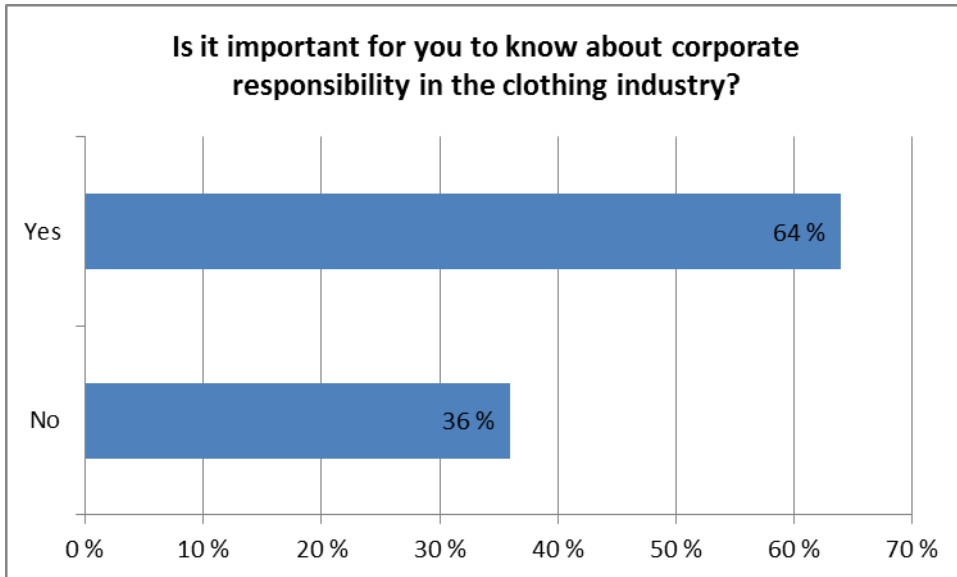
Figure 2: Consumer interest in corporate responsibility in the clothing industry
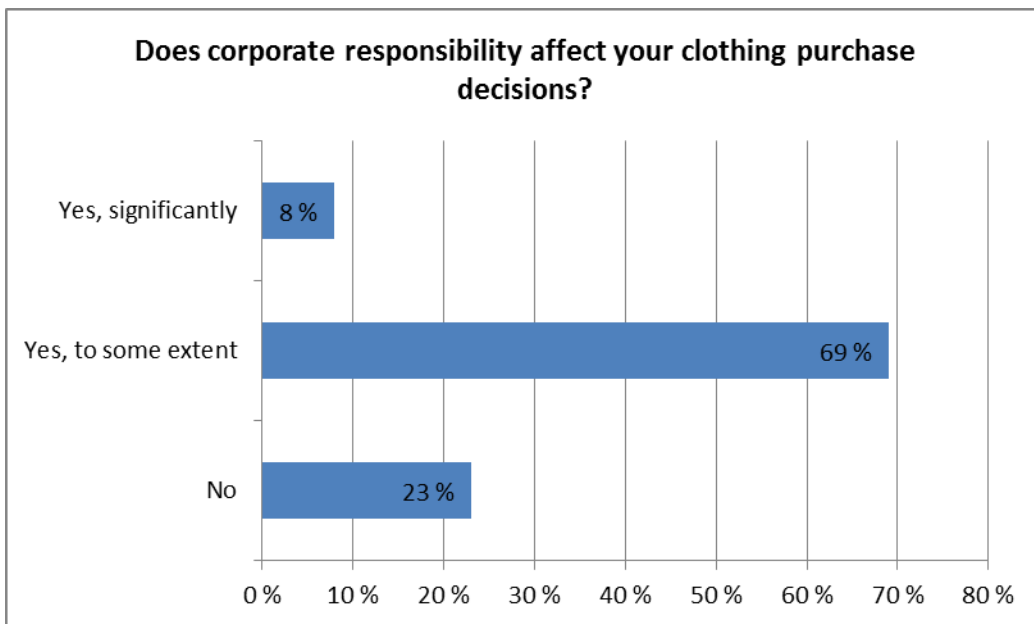

Figure 3: Effect of corporate responsibility on consumers' clothing purchase decisions

According to the results in Figure 2, 64 % of respondents agree that it is important for them to know about corporate responsibility in the clothing industry. However, a larger share of respondents said corporate responsibility affects their purchase decisions in clothing items, as shown in Figure 3. For a 69 % majority, CSR affects clothing purchases to some extent. In addition, 8 % state that CSR has a significant effect on their clothing purchase decisions. Meanwhile, 23 % do not consider CSR when shopping for clothes.

The above findings suggest that interest in clothing companies' CSR behaviors exists among Finnish consumers. In total, 77 % of respondents state that CSR is a criterion that affects their clothing purchase decisions. A somewhat smaller share (64 %) considers it important to know about CSR in the clothing industry. The difference between the two figures is somewhat controversial considering that in order to make purchase decisions based on CSR consumers would have to know about CSR behaviors of companies. Nevertheless, it is apparent through the two figures that most consumers seem to regard CSR as important in clothing markets.

Importantly, it should be noted that while a 23 % share of consumers does not report CSR to be important for them in the clothing industry, still very few are reluctant to receiving CSR information. Only 4 % of respondents state they do not wish to be communicated on CSR by clothing companies (see Figures 8 and 9 in section 4.3). This could indicate that consumer interest in CSR could develop further if consumers were offered more information on CSR.

4.1.2 Importance of CSR in relation to other industries

The survey also investigated the relevance of corporate responsibility for consumers in the apparel industry in relation to other industries. The aim was to find out whether CSR may influence purchase decisions differently depending on the industry.

For the majority of respondents (55 %), the significance of corporate responsibility is the same in clothing purchases as in other purchases. Those who consider CSR a significant purchase criterion typically stated that they try to buy responsibly regardless of the product. On the opposite side, some respondents state they do not consider CSR when shopping for clothing or any other items because it is meaningless to them. A number of respondents also find that CSR information is not available or CSR communication from company sources cannot be trusted and thus CSR does not affect their shopping.

35 % of respondents see that in clothing purchases corporate responsibility matters less than in other purchases. A large part of these respondents see that how a piece of clothing looks and feels is the most important. In addition, price is often a significant purchase criterion. For instance, one respondent describes:

> *"Apparel brands that are responsible are often more expensive and esthetically not my style."*

CSR information might still have a positive effect although it is not the first purchase criterion:

> *"In clothing, it is most important to me how a piece of clothing looks. The responsibility of the company is a strong plus."*

Many respondents do not consider CSR in clothing purchases because they do not buy clothes often. In many answers, the clothing market is compared to the food market. The latter is seen as a market where consumers feel they can make a difference. Meanwhile,

apparel is bought infrequently and thus those purchases are not perceived to have as much effect on corporate behavior. For example, one respondent states:

> *"Clothes are bought less often than daily products. For example in food items it [corporate responsibility] is more significant because they are products that are bought more often."*

Some respondents also find that CSR information is not readily available. For example in food purchases, it is perceived as easier to know about corporate responsibility at the moment of purchase:

> *"Concerning clothing, it is hard to get an idea where the product has been made and how etc. For example in food purchases it is somehow more concrete."*

For 10 % of the respondents corporate responsibility is a more significant factor in clothing than in other purchases. The respondents' awareness of the ethical problems in the industry makes them want to shop responsibly. As one respondent describes the clothing market:

> *"Irresponsibility is well known of (e.g. child labor, distorted self-image). Moreover, there are so many operators that it is easy not to buy the products of an irresponsible company."*

The findings suggest that for most Finnish consumers CSR is equally significant in the clothing industry as in other industries. One third of consumers may follow and judge companies' responsibility behaviors carefully in some sectors, while ignoring CSR issues in other purchases. In clothing markets this means that product appearance, feel and price may drive over responsibility factors when making purchase decisions. Moreover,

consumers might not feel they can use their purchase power effectively to punish or reward companies with items they buy infrequently, such as clothes. Also, some consumers find it hard to know about CSR behaviors in the clothing industry compared with for example the food industry.

In summary, Finnish consumers appear interested in corporate responsibility in the clothing industry. The majority sees it important to receive CSR information and states to consider CSR when making purchases. In relation to other industries, approximately one third of consumers consider corporate responsibility less in clothing purchases than in other purchases. For a part of these consumers this is because CSR is not communicated effectively in the clothing industry. The potential survey biases discussed in section 3.2 should be kept in mind when assessing these findings.

4.2   Consumer awareness of CSR in the clothing industry

Consumers' lack of knowledge about CSR has been recognized as an obstacle for companies' responsibility efforts to pay off (subsection 2.2.2.1). Therefore, it was necessary in this study to map the current level of consumer awareness of CSR in order to have a basis from which to give recommendations on CSR communication. Thus, the second research question for this study was *"To what extent are consumers aware of CSR in the clothing industry?"*.

This section presents the findings related to the second research question in two subsections. First, consumer awareness of CSR message content in the clothing industry is discussed. Second, the communication channels through which consumers become aware of CSR are presented.

4.2.1 Awareness of CSR message content

In the survey, consumer recollection of CSR initiatives was used as an indicator of their CSR awareness. Survey respondents were asked to write down CSR initiatives that they know have been carried out in the clothing industry. Associating the initiatives with company names was optional.

Out of all survey respondents, 38 % were able to name at least one CSR initiative in the clothing industry on a general level, such as avoiding the employment of child labor or using organically produced materials. In addition, 39 % were able to name at least one particular CSR initiative and the company behind it, such as the increased use of organic cotton in H&M products. In total, the recollection rate for CSR initiatives (in general and company-specific) was 73 %. Out of the 73 %, approximately half were able to name more than one CSR initiative in the clothing sector (in general or company-specific). The findings indicate that some attention is paid to corporate responsibility efforts in the clothing sector yet to a limited extent. It is noteworthy that the question was an open-ended one requiring respondents to answer without any associated information. In other situations, such as when being in a clothing store, consumers may recall CSR initiatives better sparked by for instance a sight of the company logo.

Furthermore, the CSR initiatives listed by the respondents were categorized according to topic, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.
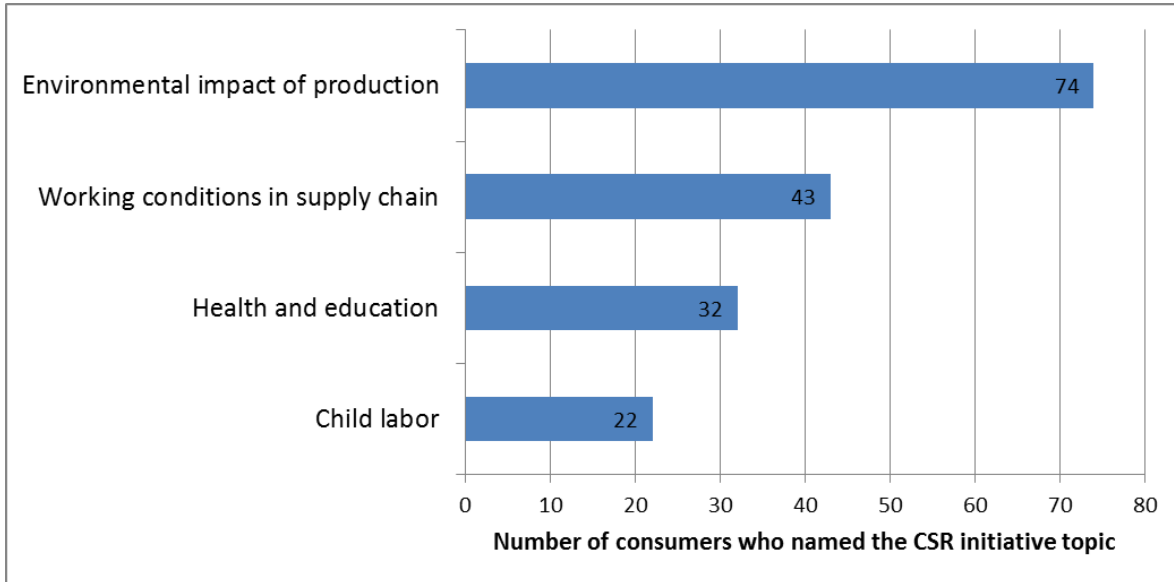
Figure 4: CSR initiative topics recalled by consumers.

As seen in Figure 4, environmental initiatives were mentioned by the largest number of respondents (74). For instance, the use of organically produced cotton was often brought up and campaigns for water use reduction were also named. Next, an initiative or initiatives related to improving working conditions in the supply chain were listed by 43 respondents. 35 remembered a campaign related to health and education themes, such as the cooperation between H&M and Unicef or the pink ribbons on products supporting the fight against breast cancer. Finally, campaigns against the use of child labor were recalled by 22 of respondents.

4.2.2 Awareness of CSR communication channels

In addition to awareness of CSR communication content, it was investigated which channels consumers have followed to learn about CSR. The results are depicted in Figure 5 below.
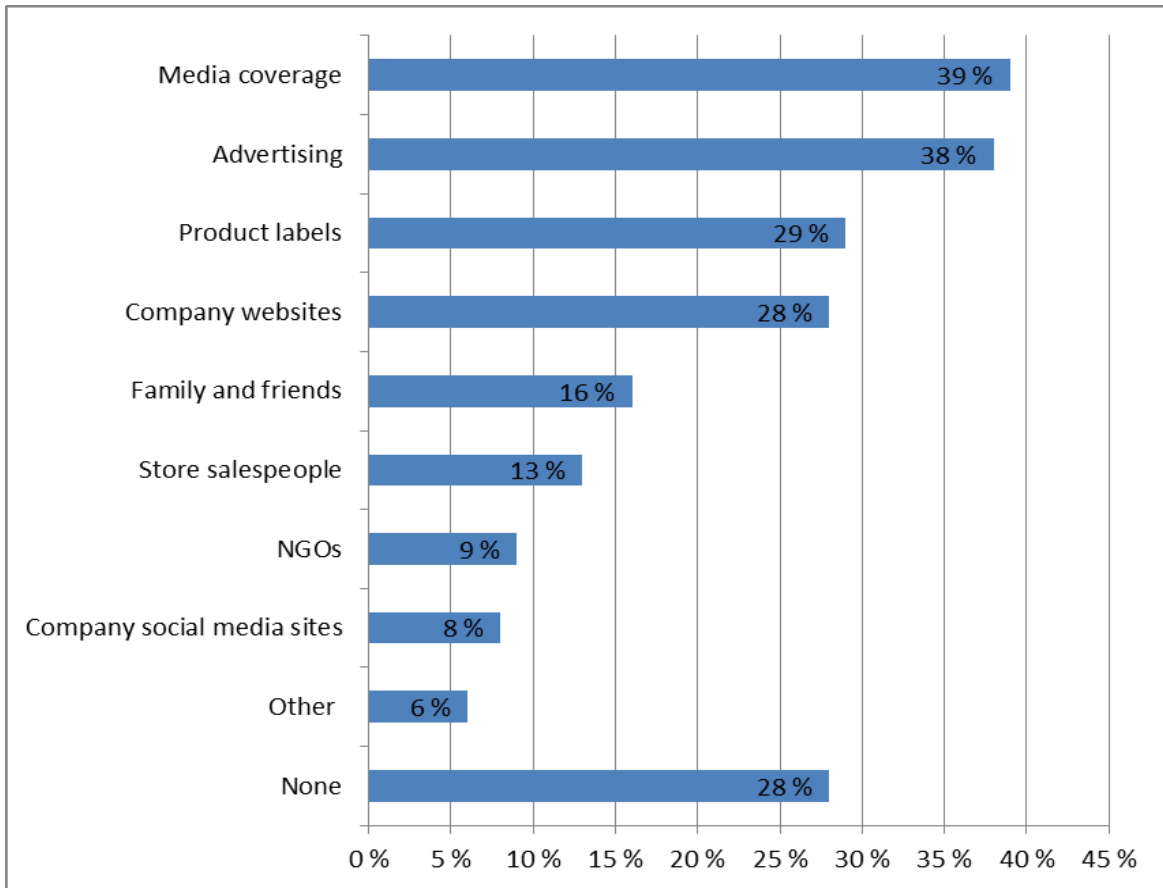
Figure 5: Channels through which consumers have received CSR information in the clothing industry.

The most common channels to learn about CSR appear to be the media (39 %) and advertising (38 %), as presented in Figure 5. Product labels and company websites were also among the top (29 % and 28 % respectively). The other channels listed, such as store salespeople and family/friends, were selected by notably fewer respondents. A small number of open answers were provided, including "the university" and "blogs" (both by two respondents). 28 % of respondents indicated they had not received information about CSR initiatives in the clothing industry through any channels.

4.3 Consumer attitudes and expectations regarding CSR communication in the clothing industry

Recognizing the attitudes and expectations of stakeholders and designing communications accordingly has been suggested to be essential in order to generate company support behaviors through CSR (Dawkins, 2004, Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009, Du et al., 2010). Thus, the third research question was *"What are attitudes and expectations of consumers regarding CSR communication in the clothing industry?"*. The findings are presented below in relation to message content and communication channel.

4.3.1 CSR message content

In this subsection, the findings on consumer expectations concerning CSR message content are discussed in two parts. First, the CSR issues consumers wish to be addressed in the clothing industry are presented. Second, the type of information consumers wish to have on CSR initiatives in the clothing industry is discussed.

4.3.1.1 CSR issues in the clothing industry

According to Du et al. (2010) and Dawkins (2004), consumer trust in CSR communication is partially dependent on how relevant the topic is seen by the audience. Thus, to reveal the CSR issues that consumers deem as relevant in the clothing industry, the survey respondents in this study were asked an open-ended question: "*In your opinion, which social and environmental issues, if any, companies in the clothing industry should address?"*. The answers collected were analyzed using quantitative content analysis, as presented in section 3.3. The analysis provided a view on the importance of different CSR issue categories for consumers, as illustrated in Figure 6 below.
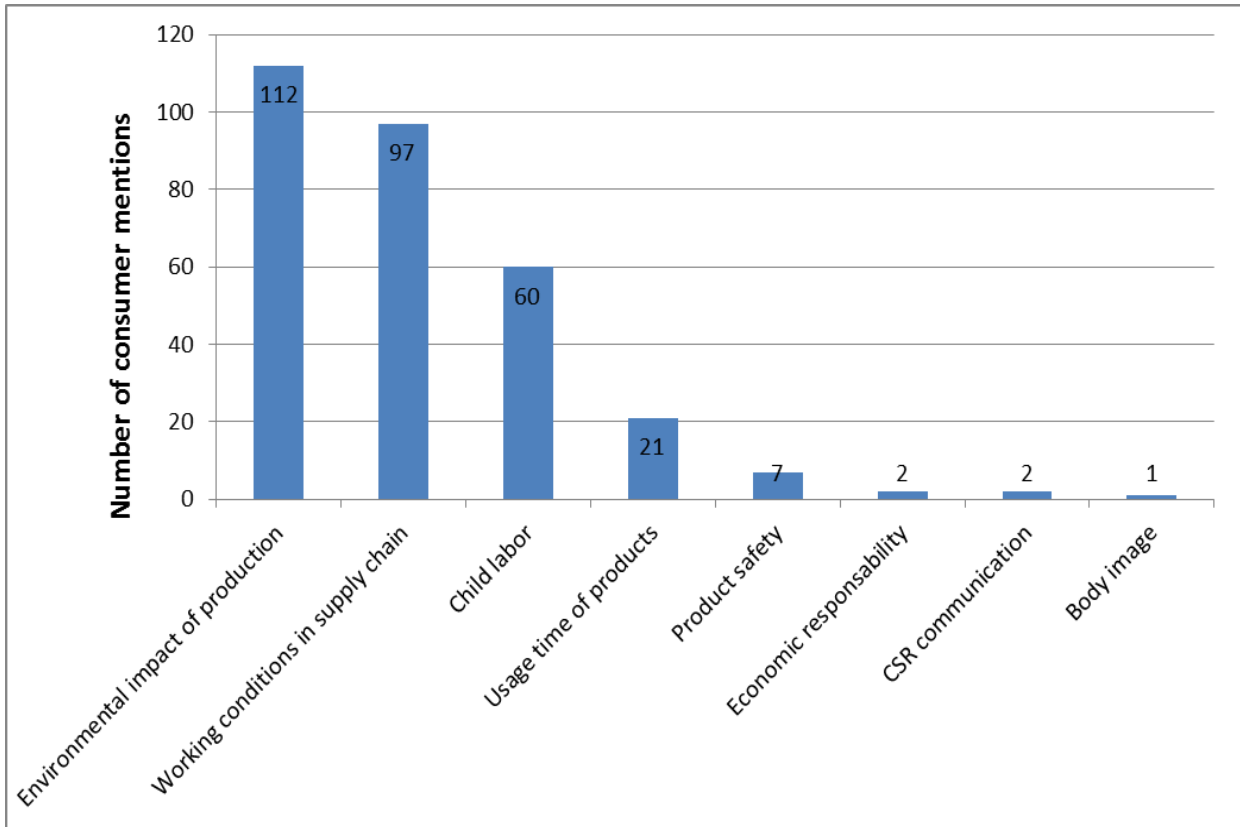
Figure 6: Importance of different CSR issues in the clothing industry for consumers.

Environmental issues related to production were mentioned by the largest number of respondents. In this category, respondents listed topics such as material use, product recycling, chemical use, energy and water use and transportation. Two examples from the answers are provided below:

"Every company should try to reduce environmental impact from its part by innovating new, more sustainable ways to produce, ship and sell clothes."

"I would like to have a possibility to take back the clothing I have used, e.g. Marks & Spencer is already doing this."

Working conditions in the supply chain were regarded as the second most important CSR issue category. The issues mentioned in this category included for instance factory worker safety and health, working hours and wages. As two respondents describe:

"Workers should be guaranteed a decent living"

"Especially issues affecting workers in production (working hours, wages, work safety, seeing people as human instead of resources)"

The third most mentioned CSR topic was the use of child labor. While child labor is an issue that is related to the supply chain, it was made into its own category as it is separate from working conditions. Fourth, topics related the usage time of products received 21 mentions. Respondents wished companies to produce more durable clothes instead of "disposable" fashion, as described by the examples below:

"Better quality, less collections. The current model encourages consumers to a completely unsustainable behavior."

"Long lasting and multi-purpose clothes so that 'unnecessary' clothes would not be produced"

The rest of the CSR issue categories were only mentioned by few respondents. Yet, it is noteworthy that these were new categories that emerged in addition to the ones that were initially framed based on previous research. For instance, a demand for better CSR communication was explicitly stated by two respondents. One of these stated:

"(CSR) promises should be true and companies should be able to analyze and justify their choices better; eg. an organic cotton product could include numerical details on how much natural resources are saved, if any"

In addition, economic responsibility of companies was mentioned by two respondents and the impact of marketing on consumers' image of their body by one respondent. The question was left blank by 21 out of 166 survey respondents.

4.3.1.2   Type of CSR information

The different aspects companies focus on in their CSR message content affects consumer responses to CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; Pomering, 2009). In the survey for this study, respondents were thus asked on their preferences concerning the type of CSR information provided by clothing companies. The results are displayed in Figure 7 below.
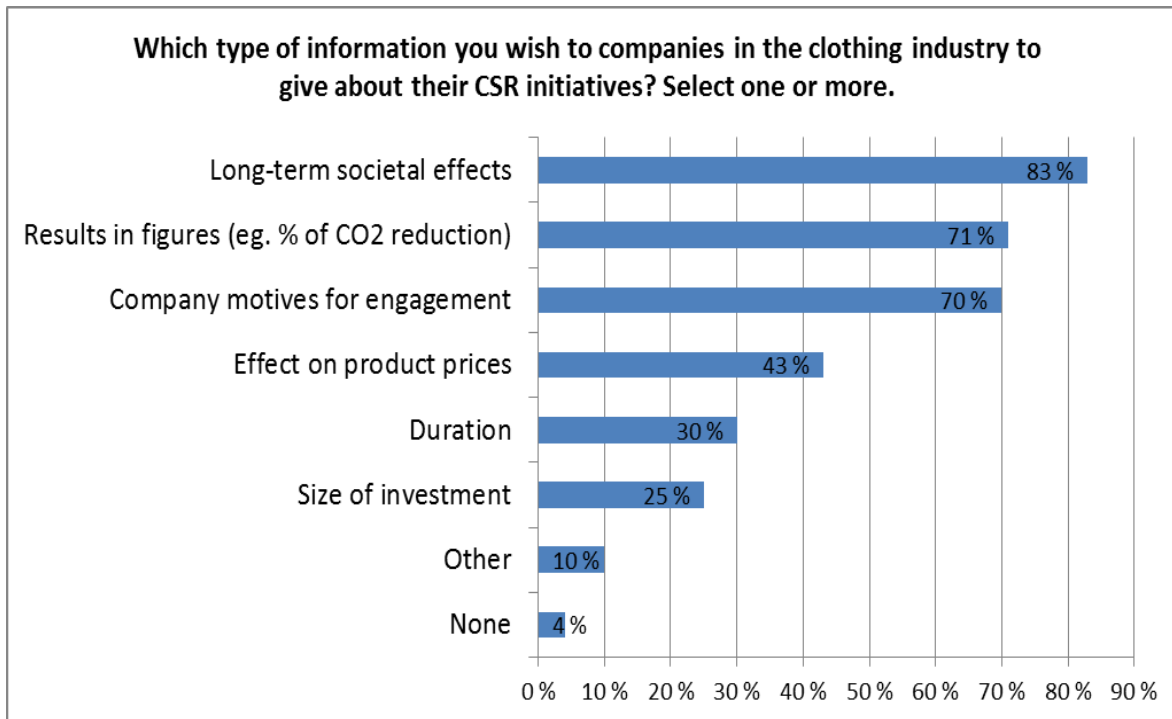
Which type of information you wish to companies in the clothing industry to give about their CSR initiatives? Select one or more.

- Long-term societal effects — 83 %
- Results in figures (eg. % of CO2 reduction) — 71 %
- Company motives for engagement — 70 %
- Effect on product prices — 43 %
- Duration — 30 %
- Size of investment — 25 %
- Other — 10 %
- None — 4 %

Figure 7: Consumer preferences concerning the type of information provided about CSR initiatives.

Based on Figure 7, information on the impact of CSR initiatives is the most demanded among consumers. This includes communication about the societal effects of CSR initiatives in the long run (83 %) as well as quantitative data on the results of the initiatives (71 %). In addition, a large share of consumers (70 %) wishes to be informed on the motives of a company to engage in a CSR initiative.

Other types of CSR information are not as important for respondents as the ones listed above but still raise an interest. For instance, information on how CSR affects product prices is demanded by approximately two out of five consumers (43 %). Duration of the CSR initiative and the size of investment seem to be relatively less important to consumers as these options were only selected by 25 % to 30 % of respondents, respectively.

In conclusion, two main findings can be highlighted concerning consumer expectations from CSR message content. First, consumers consider the most important CSR issues in the clothing industry are those related to the environmental impact of production and to working conditions in the supply chain. Second, consumers wish to have information especially on the long-term societal effects of CSR initiatives as well as on the results in quantitative terms and on company motives for CSR engagement.

4.3.2 CSR communication channels

In addition to message content, consumer responses to CSR communication are influenced by the communication channel (Du et al., 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004). Therefore, the third research question of the present study also addressed consumer needs and expectations in relation to CSR communication channels in the clothing industry.

In the literature review, three relevant aspects were identified in relation to communication channels: consumer use of communication channels for product and company information, consumer trust in CSR communication channels, and consumer preferences for CSR communication channels. Findings from the survey concerning each of these aspects are presented below.

4.3.2.1 Consumer use of communication channels for product and company information

According to previous research, consumers typically do not look for CSR information proactively but learn about CSR through mainstream sources (Dawkins, 2004). For this reason, it may be worthwhile for companies to identify which communication channels are

generally used by consumers when they look for product and company information. Messages about corporate responsibility could then be included other communications.

In the present study, consumers were asked which channels they mainly use to acquire information about companies in the clothing industry and their products. The results are illustrated in Figure 8 below.
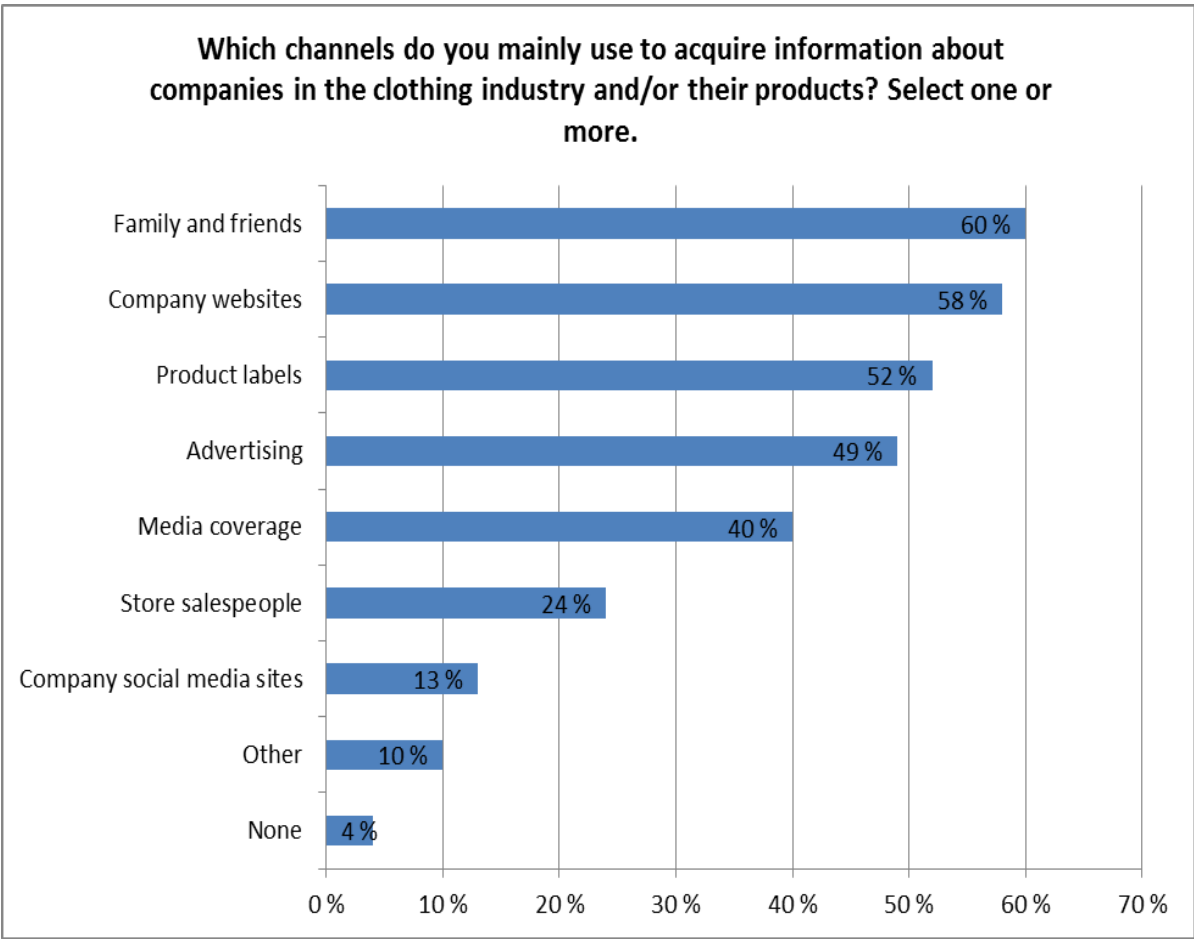

Figure 8: Consumer use of communication channels to acquire information about clothing companies and their products.

According to Figure 8, the most popular way to get clothing company and product information is through family and friends and from company websites. Product labels and advertisements are also used often by roughly half of respondents. Moreover, the media is a fairly popular communication channel used actively by 40 % of respondents.

4.3.2.2 Consumer trust and preferences concerning CSR communication channels

Communicating CSR is a more sensitive issue than communicating about product-related information and it is likely to evoke consumer skepticism (Du et al. 2010, Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009, Dawkins, 2004). Therefore, this study was also concerned with consumer views on communication channels particularly in relation to CSR. Firstly, the survey investigated which CSR communication channels respondents trust. Secondly, the respondents were asked to identify channels they prefer to receive CSR information from. The results are depicted in Figure 9 below.
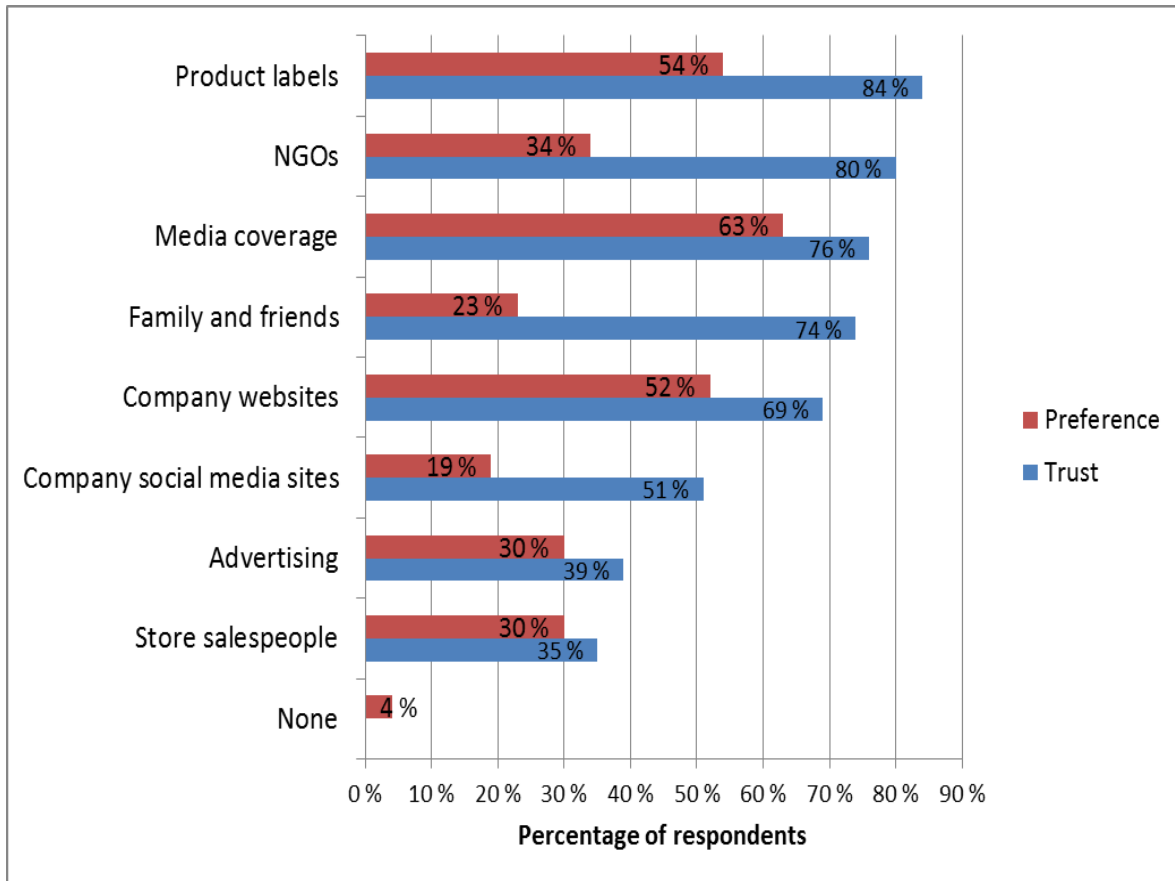
Figure 9: CSR communication channels consumers trust and prefer in the clothing industry.

As shown in Figure 9, the most trusted source of CSR communication are product labels (84 %). Non-governmental organizations, the media, and friends and family are also trusted to a significant extent (between 76 % and 84 %). Company websites are seen as trustworthy by two thirds of respondents. Meanwhile, advertising and salespeople in stores are among the least credible sources of CSR communication and trusted only by one third of respondents. Consumer trust in each channel was asked as a yes/no question and thus there is no percentage on how many consumers did not trust any channel.

In terms of channel preference, the results in Figure 9 reveal that the media is the most preferred CSR communication channel (64 %). Product labels and company websites are

convenient channels for approximately half of respondents. Other channels are liked by notably fewer respondents. Only approximately one third likes to be communicated on corporate responsibility through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advertising or store personnel. A 4 % share of respondents does not wish to receive CSR information from any source.

Figure 9 allows for comparison between consumer trust and preference concerning CSR communication channels. It appears that the media is the best channel for CSR messages from the two aspects. Product labels and company websites appear as the following options. Interestingly, the results suggest that measuring consumer trust in CSR communication channels does not provide enough information on which channels should be used. It seems that while many channels are highly trusted the demand for CSR information through these channels is much lower. For instance, four out of five respondents find CSR information from NGOs credible but only one third would like to receive this information from them. Similarly, consumers do not prefer to learn about corporate responsibility from friends and family although they trust them.

4.3.2.3 CSR communication channels for highest consumer awareness and trust

The findings discussed above provide guidance on CSR communication channels from three aspects. These findings are compared in Figure 10.
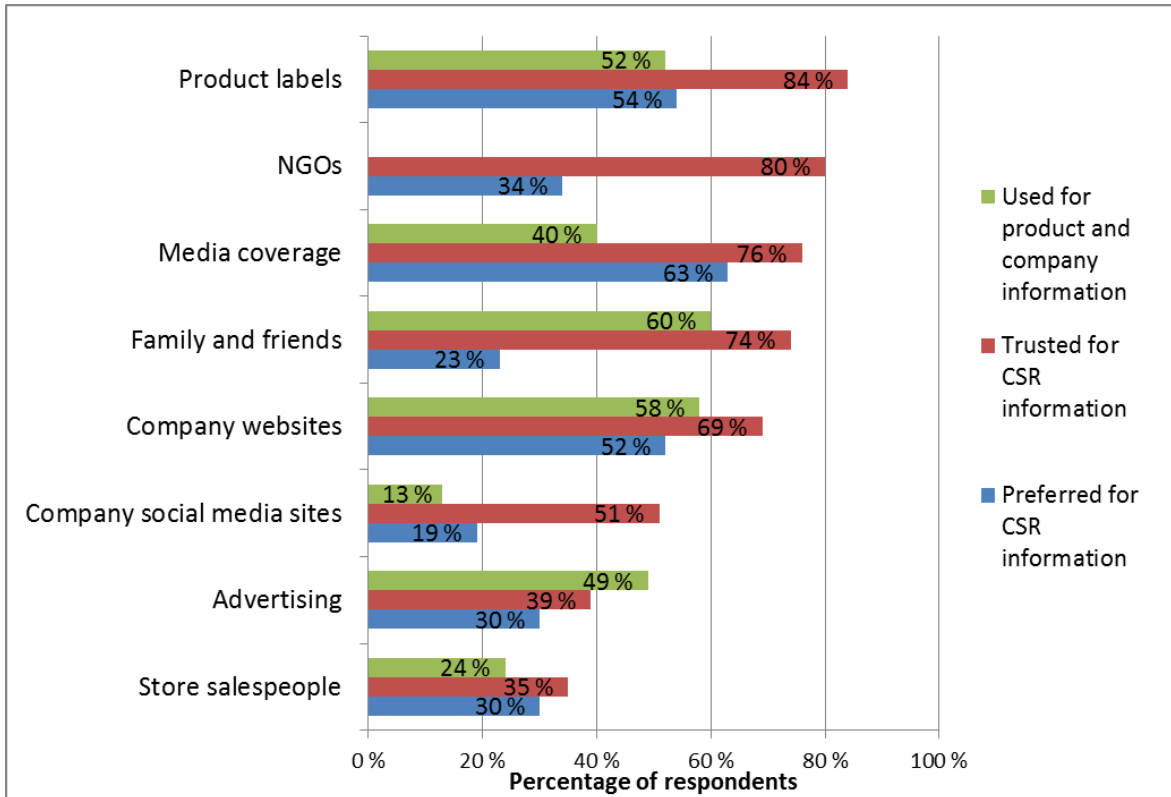
Figure 10: Consumer views on communication channels in the clothing industry.
Note: NGOs were not offered as an option for receiving product and company information nor were they mentioned in the open answers for the question.

According to Figure 10, a large part of consumers finds company websites and product labels to be credible and roughly a half follows these channels actively and likes to receive CSR information from them. Thus, these channels appear to be the best choices for companies who wish to achieve high consumer awareness of and trust in their CSR communications.

Communicating on CSR through the media would be another potentially effective channel. The public appears to trust the media and likes it as a source of CSR information. Although media sources are not as widely used for product information than product labels and websites they are still followed by a 40 % share. However, for companies it is naturally

much harder to control the media than its own channels, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

5. DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, the key findings of the present research are identified and reflected on the literature reviewed in chapter 2. Moreover, the practical implications of the findings for companies are presented.

5.1 High consumer interest in CSR

Firstly, the present research addressed consumer interest in CSR in the clothing industry. It should be remembered that the survey results are likely affected by the biases discussed in 3.2. Yet, they provide an indication for clothing companies and for researchers.

The findings of the study indicate that approximately two thirds of consumers consider it important to get information about CSR in the clothing industry. This is in line with previous consumer studies which have indicated that the majority of the public wishes to know about companies' responsibility efforts (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Dawkins, 2004; Mohr et al., 2001). In addition, only 4 % of the survey respondents stated to be unwilling to receive CSR information from clothing companies. While these finding should be considered with precaution, there is more evidence suggesting that CSR issues raise interest among the public. The response rate of the survey was particularly high for a Master's thesis survey: 166 answers in one week's time. Moreover, question 9 in the survey was optional yet 145 out of 166 respondents answered it listing CSR issues they think clothing companies should address.

Concerning the effect of CSR on clothing purchase decisions, this study is in contrast with previous research (Jegethesan, 2012; Joergens, 2006; Dickson, 2000). A particularly large share of the respondents (77 %) said that CSR information affects their clothing purchases significantly or to some extent. Again, the figure provides only an indication. Investigating

the importance of CSR to consumers in real purchase situations would have been out of reach of this study.

The comparison between CSR in clothing purchases and other purchases resulted in interesting findings. The comparison has not been made in any of the previous research discussed in chapter 2, yet the answers provide valuable information for clothing companies. To approximately one third of consumers, CSR is less relevant in clothing purchases than in other purchases. The reasons for this are various. Firstly, most respondents stated that the look and price of the apparel is more significant than its ethical features. This suggests that consumers wish for a larger amount of options in ethically produced clothing. For CSR-oriented companies, it may be difficult to compromise on the price of the clothing since respecting environmental laws and fair trade principles typically increases production costs. However, the style and look of the clothing is easier to modify according to customer preferences.

Secondly, the findings suggest that communication-wise the clothing industry could take an example from the food industry. Some consumers do not feel they can make a difference with clothing purchases since they buy clothes less frequently than for instance food. Clothing companies investing in CSR could thus benefit from transmitting the message that every purchase counts. In addition, part of consumers find that in food products CSR information is more readily available. For instance, in grocery stores organic, fair trade and other CSR-related product labels help consumers to choose more responsibly produced products. It could thus be beneficial for clothing retailers to find out more about the means of CSR communication that have been the most effective in the food industry. Some clothing retailers, such as H&M, have a label on their products telling the consumer that the product has been made with organic cotton. This kind of practices could be effective for spreading CSR information, as has also been suggested by Dickson (1999).

For clothing companies, the results imply that companies should invest in CSR and communicate about it. Best practices for CSR communication can potentially be found from other industries.

5.2   Limited consumer awareness of CSR

The second part of the research was concerned with consumer awareness of CSR in the clothing industry.

Previous research has suggested that consumers' low awareness of CSR is a challenge for companies wishing to gain business benefits through their CSR efforts (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Dawkins, 2004; Auger et al. 2003). For instance, Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) found that consumers were not able to identify the banks behind specific CSR initiatives nor were they aware of CSR initiatives in the banking industry in general. The only clothing-related study that was found was by Auger et al. (2003) investigating consumer awareness of ethical features of sports shoes. The authors discovered that consumers knew little about these features.

In the present study, three out of four consumers were able to name at least one CSR initiative from the clothing industry on a general level or company-specifically. Yet, only one third was able to name more than one CSR initiative which tells that consumer awareness of CSR is still limited. It is noteworthy that the question was an open-ended one requiring respondents to answer without any associated information. In other situations, such as when being in a clothing store, consumers may recall CSR initiatives better sparked by for instance a sight of the company logo. This could be studied further in future research.

In terms of the topics of CSR initiatives, environmental campaigns appear to be remembered the best. This could tell that clothing companies have been the most successful in communicating about their environmental efforts. For example, the increasing use of organic cotton by H&M was often mentioned by respondents. Alternatively, the result can also indicate that consumers are particularly interested in environmental themes. The issue is discussed further in the next section.

For companies, the findings discussed in this section indicate that that there is some awareness of CSR initiatives yet to a limited extent. Thus, companies could benefit from planning their CSR communication strategies more in detail to reach larger masses of consumers.

5.3   Implications of consumer expectations and attitudes on CSR communication

Finally, the present study addressed consumer attitudes and expectations concerning CSR communication in the clothing industry. The findings provide guidance for companies on what to include in their CSR messages and which communication channels to use. The two aspects are discussed in the following subsections.

5.3.1 Implications on CSR message content

In the present study, two factors were covered concerning consumer expectations from CSR message content: the importance consumers attach to different CSR issues and the type of CSR information consumers wish to receive.

Firstly, the findings show that consumers consider environmental issues related to clothing production, such as material and energy use, are the most important ones for companies to

address. This is in contrast with Hustvedt and Bernard (2010) but supports Jegethesan et al. (2012) who report that environmental CSR messages have a greater positive impact on clothing purchase decisions than information related to companies' social efforts. As discussed in the previous section, CSR campaigns covering environmental topics were also the best recalled by consumers. For clothing companies, this indicates that focusing on environmental issues in CSR communication can be a beneficial strategy. Ethical issues related to working conditions were also mentioned by a large part of consumers, only ten fewer than environmental issues. This indicates that communicating about CSR efforts such as safety and health improvements at factories or salary increases can also generate positive reactions in consumers.

Interestingly, problems related to the durability of clothing products were also required to be addressed by a distinct share of consumers. These are issues that fairly few large clothing retailers currently seem to communicate on. In fact, producing longer-lasting clothes would appear to be against the business philosophy of many global retailers who aim for higher profits by introducing new collections in short cycles. However, the findings suggest that companies that have made the durability of clothing one of their competitive assets could benefit from communicating on their commitment even more extensively.

In contrast with Joergens (2006), the present study shows very little support for CSR issues that are directly related to the consumer. Issues such as product safety and influence of marketing on body image were mentioned by very few respondents. However, low consumer interest in a CSR topic does not imply that companies should not communicate about it at all. Instead, when communicating on CSR issues that are less familiar among the public companies can take an educative role and invest more in informing consumers on how the issue is related to the industry or company in question (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009).

As a second point concerning message content, companies need to consider what type of information they provide on their CSR efforts to increase consumer trust (Du et al. 2010; Pomering, 2009). The present study found that consumers wish the most to receive information on the long-term societal effects of CSR initiatives. In addition, consumers want companies to provide figures on the results of their CSR efforts and to tell about their motives for engaging in CSR.

As discussed in subsection 2.2.3, research has suggested communicating about the company's CSR commitment, such as the amount and consistency of input and length of the commitment may strengthen stakeholder trust (Du et al., 2010; Pomering, 2009). Findings of the present study indicate that this type of information is demanded by a relatively small share, approximately one fourth of consumers. While this is a distinct proportion, there is much more demand for other types of information. Thus, messages about the duration of CSR initiatives or the amount of money invested in them would not appear to be a very effective way to appeal to consumers.

5.3.2 Implications on CSR communication channels

Finally, the study addressed consumer attitudes and expectations towards CSR communication channels. The topic has been covered little in the clothing industry research. Moreover, consumer studies from other industries have provided limited and contrasting findings.

Firstly, previous research has typically given recommendations on the use of CSR communication channels based either on which channels are trusted or which channels are liked by stakeholders. However, the present study suggests that paying attention to only one of these two aspects is not enough. It seems that while many channels are highly trusted for

70

CSR communication many consumers still do not wish to receive responsibility information from these sources. For instance, NGOs are a highly credible source of CSR communication among the public as has also been reported in previous research (Du et al. 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Yet, this study shows that a relatively small share of the public prefers to learn about CSR through NGOs. When looking at both channel trust and preference, it appears that the media is the best channel for CSR messages. It is followed by product labels and company websites. These represent company-controlled sources and the trust in them is higher than reported in other research (Du et al., 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Furthermore, this study is in contrast with Du et al. (2010) but supports MTT Agrifood Finland (2012) in that consumer word-of-mouth is not preferred nor trusted as a means of CSR communication.

Secondlly, this study also took into account that while consumers may prefer and trust certain CSR channels they still might not follow these channels actively. It has been suggested by Dawkins (2004) that consumers are not proactive seekers of CSR information. Thus, the present study also identified the communication channels that are used by consumers when they look for product and company information in general. The findings show that this information is mainly acquired from family and friends and company websites. While it is more difficult for companies to influence the word-of-mouth by consumers, they can easily adjust what information they offer on corporate websites.

Taking into consideration the three aspects discussed above, this study suggests that company websites and product labels are the most effective channel for CSR communication. Company websites and product labels are often used for product and company information and they are both trusted and liked for CSR information. Thus, these channels appear to have the highest potential for generating CSR awareness and trust in consumers.

Consequently, concerning company websites, it is important to consider where on the website CSR information is placed. Having a separate section focusing on corporate responsibility may not be the best option since consumers who look for product information are likely to browse through only product-specific sections. Instead, for instance product descriptions could include information on how the product was produced and how were the social and environmental impacts of production taken into account.

The findings suggest that spreading CSR messages through the media would be another effective method. In comparison with a company's own websites or product labels, acquiring media attention and controlling what is said about the company by reporters is naturally very difficult. Yet, it needs to be noted that since the survey for this study was conducted online the results might show a higher support for online channels than would be representative of the general public. Thus, communication about corporate responsibility through other sources, such as the media, would probably also be necessary.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a summary of the research as well as research limitations and recommendations for further studies.

6.1 Research summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate consumer perceptions of CSR and CSR communication in order to improve company ability to effectively communicate on CSR. The study was motivated by the challenges of low awareness of and trust in CSR among consumers. The research focus was on the clothing industry. Ethical issues have been strongly present in clothing markets in recent years but communicational aspects of clothing companies' CSR efforts have been limitedly studied.

The empirical part of the research was conducted through an online consumer survey completed by 166 Finnish nationals. The research questions of the study were threefold. Firstly, the study aimed to investigate the extent to which consumers are interested in CSR in the clothing industry. It was found that consumers see it important for clothing companies to address ethical issues and most consumers are prepared to take CSR into account in their purchases to some extent. However, for 35 % CSR is a more significant factor in other purchases than clothing purchases. The findings show stronger consumer support for CSR than other research from the clothing industry (Joergens, 2006; Dickson, 2000) but reflects studies by for instance Dawkins (2004), Maignan (2001) and Pomering and Dolnicar (2009). Yet the social desirability bias should be taken into account, which means that respondents may select the answer that is perceived as socially correct.

Secondly, the research aimed to track consumer awareness of clothing companies' CSR efforts. The findings show that most consumers are able to name at least one CSR initiative

from the clothing industry. Yet, only one third was able to name more than one CSR initiative and 28 % reported not having learnt about clothing companies' CSR efforts through any channels. Previous research has suggested that companies need to communicate more effectively on their CSR efforts in order to support consumers in their purchase decisions (Joergens, 2006; Dawkins, 2004; Dickson, 2000). This is supported by the present study since consumer awareness of CSR appears to be limited.

Finally, the study explored consumer attitudes and expectations regarding CSR message content and channels. This has been suggested as necessary in order to increase trust in and awareness of CSR (Du et al. 2010; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Argenti, 2007; Dawkins, 2004), yet consumer views have been limitedly studied in the clothing industry. Concerning message content, the findings indicate that consumers see environmental issues as the most important CSR topic to address in the clothing industry. Moreover, it was found that consumers wish for information on the impact of CSR initiatives in the long-term and in figures, as well as information about companies' CSR motives. Concerning CSR channels in the clothing industry, it was found that the channels consumers trust, like and use the most for CSR communication are product labels and company websites.

In summary, the study indicates that consumers are interested in corporate responsibility yet not aware of CSR initiatives to a large extent. Furthermore, the study adds to knowledge of consumer attitudes and expectations on CSR message content and channels. The findings help companies to reach high awareness of and trust in CSR and consequently generate company-favorable responses. As Pomering and Dolnicar (2009) point out, growing investments in CSR need to be turned into increased purchases in order for responsible corporate behaviors to be sustained.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The following limitations should be taken into account regarding findings of the present research.

The consumer survey sample included demographic limitations. The survey was only sent to Finnish nationals due to time constraints and ease of access to contacts. The results should be applied with caution to other nationalities (see e.g. Maignan, 2001). Nevertheless, considering the global presence of major clothing brands the findings are valuable for international business communication research.

As another demographic limitation, the age and sex of the survey respondents was not asked. Thus, the results might be biased towards a certain age group or sex. It could be assumed that most respondents were aged between 18 and 35 years because of the initial list of Facebook contacts the survey was posted to.

Moreover, as mentioned in section 3.2, the survey sample may include a higher percentage of ethically concerned consumers that would be representative of the total population. Ethically concerned consumers can be assumed to be better aware of CSR issues and more willing to receive CSR information (e.g. Dawkins, 2004).

Finally, conducting the survey online naturally produced a bias towards consumers that use the Internet.

6.3   Suggestions for further research

During this research project, it was discovered that the research scope was quite broad for a Master's Thesis study. Aiming to cover a smaller number of aspects than consumer interest, awareness, attitudes and expectations could have been beneficial. With this precaution in mind, the current section presents suggestions for further research.

Firstly, this study was able to provide only limited information on consumer awareness of CSR. Considering the growing importance of CSR in the clothing industry it would be interesting to investigate the issue further. For instance, research could focus on a number of companies that are running CSR campaigns at the moment and investigate to what extent consumers recall these campaigns. In addition, more extensive methods of measuring consumer awareness could be applied such as studying whether consumers can link company logos to particular CSR initiatives.

Secondly, as consumers in this study named environmental issues as the most important CSR issue to address it would be useful to study the topic further. Environmental issues are naturally a broad category which was not further narrowed down in this study due to time constraints. In the future, research could be taken focusing more specifically on which environmental topics consumers deem as most important. The examples given from the data in this study could serve as a starting point.

Thirdly, considering that this study did not take into account age and sex of the survey respondents, further studies showing the influence of demographics would be necessary. Moreover, some researchers (e.g. Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009) have argued that in CSR communication it appears more beneficial to categorize consumers based on their attitudes

and interests. Thus, audience segmentation is definitely a topic that should be in focus of future consumer studies in the field of CSR communication.

Finally, this study identified product labels among the most effective means of CSR communication which supports conducting further research on this channel, as has been done by for instance by Hustvedt and Bernard (2010) and Hyllegaard et al. (2012). In addition, best practices of CSR communication on clothing companies' websites could be investigated more in detail.

REFERENCES

Argenti, P. (2007) *Corporate communication.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Auger, P., Burke, P., Devinney, T., & Louviere, J. (2003) What Will Consumers Pay for Social Product Features? *Journal of Business Ethics, 42*(2003): 281-304.

Bernstein, A. (2003) Commentary: Sweatshops: Finally, Airing the Dirty Linen. Retrieved October, 25, 2012 from http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2003-06-22/commentary-sweatshops-finally-airing-the-dirty-linen

Bigné, E., Currás-Pérez, R. and Aldás-Manzano, J. (2012). Dual nature of cause-brand fit: influence on corporate social responsibility consumer perception. *European Journal of Marketing, 46*(3), 575 – 594.

Bhattacharya, & Sen, S. (2004) Doing better at doing good: when, why, and how consuemrs respond to corporate social initiatives. *California Management Review, 47*(1): 9-24.

Carroll, B. & Shabana, K. (2010) The Business Case for Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review of Concepts, Research and Practice. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 12*(1): 85-105.

Cornelissen (2011) *Corporate Communication – A Guide to Theory and Practice.* London: SAGE Publications Inc.

Davis, K. (1973). The Case for and Against Business Assumption of Social Responsibilities. *Academy of Management Journal, 16*(2), 312-322.

Dawkins, J. (2004) Corporate Social Responsibility: the Communication Challenge. *Journal of Communication Management, 9*(2), 108-119.

Dickson, M. & Eckman, M. (2006) Social Responsibility: The Concept as Defined by Apparel and Textile Scholars. *Clothing & Textiles Research Journal, 24*(3), 178-191.

Dickson, M. (2000) Personal Values, Beliefs, Knowledge, and Attitudes Relating to Intentions to Purchase Apparel from Socially Responsible Businesses. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 18*(1), 19-30.

Dickson, M. (1999) US consumers' knowledge of and concern with apparel sweatshops. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 3*(1), 44 – 55.

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. & Sen, S. (2010) Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) : The Role of CSR Communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00276.x

Ellen, P., Webb, D. & Mohr, L. (2006) Building Corporate Associations: Consumer Attributions for Corporate Socially Responsible Programs. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 34*(2): 147-157.

Emmelhainz, M. & Adams, R. (1999) The Apparel Industry Response to "Sweatshop" Concerns: A Review and Analysis of Codes of Conduct. *The Journal of Supply Chain Management: A Global Review of Purchasing and Supply,* Summer 1999: 51-57.

Freeman, R., Harrison, J., Wicks, A., Parmar, B. & de Cole, S. (2010). *Stakeholder Theory – the State of the Art. Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press.

Friedman, M. (1970) The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits. *The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970.

H&M (2012) *Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2011*. Retrieved September, 25, 2012 from
http://about.hm.com/content/dam/hm/about/documents/en/CSR/reports/Conscious%20Actions%20Sustainability%20Report%202011_en.pdf

Gupta, M., and Hodges, N. (2012) Corporate social responsibility in the apparel industry: An exploration of Indian consumers' perceptions and expectations. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management,16*(2), 216 – 233.

Hustvedt, G. & Bernard, J. (2010) Effects of social responsibility labelling and brand on willingness to pay for apparel. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 34*(6): 619–626.

Hyllegard, K., Yan, R., Ogle, J. & Lee, K. (2012) Socially Responsible Labeling - The Impact of Hang Tags on Consumers' Attitudes and Patronage Intentions Toward an Apparel Brand. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal January, 30*(1): 51-66.

Ihlen, O., Bartlett, J., & May, S. (Eds.) (2011). *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Jegethesan, K., Sneddon, J., & Soutar, G. (2012) Young Australian consumers' preferences for fashion apparel attributes. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 16*(3), 275-289.

Joergens, C. (2006) Ethical fashion: myth or future trend*? Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management,10*(3), 360 – 371.

Maignan, I. & Ferrell, O. (2004). Corporate social responsibility and marketing: an integrative framework. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 32*(1), 3-19.

Maignan, I. (2001) Consumers' Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibilities: A Cross-Cultural Comparison. *Journal of Business Ethics, 30*(2001), 57-72.

Marimekko (2012) *Responsible sourcing*. Retrieved December 5, 2012 from http://company.marimekko.com/corporate-responsibility/social-responsibility

Mohr, L., Webb, D., & Harris, K. (2001). Do Consumers Expect Companies to be Socially Responsible? The Impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on Buying Behavior. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs, 35*(1), 45-72.

MTT Agrifood Research Finland (2012). *Vastuullisuus ruokaketjussa – Eväitä johtamiseen, mittaamiseen ja viestintään.* Jokioinen: MTT.

Morsing, M. & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: Stakeholder Information, Response and Involvement Strategies. *Business Ethics: A European Review, 15*(4), 323-338.

Pomering, A. (2009) *The impact of claim diagnosticity on consumer scepticism to corporate social responsibility advertising claims.* Wollongong: University of Wollongong.

Pomering, A. & Dolnicar, S. (2009). Assessing the Prerequisite of Successful CSR Implementation: Are Consumers Aware of CSR Initiatives? *Journal of Business Ethics, 85,* 285-301.

Rudell, F. (2006) Shopping With a Social Conscience: Consumer Attitudes Toward Sweatshop Labor. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 24*(4): 282-296.

Sen, S. and Bhattacharya, C. (2001) Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Marketing Research, 38*(May 2001): 225-243.

Shaw, D., Hogg, G., Wilson, E., Shiu, E. and Hassan, L. (2006) Fashion victim: the impact of fair trade concerns on clothing choice. *Journal of Strategic Marketing, 14*(4), 427-40.

Zikmund, W. (1997). *Business Research Methods.* Florida: The Dryden Press.

Appendix 1: Self-completion questionnaire

Note: the self-completion questionnaire was originally distributed in finnish. It is translated in english here to avoid linguistic problems.

Corporate social responsibility in the global clothing industry

This survey is conducted to investigate consumer views on corporate social responsibility in the global clothing industry.

The global clothing industry refers to all companies concentrating on clothing production and retail.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) means that a company aims to take into account the impacts of its operations on the society and environment.

1. Which channels do you mainly use to acquire information about companies in the clothing industry and/or their products? Select one or more.
   a. advertisements
   b. company websites
   c. company pages in social media
   d. product labels
   e. store salespeople
   f. media coverage
   g. family and friends
   h. other channel, please specify
   i. none
2. Which CSR initiatives you know that have been carried out by companies in the clothing industry? Name as many as you can recall (company names are optional).
3. Have you particularly liked some CSR initiative in the clothing industry? Why?
4. Have you been particularly irritated by some CSR initiative in the clothing industry? Why?
5. Through which channels have you received information on CSR initiatives by companies in the clothing industry?
   a. advertisements
   b. company websites
   c. company pages in social media
   d. product labels
   e. store salespeople

f. media coverage
g. non-governmental organizations
h. family and friends
i. other channel, please specify
j. none

6. Is it important for you to know about corporate responsibility in the clothing industry?
   a. yes
   b. no

7. Does corporate responsibility affect your clothing purchase decisions?
   a. yes, significantly
   b. yes, to some extent
   c. no

8. How important factor is corporate responsibility in your clothing purchases compared with other purchases? Why?
   a. more significant than in other purchases because…*(fill in)*
   b. less significant than in other purchases because…*(fill in)*
   c. equally important as in other purchases because…*(fill in)*

9. In your opinion, which social and environmental issues should be addressed by companies in the clothing industry, if any?

10. Which type of information do you wish companies in the clothing industry to provide about their CSR initiatives? Select one or more.
    a. duration of the initiative
    b. size of investment
    c. results in figures (eg. % of CO_2 reduction)
    d. long-term societal effects
    e. company motives for engagement
    f. effect on product prices
    g. other information, please specify
    h. none

11. If you wish to receive information on CSR initiatives by companies in the clothing industry, do you trust the following information sources? Choose yes or no.
    a. advertisements
    b. company websites
    c. company pages in social media
    d. product labels
    e. store salespeople
    f. media coverage
    g. non-governmental organizations
    h. family and friends

12. Why do you trust or do not trust the selected information sources?
13. From which channels would you prefer to receive information on CSR initiatives by companies in the clothing industry? Select one or more.
    a. advertisements
    b. company websites
    c. company pages in social media
    d. product labels
    e. store salespeople
    f. media coverage
    g. non-governmental organizations
    h. family and friends
    i. other channel, please specify
    j. none