

Communication of corporate social responsibility - An analysis of different brands in the outdoor industry

Comunicação da responsabilidade social empresarial - Uma análise de diferentes marcas na indústria de atividades ao ar livre

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyse the role of *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) in the outdoor industry and the implementation of CSR-communication on different outdoor brands' websites. This paper provides an overview of the framework of CSR and sustainability marketing. Consequently, a closer look on CSR-communication and on the definition of three sustainability related marketing strategies is taken. Furthermore, this paper defines the current situation of CSR in the outdoor industry. The research is divided into two parts. Firstly, a standardized open-end interview with four different outdoor brands was conducted. Secondly, a benchmark tool was developed, based on literature and the results of the former conducted interviews. In total 22 different outdoor brands' online CSR-communication are investigated and taken in comparison. This study suggests that CSR and especially brands' external CSR-communication play a crucial role in the outdoor industry. It is analysed, related to the CSR-communication, a classification into, denier, risk minimizer and differentiator, is identifiable. All analysed outdoor brands implement CSR-communication, what proofs that CSR-communication cannot be ignored anymore. Only a few brands are characterised as denier of CSR-communication, as they implement almost no communication of CSR. The majority shows the communication characteristics of risk mitigation whereas some brands stand out as brand differentiators.

KEYWORDS: Corporate social responsibility; CSR-communication; Sustainable brand image; Outdoor industry; Brand classification.

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RESUMO

Este artigo teve como objetivo analisar o papel da responsabilidade social empresarial (RSE) na indústria de atividades ao ar livre e verificar a implementação da comunicação da RSE nos sites das empresas deste setor. Este estudo fornece uma visão detalhada do conceito da RSE e marketing de sustentabilidade, consequentemente, tanto na comunicação da RSE como na definição de três estratégias de marketing relacionadas com a sustentabilidade. Além disso, foi analisada a situação atual da RSE na indústria de atividades ao ar livre. O estudo desenvolveu-se em duas fases: primeiro, foi realizada uma entrevista aberta em quatro empresas de atividades ao ar livre; segundo, de acordo com a literatura e as entrevistas, foi desenvolvida uma ferramenta de referência. Foram pesquisadas 22 empresas do setor de forma on-line para comparar a comunicação da RSE. O estudo mostrou que a RSE e, em especial, a comunicação externa sobre RSE das empresas, desempenha um papel crucial na indústria de atividades ao ar livre. Com base na comunicação da RSE on-line foram identificadas três estratégias de marketing de sustentabilidade: renegação, minimização de risco e diferenciação. Todas as marcas comunicam de alguma forma a RSE, o que sugere que a comunicação da RSE não pode ser ignorada. Apenas algumas marcas se caracterizam como renegadoras da comunicação da RSE, uma vez que pouco a desenvolvem. A maioria apresenta uma comunicação da minimização de risco enquanto algumas marcas se destacam pela sua estratégia de diferenciação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Responsabilidade social empresarial; Comunicação da RSE; Imagem de marca sustentável; Indústria das atividades ao ar livre; Classificação da marca.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years terms like global warming, environment pollution, sustainability, fair labour and *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) captured an immense attention within the society as well as in the world of business creating a new challenge for brand leaders. Companies got the important task to balance brand reputation, consumer trust, mass consumption, radical corporation transparency and still not to forget sales and growth. The traditional marketing aspect of simple promoting a product or service became outdated and the commercial marketing slowly developed to the today's known sustainability marketing. Companies try to improve their brand reputation, consumer loyalty and consumer trust by communicating CSR (Lunenberg, Gosselt, & De Jong, 2016). This is why the relation of CSR and communication became a big role for organisations with the target motto "*Do good things and talk about it on every communication channel*" (Heinrich, 2013, p. 2; own translation).

One of the industry branches that recognised a remarkable growth in the last decade is the outdoor industry, moving to a multibillion industry sector (Cobb, 2015). But the outdoor industry does not just demonstrate an immense gain in profit, also the external attention on outdoor brands' CSR engagement won in crucial importance.

Based on its external CSR-communication and radical advertisement campaigns, the brand *Patagonia* became the flagship for a responsible company in the outdoor industry (CSR Central, 2015; Chouinard, 2006). This makes *Patagonia* a brand differentiator by communicating its CSR engagement. But is *Patagonia* the only outdoor brand that builds brand differentiation by using CSR-communication or do others also react on the sustainable consumers' behaviour and follow the implementation of CSR-communication? Did CSR really become such a crucial role in the outdoor and sports industry?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR, also known as *Corporate Responsibility* (CR) is not a complete new invented concept. The first existing writings about CSR can be traced back to the 1930s, already long before the first actions of CSR were conducted (Blowfield & Murray, 2011). By the ongoing changes of society, over more than 100 years, and the influence of the sustainable development CSR is nowadays known as the "*integration of social and environmental concern; voluntariness; ethical behaviour; human and labour rights; fight against corruption; transparency and accountability*" (Giurgilă, 2014, p.15). Miluwi (2013) emphasises that the 21st century is marked by new challenges and opportunities caused by globalisation, an inclusive development and the impacts of climate change. This shows that CSR became an essential element in business operations being impossible to ignore it nowadays.

Conceptualizing CSR shows a big disunity as there is neither a clear definition of CSR nor a generalized concept pointed out in literature. But all definitions lead to the current understanding of CSR: CSR is a concept anchored in the business approach which includes the integration of social and environmental concerns, ethical business behaviour the consideration of human and labour rights, to provide transparency to all stakeholders and this on a voluntary basis (Giurgilă, 2014).

According to Andreu, Casado-Díaz and Mattila (2015), in relation to marketing, CSR demonstrates the management of responsible and irresponsible acts towards all stakeholders, in relation to environmental, ethical and social issues, in a way that the corporate's benefits are still ensured. This quotation defines the link between CSR and marketing, building the framework for the so-called *Sustainability Marketing*. So, considering the sustainable development, the change of society's sustainability awareness as well as the development from single-bottom-line to the so-called triple-bottom-line (TBL), businesses are forced to build a link between CSR and marketing and implement the sustainability marketing. The TBL is also known for its *three P's*, *people*, *planet* and *profit*. It is a tool that measures the human capital (social health/people), the natural capital (planet) and the capital (profit). Thus, companies of the 21st century have to step back from the traditional

bottom line, which refers just to “profit” or “loss” and measure also their social, economic and environmental profits and consider these aspects in their core business and marketing strategies.

One can say that sustainability marketing is not a new invention of marketing, as the main goal for companies is still implementing a business strategy so customers’ satisfaction and corporation’s goals are reached. The only difference, or better said the add-on, is that sustainability marketing is also focused on the social and environmental issues that the mass industry evokes nowadays.

New challenges appear for the world of marketing like the transformation towards a focus on customer relationships and the defiance to build a relationship between marketing strategies and the principles of the sustainable development. In the traditional marketing mix, the viewpoint is based on the companies and consumers are not seen as being an actual part of the business. The famous *four P’s of marketing* (product, price, promotion and place) show a one-way process meaning that all the action and communication comes from the sellers. But with the change to sustainability marketing, a two-way system is needed and the focus on customer relationship and sustainable development should increase. Hence, Lauterborn (1993) developed the *four C’s marketing model*, also known as *sustainable marketing mix* (as cited in Rosemeier, 2015). Instead of *product, price, promotion and place*, the sustainable marketing mix is based on *customer solutions, customer costs, communication and convenience*.

The commercial one-way promotion is not enough anymore, organisations have to focus on the so-called two-way communication and include their customers. For sustainability marketers, communication is the most important part of a good working marketing strategy. An effective communication performance represents a big benefit for companies to assure the consumers’ awareness of corporations’ sustainability solutions (Belz & Peattie, 2010). This idea shows that a marketing strategy without an optimal communication is not enough. Hence, the challenge for companies is to create communication and promote their products in a way that their consumers are fully satisfied, and to consider the social, environmental and the economic aspects. This makes communication, the centrepiece of marketing, one of the biggest challenges for companies’ marketing departments. Today’s consumers are asking more and more businesses to open their curtains and provide business transparency. This is why CSR-communication became a crucial role in the world of business. According to Moravcikova, Stefanikova and Rypakova (2015), communicating CSR activities enables a company to inform its customers about social responsibility related issues and about company and product values.

Nowadays corporations take advantage of social and ecological potentials of sustainability for improving their competition strategy and their economic acting (Emrich, 2015). Hence, there is still no optimal framework and definition of sustainability competition strategies but Gminder (2002) and Dyllick et al. (1997) define five types of sustainability competition strategies as shown in Figure 1 (as cited in Emrich, 2015).

By taking a closer look on the different sustainability marketing strategies the author summarizes these into three main types of groups related to the CSR-communication efforts. While strategy types ‘certain’, ‘reliable’ and ‘efficient’ are more passive and show a brand’s reaction, the other two types (‘innovative’ and ‘transformative’) demonstrate an active communication strategy. The main goals of the first three strategies are risk mitigation, assuring a positive brand reputation and not allowing the risk to implement greenwashing. These three types are summarised as the business group “risk minimizer”. Strategy types ‘innovative’ and ‘transformative’ emphasise the goal of brand differentiation by CSR-communication. This group is named “differentiator” with the objectives of including CSR in the core business, building competitive advantage by communicating CSR activities, changing the market branch as a whole by putting pressure on all other competitors and constantly publishing new sustainability discussions. The third group, not defined by the mentioned types will be defined as “deniers”, even if nowadays’ pressure of sustainable consumer behaviour, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and press releases is high, some companies still focus on brand differentiation by traditional marketing communication and show no participation in CSR efforts.

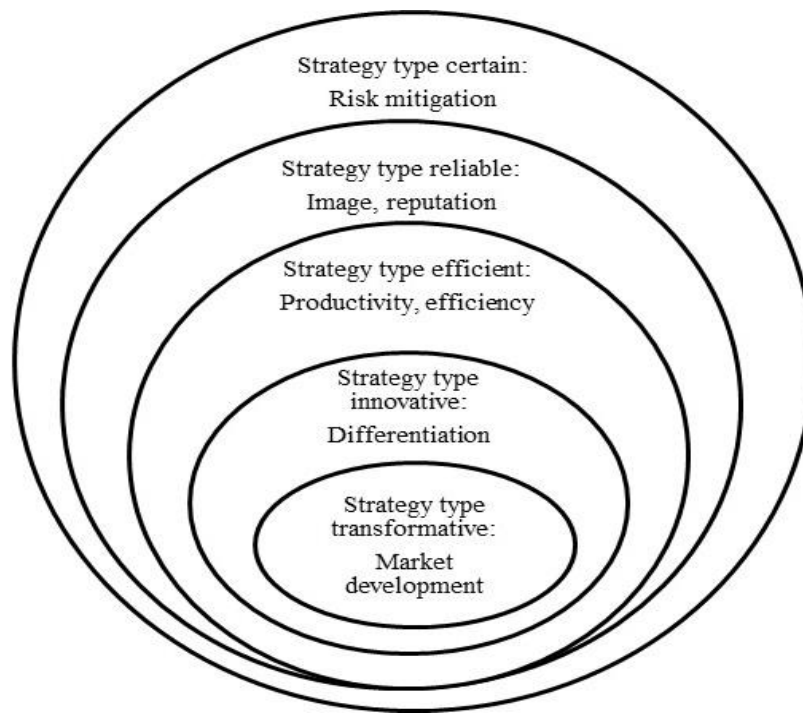


Figure 1 - Sustainability oriented competition strategies
Source: Emrich, 2015, p.175.

CSR and the sports industry, especially the outdoor industry, have a significant characteristic in common as both have experienced an immense growth and boom during the last years. Rodewald (2015) states that, according to sustainability issues, the outdoor industry is already a step ahead in comparison to the fashion industry. This emphasises how the sustainability awareness trend is of big importance for outdoor brands as well as for other sports companies. Already by its definition and clientele, the outdoor industry creates a direct link to nature and environment (Dalsant, 2015). For many sports apparel brands, CSR is already the main topic in its business strategy and communication (e.g., brand *Patagonia*, known as the outdoor clothing company with a revolutionary approach to CSR and sustainability; CSR-central, 2015). According to Bouchet, Hillairet and Bodet (2013), brands which want to survive in their market and assure their reputation and relationship to their consumers, have to implement communication programmes including brand concerns associated to their impact on society, environment and individuals as well as showing effort to act as a 'good citizen'. Factors like citizenship, fair trade, and social and environmental responsibility play a crucial role in the corporations' communication messages. Another impulse for outdoor brands communicating their CSR activities is the increased receiving enquiries for used materials and the corporations' supply chains. The CSR movement in the outdoor industry is an ongoing process and every year at least one of the new trends pushes the industry on the importance of CSR, from cleaner production to environmental energy use and social responsibility, the whole range. Also, various studies show that sustainable clothes are more and more requested by sports consumers (e.g., Fritzen, 2017).

To sum up, the current situation of CSR-communication in the sports apparel industry is a global trend and pushes towards more CSR efforts. The increasing competition in the outdoor industry, related to innovation, quality improvement and also better CSR-communication efforts, forces the different brands to move forward continuously. So outdoor brands are expected to commit themselves to social and environmental causes and communicate these. To be able to have their products purchased by their consumers, corporations in the outdoor sports industry should develop a clean or green image.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the role of *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) in the outdoor industry and the implementation of CSR-communication on different outdoor brands'

websites. Based on the literature review and previous studies, the current research is based on the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1 - What role does CSR-engagement play nowadays for outdoor brands?
- RQ 2 - Is sustainability marketing implemented by outdoor brands?
- RQ 3 - Due to the CSR-communication on outdoor brands' website, is it possible to identify the three sustainability-oriented marketing strategies?

3 METHOD

A standardized open-end interview was conducted to accomplish RQ1 and RQ2, which falls under qualitative research methods. *“A standardized open ended interview consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words”* (Patton, 2002, p. 342).

The interview followed Emrich (2015) and Heinrich (2013) studies and was divided into four parts. The first part deals with general information about the companies' mission statements and the corporations' CSR definition. The second part was related with analysing the CSR embedding within the different brands. The third part of the interview analyses the role of sustainability marketing, especially CSR-communication, for outdoor brands and the brand classification due to the particular company's CSR-communication performance. The interviews finish with a closer look at the brands' SWOT – Analysis related to their CSR efforts. Four different outdoor brands were researched. For providing a complete anonymity, brand names and interviewees are replaced by the representative letters A, B, C and D. The interviews were consulted via online interview or in written form via e-mail. All participants were able to read the interview questions in advance. As it is a standardized open-end interview, the interviewees were completely free in answering. Furthermore, interviewer and respondents were able to ask interposed questions, what provides more detailed information. For the interview analysis the respondents of the four brands are put in comparison based on existing literature. As it is a qualitative research method and all interviewees had no answers given, the analysis is based on objective and qualitative interpretation.

For accomplishing RQ3, a benchmark tool was developed based on the previous literature (Butow, 2014; Emrich, 2015; Heinrich, 2013) and on the results of the conducted interviews. The benchmark tool includes 23 criteria related to a collection of “yes and no answers” whereby the online CSR-communication performance of the respective outdoor brands' websites is analysed. The collection of “yes and no answers” allows a higher comparability and provides the reader with an easier understanding of the results. The sample of the second research part includes 22 different large sized outdoor brands that are members of the *European Outdoor Group* (EOG). In order to allow an international comparison, the 22 brands represent outdoor brands headquartered in Europe and in the US. For the online analysis, the corporate websites of the representative 22 outdoor brands were consulted. As there is no existing scale in the literature, the author consulted the three sustainability oriented marketing strategies and took all collected data into comparison with these. Furthermore, as the literature points out the outdoor brand *Patagonia* as CSR related brand differentiator, the results of the online analysis of the *Patagonia* were taken as role model. This provides a more effective analysis and better understanding for the reader.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of the interview was to analyse the current role of CSR within the outdoor industry and the importance of CSR-communication for outdoor brands.

All four interviewed brands confirm the existing of CSR activities and in total three agreed that these activities are part of the core business. Company D explained that CSR plays a crucial role within the brand and that the interaction with all stakeholders is anchored in the core business but not specifically the CSR efforts. According to the CSR role within the consulted companies, company A

explained that it is not easy to define it but rather to define the corporation's motivation for CSR. On one side, there is consumers' satisfaction and on the other side the tool for risk mitigation. This shows the link to the brand classification. Companies B and C both emphasise, that CSR is the heart of the brand, and that it is more than just external communication. Similar to company A, company D referred that the role of CSR within a company is critical and that the main goal of every company is making money. What interviewee D emphasises here is that he does not exclude CSR but gives it a very simple explanation: *"If companies do not make money they cease to exist and all of their stakeholders suffer"* (Company D, 2016). Therefore, one can see how interviewee D has a similar opinion as Chouinard and Stanely (2012), who say that a business cannot be social and environmental responsible without being financially save and able to grow.

Figure 2 gives an overview in which departments the researched outdoor brands have CSR anchored and what are actual goals of CSR-communication.

Company	Departments with CSR relation	CSR goals
A	Strategy department – department of brand - and business development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image improvement • Integration into society • Employees' motivation • Risk mitigation • Innovation • Fulfilling the customers' requests
B	Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image improvement • Integration into society • Employees' motivation • Communication of social responsibility • Sustainable economic benefit
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PR-department • Management • Sales department • Product development/ - management department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image improvement • Integration into society • Employees' motivation • Communication of social responsibility • Sustainable economic benefit • Improvement of production conditions to environmental and social friendly products
D	Core business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Sleeping well at night"</i> (Company D, 2016) • Retention of employees • Sustainable manufacturing • Risk mitigation

Figure 2 – Results of CSR embedding and – goals

During the interviews, it was possible to verify that the brands show different specific characteristics, which emphasise the brand classification related to their CSR-communication effort and importance. The following Figure 3 provides a summary of the classification characteristics.

Denier	Risk minimizer	Differentiator
Mission statement focuses on brand's quality and performance	Mission statement focuses on brand's quality and performance	Mission statement includes company's CSR efforts
Simple CSR definition with emphasise the company's profit	CSR definition represents the typical TBL	CSR definition does not include the company's economic approach
No CSR-communication	CSR-communication present but not active	Active CSR-communication
Just quality	Quality above sustainability	Sustainability above quality
Competitor advantage by product performance	Competitor advantage by product performance	Competitor advantage by product sustainability
Brand differentiation by quality	Brand differentiation by quality and sustainability	Brand differentiation by sustainability

Figure 3 - Brand classification based on CSR-communication

Company A defines itself as risk minimizer because the corporation does not use active CSR activities to reach a better competitor position in the outdoor industry. The company sees its CSR

activities as a so-called add-on but does not identify itself by its CSR activities, “like the brands *Patagonia, Vaude or Haglöfs*” (Company A, 2016; own translation). In comparison, interviewee B allocates the company as differentiator and emphasises that the company’s focus is on sustainability and its sustainability communication to all stakeholders. Interesting is the statement of company B: “the corporation contrasts from its competitors by active sustainability marketing and follow the goal of brand differentiation by sustainability” (Company B, 2016; own translation). Company C does not give an explicit answer and only gives the statement that the main goal of the brand’s CSR activities is risk mitigation but the CSR-communication in total is more than just a tool for minimizing the risks. With this statement one can say, that company C already shows an immense tendency to define itself as brand differentiator. Company D defines the corporation as denier of CSR activities but this because the company’s foundation of its marketing efforts is not based on its CSR activities hence the company mentions it in its marketing communication: “the core technology is naturally derived, recycled, human friendly and permanent” (Company D, 2016).

Summarizing the responses, it seems that external communication became the most important tool to demonstrate the outdoor brands’ CSR activities. Yet, there are no rules or guidelines for CSR-communication in the outdoor branch, which makes it quite complex and uncontrollable. It still brings the danger of *greenwashing* (false CSR-communication) and *label-jungle* with it, but external pressure by NGOs, third-party verifications and brands’ collaborations are showing a positive change.

The second research part analysed the CSR-communication performance on the websites of the particular outdoor brands. Figure 4 demonstrates the amount of particular brand’s “Yes” answers and the CSR-communication related classification.

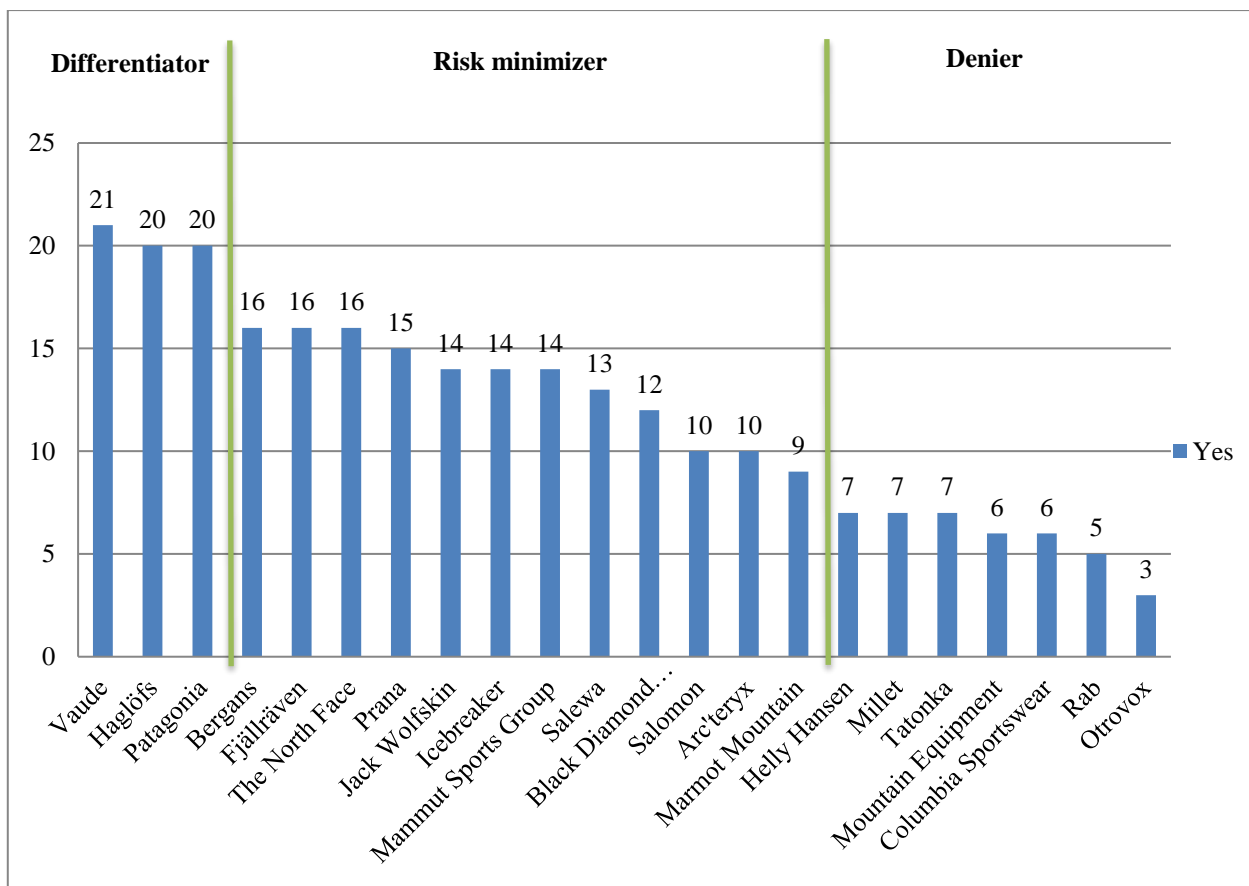


Figure 4 - Summary of “Yes” answers related to the CSR-communication analysis on the particular brands’ websites

The analysis of the interviews has already suggested that companies like *Patagonia, Vaude* and *Haglöfs* are known as pioneers in CSR-communication and CSR related brand differentiation (Company A, 2016). This idea is consistent with the second research part. As Figure 4 shows, the brand *Haglöfs* fulfils a total of 20 criteria, as *Patagonia* does. However, it is interesting that the brand

Vaude actually takes the lead with 21 achieved criteria. All three companies communicate a CSR related business mission, which is recognisable through the entire communication within the corporations' websites. *Patagonia*, *Vaude* and *Haglöfs* represent the previous defined characteristics of the strategy type "brand differentiator". These brands communicate an ecological and social product innovation and implement a proactive CSR-communication, with the objective of changing the outdoor branch as a whole.

The classification with the most outdoor brands is the group of "risk minimizer". The outdoor brands *Bergans*, *Fjällräven* and *The North Face* fulfil the same number of criteria, in total 16 closely followed by the brand *Prana*. The brands *Icebreaker*, *Jack Wolfskin* and *Mammut Sports Group* confirm in total 14 criteria. These outdoor brands show the characteristics of all three strategy types, which represent the group "risk minimizer". They all communicate 'certain', 'reliable' and 'efficient'. By implementing third-party verifications, communicating a less environmental pollution they build a sustainable positive brand image. The brands *Salewa*, *Black Diamond Equipment*, *Arc'teryx*, and *Marmot Mountain* are also defined as risk minimizer, but focus more on a reliable and certain marketing strategy (Emrich, 2015).

On one hand, these outdoor brands already implement various CSR-communication tools and show the effort of having a positive brand image related to sustainability, but on the other hand still have the tendency to stay reserved concerning the corporate's CSR-communication. This is quite typical for the marketing strategies 'reliable' and 'credible', which are summarised as risk mitigation. By doing this, the brands avoid the risk of being in the spotlight of negative press or sustainability campaigns but also focus not on too many communication channels to avoid the danger of greenwashing.

The analysed outdoor brands *Helly Hansen*, *Millet*, *Tatonka*, *Mountain Equipment*, *Columbia Sportswear*, *Rab* and *Ortovox* represent the classification "denier" with by far less than one-third of fulfilled criteria. These brands show an immense difference to the leading companies like *Patagonia* and *Vaude*. But it is also difficult to classify them as pure "denier". On one side, they implement a few CSR-communication efforts and demonstrate that none of the outdoor brands denies CSR completely, but on the other side it is obvious that these outdoor brands set the focus more on creating a brand differentiation by product quality, new innovations and do not create any notion in direction sustainable consumption behaviour.

Overall the interviews confirm that CSR became a crucial role in the outdoor industry and that it became impossible to ignore. Though there is still an immense difference between the particular brand's CSR perception and importance. But one aspect is remarkable, all brands converge into the idea that the business trend changed from the single-bottom-line focus to the so-called TBL. There is also a tendency visible for the outdoor brands to collaborate and support a common sustainable development but also the tendency to focus on brand differentiation by sustainability. The previous literature review also mentioned the change of the four P's of marketing to a so-called sustainable marketing mix, which highlights the increasing importance of CSR-communication. During the interview, the brands frequently emphasise this (i.e., how important became an optimal CSR-communication in the outdoor industry).

Based on the interviews and the previous illustrated literature review, research questions one and two are answered:

- RQ 1 - *What role does CSR-engagement play nowadays for outdoor brands?*
- RQ 2 - *Is sustainability marketing implemented by outdoor brands?*

By its definition, allowing outdoor enthusiasts to spend the optimal and most comfortable time in nature and the environment, the outdoor industry calls the external attention to the implemented CSR efforts. Furthermore, the change of sustainable buying behaviour and request for more transparency by outdoor brand consumers push the importance of CSR for outdoor brands into a high level. All in all, one can say that CSR plays a crucial role in the outdoor brand industry and any company cannot effort to be economical and survive on the constant growing competition market without

implementing effective CSR approaches. Another important result is that it seems important to implement CSR-communication to satisfy the customers and avoid the risk of negative press. But the sustainability-oriented associations and verification companies are not sleeping and often force outdoor brands more and more to develop an optimal, honest and effective CSR process within the entire business.

Regarding RQ2, it is impossible to affirm that completely. On one hand, yes, outdoor brands implement sustainability marketing, but on the other the focus is on an optimal CSR-communication strategy and the marketing effect is rather seen as positive “add-on”. In this case, the focus is still more on the traditional marketing. But all outdoor brands emphasise the importance of CSR-communication and the outdoor industry as a whole is moving in a direction where no CSR-communication will be impossible. It is important to mention here that not all companies rely on a competition differentiation by pure CSR-communication. Rather there are still some which deny active CSR efforts or are still quite passive in this way. The focus is still more on risk mitigation by CSR-communication, and brand differentiation rather by quality, but there is a tendency that will keep the sustainability development moving within the outdoor industry. So, it cannot be confirmed, that sustainability marketing is implemented specific, but it is probable that CSR-communication is implemented within outdoor brands.

The objective of the second research part was answering RQ3: *Due to the CSR-communication on outdoor brands’ website, is it possible to identify the three sustainability-oriented marketing strategies?*

Similar to RQ2, by a few six of the 21 analysed companies (excluding *Patagonia*) the author can observe that outdoor brands follow the CSR related brand differentiation strategy like *Patagonia*, the pioneer of sustainability communication. But on the other hand, the tendency of the outdoor brands’ CSR-communication objective still shows more the characteristics of risk mitigation. The two criteria with most “Yes-answers” are the availability of an extra CSR related part on the corporates’ websites and the communication of the implementation of sustainable material, closely followed by the criteria of an extra CSR related mission statement and the labelling of third-party verifications. These results show that the majority of outdoor brands are dealing with the CSR topics and are following the sustainable consumer requests.

Interesting is that one brand, *Vaude*, reaches more fulfilled criteria than *Patagonia* and equals *Haglöfs*. This shows that *Patagonia* is not the only one following the mission of creating a complete sustainable brand image. Also, the respondents of the interviews mention exactly these three companies as pioneers of CSR related brand differentiation.

5 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the growth of attention on CSR, especially in the sports apparel industry, the aim of this study was to investigate the importance of sustainability marketing and CSR, especially CSR-communication, within outdoor brands and to analyse the CSR-communication performance on different outdoor brands’ websites.

“Do good things and talk about it”, the main motto for marketers developing the optimal CSR-communication. Nevertheless, the idea of CSR-communication is not simply defined by these few words, and so this study focused on providing an in-depth attention into the concept of CSR.

Firstly, this study helps the reader understanding the birth of CSR and its complexity. Even nowadays, after more than 100 years of development, there is still no commonly accepted definition.

Furthermore, a closer look on the so-called sustainability marketing and what changes the world of marketing has experienced was taken. It was pointed out that the famous *4 P’s of marketing* may be transformed, caused by the sustainable development within, to the so-called *sustainable marketing mix*, also known as the *4 C’s of marketing*. The literature revealed how communication became a crucial role in the world of business, especially in the marketing strategies. So, the next parts of this paper were focused on conceptualising the so-called CSR-communication. Based on the consulted literature one can point out that CSR-communication refers to the tool corporations use to inform all

their stakeholders about their integration of social and environmental issues into the core of the business, and everything on a voluntary basis.

The today's consumers ask for more than product quality, they also want to know products' origins and processes behind the "business curtains". As brand equity plays a crucial role for the survival of businesses, an emphasis on CSR-communication is almost impossible to ignore. The consumers' perception of corporation's CSR efforts increased and the society is shifting more and more towards a complete sustainable consumption pattern.

This research analysed the CSR-communication of outdoor brands. Different sustainability-oriented marketing strategies were consulted, based on Emrich (2015), and were summarised in three main groups. It is pointed out that regarding to the corporations' CSR-communication efforts the companies can be classified in "denier", "risk minimizer" and "differentiator". This classification conducted this study.

The outdoor industry and CSR can both write down a remarkable growth and increased importance for the society and the world of business during the last decade. Hiking, biking, climbing are just a few outdoor sports which are more and more driven by the society. Also interesting is to see that outdoor sports clothes became part of people's day-by-day life and the outdoor industry as a whole experiences a boom as never before. Furthermore, the outdoor industry already leads the focus on nature and environment by its definition this sector equips their consumers to spend time in nature what sends the focus of sustainability related NGOs and media on the CSR efforts of outdoor brands.

Various outdoor brands already communicate their CSR efforts through the help of eco-labels and verifications of NGOs. The role model in this case has become the brand *Patagonia*. Various literature resources and media releases highlight *Patagonia* as the sustainable company pioneer (e.g., CSR-central, 2015; Chouinard, 2006).

Thus, the purpose of this study was defined by analysing the role of CSR within the outdoor industry and the particular outdoor brands' view about sustainability marketing, especially CSR-communication, and consequently exploring the CSR-communication efforts on outdoor brands' websites. Firstly, a standardized open-end interview was conducted with the attention on the role of CSR as general and sustainability marketing, especially CSR-communication within the companies. Consequently, the CSR-communication practices of 22 corporations were reviewed through a collection of 23 "Yes/No" questions.

The first research part identified that CSR is a crucial role within the outdoor industry and impossible to deny. Moreover, the interviews pointed out that the companies define their CSR-communication separately and do not see it actually as part of the sustainability marketing. In turn, the marketing is seen more as a positive add-on of an optimal CSR-communication. An important conclusion is though that the corporations emphasise that it is not enough just to communicate CSR efforts, it is important to communicate CSR as a whole business process and provide therefore transparency. Additionally, it was identified that companies also want to avoid allegation greenwashing, so they rather communicate less than too much without association to the core business. Nevertheless, marketing does play an increasing role, because companies do want to create a positive brand equity.

Another important result is that different outdoor brands follow the objective of driving the outdoor industry as a whole to a social and environmental aware industry. Also the implementation of a common third-party eco-label is highly desired. Nevertheless, it is recognisable that there is CSR-communication related classification, as one brand defines itself as denier, one as risk minimizer and two as differentiator. Furthermore brands like *Patagonia*, *Haglöfs* and *Vaude* were named as pioneers of CSR-communication related brand differentiation.

Based on the results of the interviews, it was explored if there was a classification visible by reference to the CSR-communication on corporations' websites. All in all, one can say that outdoor companies can be classified due to their CSR-communication on corporate's website, whereas only four brands follow the role model of CSR-communication (i.e., *Patagonia*). Seven of the 22 companies show no remarkable CSR-communication efforts and therefore represent the classification denier. Lastly, it was identified that most of the brands implement CSR-communication more as risk

mitigation than as a brand differentiation. But *Patagonia* will not stay the only brand what implements CSR-communication as brand differentiation tool, brands like *Haglöfs*, *Vaude* are also implementing CSR related brand differentiation strategies. Furthermore, various outdoor brands like *Bergans*, *Fjällräven*, *The North Face* and *Prana* are heading on the right direction and others will likely follow them.

These results are important for sports managers, especially for those working in the outdoor industry. It is pointed out that CSR-communication is not ignorable anymore, not only for outdoor sports brands, also for other sports sectors.

This research focused only on one-way CSR-communication on the corporate's website. For further researches, it is suggested to include other communication channels, as sent newsletters, the hangtags on products presented in outdoor apparel shops or in corporation's own shop or a specific analysis of social media channels.

Furthermore, future researches could be done by taking a closer look on the purchasing behaviour of outdoor brands' consumers and identify the congruence with the particular brand's CSR-communication.

Moreover, only four anonymous interviews were conducted during the current study, what prevented the author to take the brands' statements in direct comparison with the brands' communication. It is recommended to conduct more interviews and to compare the results with the actual communication efforts.

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