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**THE RELEVANCE OF STRATEGIC CSR AS A METHOD TO CREATE A
COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE. A STUDY ON THE CUSTOMERS IN THE
MARKET OF THE OUTDOOR CLOTHES FOR MOUNTAIN.**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

	Page
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	7
ABSTRACT:	9
1. INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 Research problem	15
1.2 The Scope and the Delimitation of the Research	19
1.3 The Outline of the Study	21
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	23
2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility	23
2.1.1 Criticism on CSR	24
2.1.2 The Pyramid of CSR	25
2.1.3 Corporate Social Responsiveness	28
2.2 Other Concepts Related with CSR	30
2.2.1 Stakeholder Theory	30
2.2.2 Sustainability	31
2.2.3 Triple Bottom Line	32
2.3 Strategic CSR	34
2.4 Creating Shared Value	38
2.4.1 Criticisms on Creating Shared Value	42
2.5 For-Benefit and Benefit Corporations	46
3. PROPOSITIONS	51
3.1 General Features of the Present CSR in the Outdoor Clothing	52
3.2 Aspects of the CSR remunerated by the Customers in the Outdoor Clothing	54

3.3 Advantages derived by the Implementation of CSR Policies in the Outdoor Clothing	57
3.4 Alternatives to Standard CSR Investments in the Outdoor Clothing	61
4. METHODOLOGY	64
4.1 Design of the Research	64
4.1.1 Research Choice Research Strategy and Research Approach	64
4.1.2 Data Collection and Interview Guide	66
4.2 Reliability and Validity	67
4.2.1 Reliability	67
4.2.2 Validity	69
4.3 Sample of the Study	69
5. FINDINGS/EMPIRICAL RESULTS	72
5.1 The Concept of CSR	72
5.2 The Information on CSR and the Reliability attributed to it	75
5.2.1 Information on CSR Practices	75
5.2.2 Certifications	77
5.3 Sectors in which CSR Investments are spread and required	79
5.3.1 Diffusion of CSR Practices	80
5.3.2 Most required CSR Practices	83
5.3.3 Consistency between CSR Practices and Personal Ideals	84
5.4 Advantages derived from CSR Policies	84
5.4.1 Brand Reputation	84
5.4.2 Willingness to Pay	88
5.4.2.1 Questions on Willingness to Pay	88
5.4.2.2 Experiment on Willingness to pay	90
5.5 Different Approaches toward CSR	95
5.5.1 Multi-Stakeholder Approach	95
5.5.2 Benefit Corporations and b Corp	97

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	100
6.1 Check of the Propositions	100
6.2 Answering the Research Questions	114
6.3 Managerial Implications	120
6.4 Limitations of the Study	121
6.5 Topics for future Research	123
7. LIST OF REFERENCES	124
8. APPENDICES:	135
Appendix 1: The Structure of the Interview	135
Appendix 2: The Images used for the Products	138

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES:

Table 1: Origins of CSR	29
Table 2: Concepts related with CSR	34
Table 3: Comparison between CSR and CSV in Porter's and Kramer's opinion, adapted from "The big Idea – Creating Shared Value", 2011	41
Table 4: Sample of the Study	71
Table 5: Answers to the North Face's Jacket	93
Table 6: Answers to the Patagonia's Jacket	94
Table 7: Propositions	112
Figure 1: The Structure of the Thesis	22
Figure 2: CSR Pyramid. Adapted from Carroll (1991)	27
Figure 3: Triple Bottom Line	33
Figure 4: The b Corp Label	47
Figure 5: General Features of the Present CSR	54
Figure 6: Aspects of the CSR Policies remunerated by the Customers	57
Figure 7: Advantages for Firms derived by the CSR Policies	60
Figure 8: Alternatives to Standard CSR Investments	63

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ABSTRACT:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has assumed a stronger relevance in the recent past because of its shifting from a second-rate activity to an issue playing a central role in the strategy of the firm. The opinion of the customers in the outdoor clothing industry about the relevance of the CSR in their purchasing choice has been investigated with a duplex goal: to fill the gap on a theoretical level, since not many studies have been carried out about this issue, and to test if these practices could provide a competitive advantage to the firms. It should be pointed out if consumers are asking for more radical practices than the CSR's ones. In fact, the financial crisis has brought diffidence towards capitalism and some scholars have stated that approaches such as the multi-stakeholder and the for-benefit ones are needed in order to make the companies regain a good reputation. The debate between Porter and Crane on creating shared value and the multi-stakeholder approach has been addressed with this purpose. The outdoor industry has been chosen also because of its sensibility towards topics such as sustainability.

The previous literature on the CSR's effects on the customers has been analysed to form some propositions that needed to be confirmed in this sector. A semi-structured interview has been realized with 14 outdoor enthusiasts coming from all over Europe.

The empirical findings of this study clarify that the implementation of CSR policies has a certain impact on the purchasing choice of the customers, especially when they are consistent with customers' ideals, but also when customers' personal interests are touched by these policies. There is a problem of trust towards CSR investments: the communication of the companies is not trusted by everybody, and there are cases in which certifications are not enough to enhance their credibility, even if they are able to improve it. The brand reputation is generally increased by these actions and, as a consequence, the interviewees state that they are willing to pay a little bit more for responsible products. Nevertheless, only a minor part of them declares to have already used this criterion while purchasing. Moreover, all customers agree that CSR is not the most important criterion and are not willing to renounce to the quality or to pay an excessive price for such products. The relevance of the multi-stakeholder approach is ambiguous: it is preferred by the customers, but at the same time it preserves the limits of the CSR policies and it does not move customers to purchase more. A similar result can be observed for the b Corp, owing to a lack of awareness about it.

KEYWORDS: Corporate social responsibility; Strategic CSR; Creating Shared Value; Outdoor Clothing; Competitive Advantage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The CSR, that is corporate social responsibility, is a topic that has been under a huge amount of debate. There has always been a rough historical awareness about this concept, since “the idea that business enterprises have some responsibilities to the society – beyond that of making profits for the shareholders – has been around for centuries.” (Carroll and Shabana 2010:85). However, it is useful to notice that some more insightful conceptualization of CSR has started developing only during the twentieth century, after the Second World War, and that a commonly accepted definition has not been found yet, even if some studies on the different existing definitions and the aspects they have in common have been realized (e.g. Dahlsrud 2008). Society itself has started to put pressure on companies in order to make them behave according to the principle involved in CSR. In fact, many firms have incorporated in their policies some actions meant to show more attention towards sustainability both in terms of environment and people, in particular employees. At its beginning, the CSR was mainly considered in the USA, because this geographic area has seen the first debates on it and the first scholars who have deepened it were Americans. In the recent years, it has gained an international attention: in fact, its popularity has spread all around the world, involving almost all the developed countries and some developing ones as well. Moreover, it should be emphasized how the role of CSR has become more and more important in the recent past: as Porter has underlined, the capitalist system is strongly criticised, and there is the perception that companies succeed at the expense of the broader community (Porter and Kramer 2011).

Many studies have been realized on the concept of CSR: all of them have analysed it from different points of view, but there is not any study which has gained the complete approval of the scholars and the practitioners. Among the other interesting theories developed throughout the years that are going to be analysed in the following part, the strategic CSR is a concept that has revolutionized the stage, since it attempts to make CSR policies concentrate on the creation of long term business value and it permits a company to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Mc Williams and Siegel 2011). The older definitions were considering the CSR also in relation with profit maximization, but at the same time they were looking at this concept as separated from the primary strategy of the firm. For instance, Carroll has realised a pyramid aimed at presenting the different

responsibilities that a firm has towards the society. The higher level of Carroll's pyramid is represented by the philanthropic responsibilities: they are "expected and not required by the society, and regard the contribution of firms' money, facilities, and employee time to humanitarian programs and purposes" (Carroll 1991:42). The result of the theories developed before strategic CSR is observable in reality: they have caused CSR and philanthropic activities that are not related with the core strategy of the company and that do not provide the expected results. Thus, that type of CSR does not make any meaningful social impact and it does not strengthen the competitiveness of the firm in the long run (Porter and Kramer 2006). The rationality behind strategic CSR is quite different instead: CSR is defined as "more than a cost, a constrain, a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage" (Porter and Kramer 2006). Therefore, any firm has to investigate which is the best opportunity to work on also in relation with its own features. It has to individuate one specific social problem to address: the final goal is to discover issues that society and the firm share and to create the so-called shared value which provides benefits for both parts involved. (Porter and Kramer 2006).

Scholars have said that shared value creation has the purpose to recognise and enhance the points that societal and economic progress have in common (Porter and Kramer 2011). In practice, many firms, especially of big dimensions, have started implementing some projects which involve environmental issue, such as waste management or pollutant emissions, and social issues, such as workforce conditions and supplying minimum wages. These policies have all in common a pre-condition, which is that CSR could make business sense. In fact, the focus of the firms has seen a shift from an ethic orientation to a performance orientation (Carroll and Shabana 2010). It is also important to recognise the role of compliance with the law in this context: it is considered as a prerequisite for CSR and for some concept related with it, such as the creating shared value. Nevertheless, it is not always the case: in fact, "compliance with hard and soft law standards is hardly a given for many corporations in many industries" (Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo 2014:140).

In addition, strategic CSR has caused a strong evolution from responsive CSR. The second one involves the attempt made by a firm to behave as a good corporate citizen and to “mitigate existing or anticipate adverse effects from business activities” (Porter and Kramer 2006:85). The actions implemented improve the relationships with the community around the firm and are often able to create a sentiment of pride in the employees. Nevertheless, the benefits obtained are limited, especially because the field in which they operate is not directly linked with company’s business. Moreover, responsive CSR usually starts with an operating problem and tries to reduce the harm caused by it. This approach has been dominant until the last decade of the twentieth century: the society was expecting firms to undertake CSR programs able to make the world a better place to live in. By consequence, companies have started to invest in various initiatives related with different issues: the reason behind the attempt was noble, but the final result was poor. In fact, CSR activities linked with a wide sphere of social problems were neither useful to business’ success nor to the society, also because of the lack of competences needed to provide efficient solutions for social problems (Bhattacharyya, Sahai, Arora, Chaturvedi 2008). The alternative implemented by the firms, that is strategic CSR, has strengthened the goal to make business sense to the previous one of bettering the society. The main principle behind strategic CSR is then the joined attention for business performance and social goals: companies’ efforts should be focused in order to achieve both. These attempts must be crucial for a firm that believe in the potential of strategic CSR: it must be integrated in the firm’s strategic perspective and operations (Werther and Chandler 2006).

The implementation of strategic CSR policies could provide meaningful benefits for many firms. The strongest is the creation of a competitive advantage, which could be obtained through more efficient operations or through diverse products in relation to socially responsible and environmental features. Therefore, the cost leadership and the differentiation are the two possible different strategies through which the strategic CSR could help to reach competitive advantage (Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2008). For instance, environmental problems have lead Toyota to develop a hybrid model, called Prius: it is a hybrid electric/gasoline vehicle able to emit 10% of pollutants in comparison with other models while consuming only the half of the gas. Not only the environmental benefits are

observable, but also the business ones are remarkable: this technology has been so disruptive that many competitors have decided to license it. (Porter and Kramer 2006). However, not all the scholars agree on the concept of differentiation as a goal itself of strategic CSR. Crane and Matten have criticized Porter's concept of creating shared value (CSV) that has been developed as an evolution of the strategic CSR. Among the other aspects, which will be discussed later, they have stated that there are fields in which it is not possible to find a solution for the existing tensions between social and economic goals, and that there is the possibility that firms invest more in promoting their single actions implemented rather than in finding effective solutions able to solve complex problems. Moreover, they have fought the concept of differentiation, arguing that a deeper concept of the social role of the corporation would aim for systemic solutions that are valid for all the players. They have proposed to develop a broader solution at an industry level: the goal is "to create multi-stakeholder initiatives in which corporations would perceive themselves as a stakeholder of the problem rather than as the center of a stakeholder network" (Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo 2014:141).

Among the huge variety of stakeholders that a firm could have, customers might have a relevant role to push firms to develop CSR policies. In fact, the importance of CSR on the global business landscape is nurtured by consumer demand. Moreover, consumers are highly interested in consuming from companies that are sustainable and socially responsible (Cone 2017) and CSR is required not only on a moral level, but also on a business one, because consumers are rewarding companies which invest in these fields by purchasing their products and spreading the voice about the goodness of these firms (Baskently, Sen, Du, Bhattacharyya 2018). Still, some companies are convinced that is not convenient being environmentally-friendly, because they are persuaded that the efforts required will erode their competitiveness (Ndimolou *et al.* 2009). Therefore, it is important to understand how strong and useful customer demand for CSR is. It is true that many companies have entered CSR into their marketing strategies, mainly because they are aware that CSR is appealing to key segments of the market and they want to exploit this fact (McWilliams and Siegel 2001). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the consumer reactions on it are negative or neutral at best when there is the perception that there are only extrinsic interests, such as profit maximization, behind the implementation

of CSR policies. By contrast, when there is at least a mixed perception of intrinsic and extrinsic interests, customers approve CSR implementation: among the other benefits, they like to purchase these products, they are more loyal to them, and they have resistance to negative information about a company and its products (Sen, Du, Bhattacharya 2016).

1.1 Research problem

After these theoretical and practical observations, there are some aspects which deserve more investigations.

First of all, it is important to understand if CSR could become a means able to provide a competitive advantage. According to Lynes and Andrachuk, this is one of the reasons behind the implementation of CSR policies (Lynes and Andrachuk 2008). In particular, it is useful to investigate the possibility that customers accept to pay more for those products that have been realised in a sustainable way, since different studies in this field have brought to results that contradict each other. In fact, according to a report realised by the consulting group Nielsen in 2015, 66% of the consumers in the world declare that they are willing to pay more for a responsible brand, even if in Europe this percentage arrives only at 51% (Nielsen 2015). By contrast, in the fashion field, it is noticeable how the sustainability of the product is ranked in a lower position in comparison with ease of purchase, price, uniqueness and brand name (Conrad and Kambara 2018). Together with the change in the willingness to pay, it is useful to understand if there are other advantages which derive from the application of CSR policies and if there are factors that companies could try to exploit to enhance the effectiveness of these practices. Among the other aspects, it is useful to understand the relevance that customers attribute to the certifications as a mean to communicate CSR actions and so to move customers to buy products from brands that undertake them. It is interesting to understand whether they are considered a more reliable source of information, since some studies have declared that customers are not aware of the working conditions and production processes (Shaw, Hogg, Wilson, Shui, Hassan 2006). Another issue that deserve more attention is the relevance of the brand reputation in the purchasing choice: in fact, it seems quite clear in

the existing literature that CSR policies are able to enhance brand reputation, but it is less clear if customers consider it while buying some products: for instance, some studies have stated that customers hesitate to pay more for a product that is made by socially responsible companies (Quirk 1995 cited from Gupta and Hodges 2012).

From the theoretical point of view, instead, it is important to observe that CSR is gaining an increasing importance in the everyday life of a company, and other concepts with similar goals and meaning are flourishing: they are sustainability, triple bottom line, stakeholder theory. It is interesting to investigate more the debate between Porter and Kramer against Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo about the creating shared value: the former considers it a new concept which will substitute CSR (Porter and Kramer 2011) and declares that “CSV escape from a narrow application of capitalism by a creation of economic value that creates value also for the society” (Porter and Kramer 2011:4). Crane, together with the other scholars, has argued that this approach is “more a reactionary rather than a transformational response to the crisis of capitalism” (Crane *et al.* 2014:131). Moreover, he has firmly criticized the CSR definition used in this paper and, even in a stronger way, he has stated that the concept developed by Porter and Kramer is marginal in one firm’s strategy, since it only involves defined projects and products rather than the firm as a whole (Crane *et al.* 2014). He has observed that CSV is not enough to solve the problems which affect the capitalism and have caused its legitimacy crisis (Crane *et al.* 2014) and that “the final goal of a true societal perspective cannot only be the creation of additional profit opportunity, but the common good of society” (Crane *et al.* 2014:141). Finally, the for-benefit principle with its applications of benefit corporations and b Corp certification is presented in order to understand if this is a valid alternative to offer something more in comparison with CSV in terms of firms’ efforts. Moreover, the birth of different forms of corporations, such as the for-benefit ones, provides a credible alternative to the capitalism as it is known today and need to be deepened, especially in relation with the possible interest that customers could feel towards this solution.

The issues that have been previously underlined will be investigated in one specific sector, that is the market of the outdoor clothing for mountains. This choice has been done

for multiple reasons: first of all, a certain attention towards the environment in this sector seems natural, and some of the main brands in the field, such as Patagonia and Timberland, have positioned themselves in this sense (Franklin 2008). In relation with sustainability, they are considered as a model to be followed also by firms which belong to completely different sectors. Moreover, it is important to observe that, at least for Patagonia, this kind of actions do not represent a recent trend: in fact, they have invested both in environmental and social topics. For instance, they have been among the first to realise a space and to provide educators for the children of the employees, and they have managed to rethink many of their practices, from materials used in the production to the saving in waste. In addition, back in 1991 they have stated some of the principles that they pursue to follow. They have acknowledged the environmental crisis in act, and, also because of this, they have aimed at realising products that last for a long period of time and that do not use many natural resources. They have recognised that they are part of a wider community and that its general success is considered while taking decisions. Finally, profit is a goal, but not the only one, and an annual taxation of 1% of gross sales (or 10% of the profits, the greater of the two) has been self-imposed to help environmentally-friendly organisations (Chouinard 2008). The attention of this firm towards these topics could have set the conditions for a faster awareness on them in this sector. The literature itself has recognised the sensibility of the outdoor firms for these issues: in fact, it has also been stated that one sector of the apparel industry for which issues of sustainability are of particular concern is the outdoor apparel industry (Dargusch and Ward 2010) and that CSR practices are already spread in this industry (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). Nonetheless, it seems that there is a lack of studies on consumers in this field. It is reckoned that “CSR in the apparel industry has yet to be sufficiently studied in general” and that “most of the studies are conducted from company perspectives” (Woo and Jin 2016:21). Woo and Jin have also analysed previous studies realised on CSR in the apparel industry: according to them, the only research that concerns the outdoor clothing sub-sector has been developed by Dargusch and Ward in 2010, but they have used as their core perspective the companies’ one (Woo and Jin 2016). This create a gap, since no research has been realised on the outdoor clothing using a customer perspective. Moreover, in relation with the points underlined for the study, it is important to assess what customers analyse while purchasing and how they react to strategic CSR policies in

this specific context. Furthermore, this sector could be the most eligible context to determine if there is a feasible alternative to the modern form of capitalism, since outdoor firms are among the most active champions of sustainability (Franklin 2008). In order to verify this, the perception that customers are sensible to these aspects has to be proved throughout the work, but for many of them the outdoor sector was perceived to have a high-level commitment to corporate social responsibility (Dargusch and Ward 2010). The fact that some countries such as Brazil and Australia have introduced outdoor activities in their process of education towards environment and sustainability (Rodrigues and Payne 2015) could make this perception seem reliable.

Given these two main starting points, the wider research question for the Master Thesis is formulated as it follows:

How are customers influenced by the implementation of strategic CSR policies in the outdoor clothing sector?

Some sub-questions able to deepen the primary research question and to give an answer also to the theoretical dilemma are the following ones:

RQ1: What are the concrete effects that implementation of CSR practices has on the customer in the market of the outdoor clothing? Are these practices able to create a competitive advantage?

RQ2: How is the positive effect that the implementation of CSR policies has on the customers' willingness to buy affected by other factors such as price, quality and previous reputation?

RQ3: In the outdoor clothing market, do customers reward firms' policies when they only consist of projects implemented by the single firm or do they appreciate more when there is a collaboration with partners? Do customers require policies that deal with the entire modus operandi of the firm? Do they look for something more radical than CSR?

In order to answer to these questions, it could be useful to investigate more the concept of CSR, together with the other similar concepts taken into consideration by the companies. In addition, the debate between Porter and Kramer on one side and Crane, Spence, Palazzo and Matten on the other side must be deepened to understand the relevance that their approaches could have in practice. Finally, an analysis on the other factors that influence customers of the outdoor clothing sector in their purchasing process should be conducted in order to understand which of them has the highest relevance.

The goals of the Master Thesis could be summarized as follows:

1. To make a literature review on the concept of CSR in order to understand widely its roots and its historical development.
2. To investigate more deeply the concept of strategic CSR, creating shared value, benefit corporations and competitive advantage.
3. To understand if, in the outdoor clothing sector, customers appreciate an approach on CSR focused on projects related with the business field of the firm involved or if they are looking for a wider commitment from the firm.
4. To understand how important CSR in this sector for the customers' purchases is and how this factor is related with others (i.e. price, quality, brand reputation).

1.2 The scope and the delimitation of the research

The purpose of the study is not to determine quantitatively the advantage that could derive from implementing CSR policies, but to understand through semi-structured interviews conducted with some customers if firms could exploit a competitive advantage in implementing these practices. Moreover, another purpose of this Thesis is to determine if there is a demand for a radical shift in the capitalistic practices spread nowadays and

so for a new way of doing business. Finally, the inner words of the customers will explain if CSR policies are strategic or whether there are other elements which are much more considered by them. It is fundamental to highlight that the empirical findings that will be obtained from this study could not be generalized: they are only referable to the precise sector in the specific geographic area involved, that is Europe. They could only provide a signal about the feasibility for the firms to choose a wide CSR approach in their actions due to the maturity of this specific customer's segment on this issue.

In order to obtain a complete answer to the research questions, some concepts need to be previously defined in this work. Dealing with the main purpose of this research with CSR, it is important to understand what it is and how it has been developed. Because of this, the major contributions to the debate about it will be introduced and the strategic CSR findings will be particularly considered. Moreover, CSR will be analysed from two main perspectives: the first one has the company at its centre and tries to understand if it is worthy to invest on it, at least in a sector where customers are nature lovers and so more concerned with the environmental and social stances. This question can arise from the debate between Porter and Crane, and the latter's point of view will be developed through the for-benefits case. The second, instead, wants to investigate if the customers themselves, tired about the old capitalism, are asking for a strong change in the economic model spread throughout the world. This is quite difficult to be demonstrated in a Master Thesis, but something that goes in that direction could be implemented: this study is going to analyse a market that is sensible to this topic, that is the one related with outdoor clothes for mountain. There will be some interviews on European customers in this market able to investigate the effect that CSR policies have on customers and the real demand that they have for these practices. In particular, it will be noteworthy to dig in order to understand if there is a request for an environmental and social effort spread throughout the entire company or the desire for investments in single meaningful projects. The possible positive result could be a good starting point for other studies which aim to measure this will.

In order to do so, the competitive advantage should be defined and then the factors that are able to determine it should be assessed in the interviews: the role of the CSR will be

investigated, together with the effect that it has on the brand reputation. Moreover, there will be an inquiry on the importance that the customer gives to the quality and which are the factors used by them to determine it. Finally, there will be some questions related with the price to learn about the importance of this factor in the purchasing preferences. A test will be experimented in order to challenge the customers: two products belonging to two different brands and sold at the same price will be used. The people addressed will be asked to assess the quality of the product, its brand reputation and the perception that he or she has about the CSR implemented by the company involved. Furthermore, the interviewees will be asked to determine their willingness to pay on these products and overall considerations will be done on these replies, in particular to understand if the choice of adopting CSR policies could be also economically rewarding. Nevertheless, this part will not have the purpose to quantify the economic advantage that could derive from CSR practices: it has the only goal to understand if an improvement in the willingness to pay could derive from the implementation of these policies.

1.3 The outline of the study

The structure of the study has been defined properly. After this brief introduction about the research problem and the scope of the study, a literature review will follow. Its purpose is to present the different definitions of CSR that have been given throughout the years and to analyse also other concepts that are close to the previous one. A particular attention will be conceded to the strategic CSR and the creating shared value aspects. After this section, some proposition connected with the literature discussed will be presented. Later on, the methodologic part will follow: it has the goal to better clarify the approach that has been used in this study and to explain some assumptions behind the experiment that is going to be realized in the incoming part. The following section will discuss about the empirical results of the study and will relate them with the propositions provided previously. Some critical discussion will be added in order to offer an interpretation of the possible differences between the theoretical background and the empirical findings. Finally, the conclusive part of the study will be introduced: it will

summarize briefly the main results, presenting in addition some managerial implications and showing possible development for future studies.

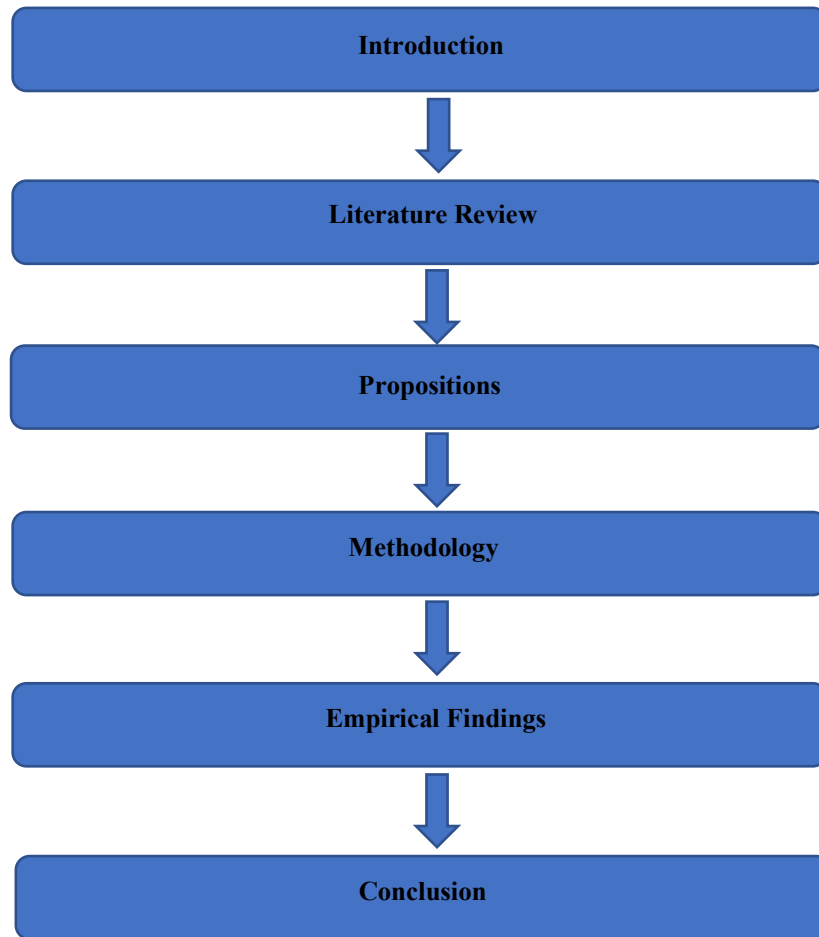


Figure 1. The structure of the Thesis

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of the Master Thesis will be devoted to the presentation of the different topics which regards not only the economic goals, but also social and environmental duty of the firm. It will provide a theoretical framework useful for a better comprehension of the following part, which will add some propositions that need to be tested in the empirical analysis. At first, corporate social responsibility will be presented because of the historical success of this concept. Later on, other theories, such as the stakeholder theory, the sustainability and the triple bottom line will be described, because they have added a relevant contribution on the debate and they have obtained a brilliant success from both practitioners and scholars. Then, strategic CSR will be introduced as a renewal of the former concept of CSR able to be more appealing for the firms throughout the world. In fact, firms, and not governments, have been asked from different stakeholders to intervene in solving environmental and social problems. This has pushed firms to try to promote CSR (Auld, Bernstein and Cashore 2008). Finally, an important debate on the newly introduced concept of creating shared value will be presented: two different positions will be analysed in order to understand if this concept is really disruptive and if there are more effective alternatives for it. As a consequence, the for-benefits concept will be added, together with two practical exemplification of it, the benefit corporations and the b Corp.

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility is not a new one: its roots could be individuated in the period between 1945 and 1960 (Carroll and Shabana 2010).

One of the first scholars able to give a strong impulse to the development of this concept has been Howard Bowen: with his book "*Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*", published in 1953, he has been capable of influencing future studies on this subject (Carroll and Shabana 2010). This work is considered as one of the first wide discussion on ethics in business and social responsibility, recognising that this issue is one consistent

part of the strategy of the firm. In 1950s some executives were already modifying their roles, focusing not only on the simple commitment of shareholder interests, but also on an attempt to equilibrate different needs and desires from both internal and external constituencies (Acquier, Gond and Pasquero 2011). Moreover, the corporate social responsibility was implemented by managers in that period because it was considered a good compromise between those companies which trusted only the free market forces and the socialist approach spread in Europe. Finally, this book was part of a series which had the goal to offer Protestant thinkers some principle to share (Acquier, Gond and Pasquero 2011). It is observable then how religious and reputational considerations were involved in the drafting of this book.

2.1.1 Criticism on CSR

Still, not everybody agreed on the goodness of the concept of CSR: many scholars were convinced that the main goal of one company is to maximise its profits. The most important author who was supporting this theory was Milton Friedman. In 1970, he wrote the article "*The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits*", which is a masterpiece for what concerns this school of thought. Friedman declared that businessmen who have spoken about CSR were promoting a model close to socialism and that they were undermining the basis of a free society. He has claimed that business itself has no responsibility, because only people have responsibilities, and that corporate executives have the responsibility to make the best for their principal, that consists of owners or shareholders. The government has to intervene with legislations and taxations if there is the need to counteract a specific action: if the free market is not able to solve social problems, they should not be managed by business, but by the government and the legislation (Carroll and Shabana 2010). By contrast, the executive has to act as a good agent, otherwise he (or she) is spending money that he does not own, and he is doing so in fields where he is not an expert. Only the individual could have social responsibilities, but not the business, otherwise there is the risk that businessmen act as politicians and impose taxations without being elected, betraying the American Revolution's principles which were fighting taxation without representation (Friedman 1970; Davis 1973).

2.1.2 The pyramid of CSR

Even if there has not been a complete agreement on this concept, it has continued to develop and spread in the following years. There have been many attempts to find an accepted agreement on what CSR is. For instance, by analysing 37 different definitions of it, five common dimensions have been found: the environmental, the social, the economic, the voluntariness and the stakeholder dimension. The first one has resulted to be the less used, maybe because it is sometimes divided from Corporate Environmental Responsibility (Dahlsrud 2008). Still, the most famous and important definition of CSR has been elaborated in 1979 by Archie Carroll, an American scholar: it has been the most durable and widely cited in the literature (Crane and Matten 2004). He states that “the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Carroll 1979:500).

The first level is about the primary responsibility of a business, that is to produce some goods which are asked from the society and to realise profits on them. This aspect must be satisfied from one company to keep operating in business. In 1991, Carroll has refined his model and, also in order to emphasize the importance of the economic responsibilities, he has considered them as the basis of its pyramidal model: the business organization was defined as the basic economic unit in our society and its first goal has been considered to maximise its profits. These have moved from being an incentive to the entrepreneurship to the real goal of a business activity (Carroll 1991).

The second responsibility considered in Carroll’s model is the legal one. In fact, the society at different levels has established the rules that a firm must respect in order to be allowed to operate in the market. It follows that firms are expected to “pursue their economic mission within the framework of the law” (Carroll 1991:41). This second responsibility is also the second level of the CSR pyramid, but it is considered as mandatory to be fulfilled in order to operate in a free society economy. As it has been recognized by Carroll, the first two responsibilities- the economic and the legal ones-

have been emphasized earlier by business practitioners, while the following ones have been discussed later.

The third responsibility involved in this model is the ethical one. It integrates some aspects that are part of the legal responsibility, but it goes beyond it. As Carroll has claimed, it “embodies those standards, norms or expectations that reflect a concern for what consumers, employees, shareholders and the community regard as fair and just, or in keeping with the respect or protection of stakeholders’ moral rights” (Carroll 1991:41). In fact, there are issues that are not codified by laws which are expected to be respected by the companies. These are quite difficult to be defined, since a debate on what is and is not ethical continues to go on and ethical duties for firms remain in a grey area. This third level of CSR pyramid is very important, since it has the power to influence the creation of new laws able to limit legally some behaviour. Still, companies are expected to keep the ethical evolutions monitored and to operate in compliance with the main aspects of these principles, even if they are not included in any law.

The fourth and final level of CSR pyramid is the discretionary responsibility, which has been later redefined as philanthropic. The name itself gives a description: it is subordinated to the firm’s discretion. It regards voluntary acts which manifest the involvement of one company in some issues in which it is not forced to act. It goes beyond the ethical responsibility, since these actions are implemented not in order to be right and fair, but in response to society’s expectation that businesses could also be good corporate citizens (Carroll 1991). Philanthropic responsibility is not expected by the customers in an ethical sense: firms are not considered as unethical if they do not invest in this direction. Nevertheless, customers place their desires for philanthropic actions. Some firms commit one mistake: they claim to be socially responsible just by implementing some discretionary policies. As it has been explained by Carroll, it is not enough: this fourth level is very important, but it is subordinated to the application of the previous ones. That means that one firm should not be philanthropic responsible while it is not respecting some laws: it would be inconsistent.

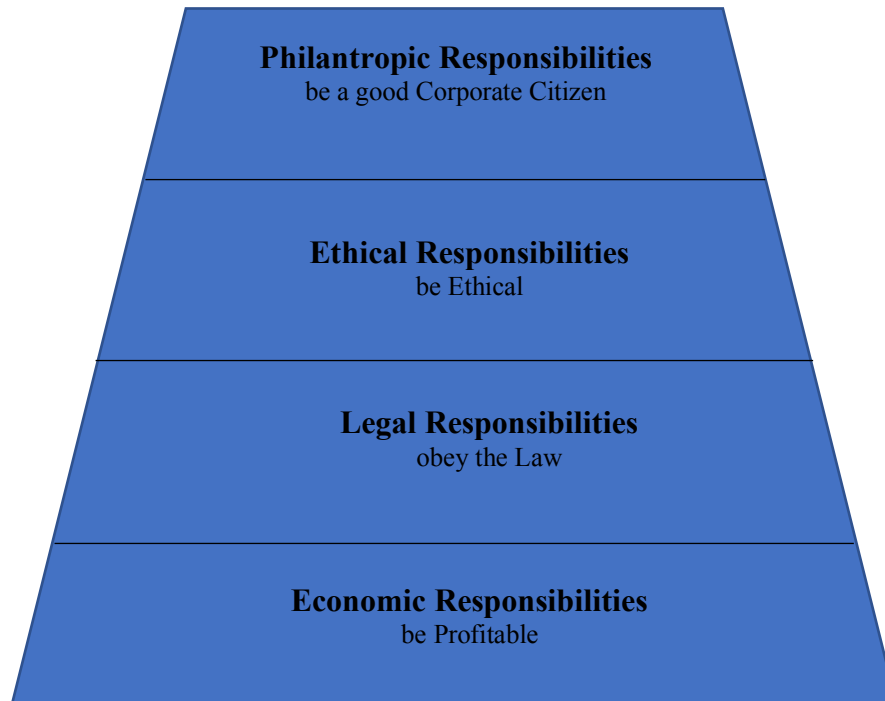


Figure 2. CSR Pyramid. Adapted from Carroll (1991)

Carroll's pyramid has obtained a huge success across scholars and still maintains some usefulness, but it has also been criticised for its points of weakness. For instance, it has not been consistent for what concerns the attribute of hierarchy of its model. Carroll has constantly reviewed his model throughout the years, and the ideas he has proposed have not been clear, especially in relation with corporate citizenship. He has defined it as the same of philanthropic responsibility in 1991, then he has stated that it is a synonym of the entire CSR in 1998 before returning to its previous idea and limiting it at the top of the pyramid (Visser 2008). Another aspect that has been argued is the universality of this model. In fact, it is modelled on the American culture and it works very well in this geographical area. Nevertheless, different cultures and sub-cultures not only give different nuances to the meaning of each component, but may also assign different relative importance (Visser 2008). In the end, Crane and Matten have underlined the fact that the model does not advice a solution when two or more responsibilities are in conflict. Carroll has underlined in one of his studies that one firm that is particularly economic-

oriented would have less room to intervene in legal, ethical or discretionary issues, but he has not suggested any solution to this problem.

2.1.3 Corporate Social Responsiveness

Other concepts that have emerged as consequences of the Carroll's proposition are those of Corporate Social Performance and Corporate Social Responsiveness. The former is defined as a business organisation's configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm societal relationships (Wood 1991). It means that the CSR that a firm is implementing is assessed by this concept more on a practical level, through the consideration of the real actions realised by the firm, rather than on a theoretical level, which deepen more ideal goals that one company declares to pursue. Some studies have been developed on this topic: for instance, using a resource-based perspective, it has been demonstrated that CSP, and specifically environmental performance, can become a means able to provide a competitive advantage, especially in the high-growth industries (Fouts and Russo 1997). The latter, instead, refers to the capacity of a corporation to respond to social pressures (Frederick 1978). Corporate social responsiveness is also a practical concept and provides practical benefits: it allows one firm to overcome the debate on what are its own social responsibilities. This discussion often weakens and slows down the path of actions' implementation, since it is relegated to the theoretical side and does not provide practical benefits. By contrast, Corporate Social Responsiveness deals with managerial actions which could be put in practice to improve performances in relation with specific problems. Carroll, following the studies of other scholars, have individuated four different paths which could describe the position of any firm which is facing social pressures: they are reaction, defense, accommodation and proaction. The reaction means that one company decides not to care about the pressures that society put on it and it does not implement any strategy in this field. The second possibility, that is the defense, does not provide meaningful investments: the firm does only what it is required to it and nothing more. The third level, the accommodation, has something more: firms try to forecast which the new requirements will be, and they want to be ready to respect them. Moreover, they consider exploiting the opportunities that the

market could offer in relation with CSR issues. Finally, the fourth level is the proactive one: companies want to be perceived as the leader in their own industry in the application of policies able to benefit the environment and the diverse stakeholders connected with them. These companies are gaining expertise in this field and they want to gain a competitive advantage also thanks to the different strategies that other competitors are following. Porter and Kramer have grouped some of these stages, arriving to a final distinction between responsive and strategic CSR, which will be analysed in the section 2.3.

Table 1. Origins of CSR

Name of the Concept	Brief Synthesis of the Concept	Main author
First acknowledgement of CSR	“CSR can help business reach the goals of social justice and economic prosperity by creating welfare for a broad range of social groups, beyond the corporations and their shareholders”	Bowen (1953)
Criticism on CSR	“Only people have responsibilities, business as a whole cannot be said to have responsibilities”. “A corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the company. He has direct responsibilities to his employers, which generally will be to make as much money as possible”.	Friedman (1970)
The pyramid of the CSR	“The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time”	Carroll (1979, 1991)

2.2 Other concepts related with CSR

2.2.1 Stakeholder theory

The concept of CSR is not the only one that has been developed in relation with the responsibilities of a firm towards different actors involved in its operations. As Freeman stated, it could be perceived more as a collection of approaches rather than a homogeneous and consistent one. This author recognises that CSR has given a contribute to the inclusion of stakeholder groups in the analysis realised by the firms. Before CSR, they were not considered because they were seen as more distant for what concerns interests in comparison with firms in general. Still, stakeholder relationships have been seen more as constrains than possible opportunities, and, because of this, CSR practices are considered by many firms only as a luxury that only successful firms can afford or as an insurance towards the most dangerous threats, and not as the core part of one firm's strategy (Freeman and Mc Vea 2001). The alternative that has been proposed is the so-called stakeholder theory. It was firstly introduced by Edward Freeman in 1984 with his "*Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*". It has counteracted the Friedman's view of the firm which has to act in the only interests of its shareholders, arguing that a socially responsible firm should consider the entire amount of its stakeholders, having defined them as any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman 1984). The main idea behind a stakeholder approach is that the entire processes thought by the managers of one firm must satisfy all those groups who have a stake in business. They must be considered as an end, and not as a means, and they should be respected: this is a radical shift in comparison with the previous approach (Evan and Freeman 1993). This theory has shown how it is no longer possible to ignore the interests of the key stakeholders, since the world is changing at a rapid path. Moreover, it seems to be in some aspects more ambitious than the original CSR concept. In fact, it is not considering anymore the shareholder wealth as the only goal to pursue, but it tries to balance and integrate multiple relationships and multiple objectives (Freeman and Mc Vea 2001), while Carroll has declared that his vision differs very little from Friedman's view of responsibilities of the firm (Carroll 1991) because he gives the highest possible priority to the economic responsibility.

Among the other stakeholders, this Master Thesis will focus on the customers' perception about the actions undertaken by the firms, the importance that these policies have in their purchases and the role that other factors could exercise in modifying this. Customers' opinions could provide success to one firm: in fact, the organisation succeed by outperforming its competitors in providing superior value to their customer (Crane and Matten 2010). Because of this, one goal of the firm is to satisfy the customer as much as possible. Still, there are occasions in which the main interests of customers and firms differ: it is important for the customer to have the possibility to choose among different alternatives in order not to be forced to accept any conditions. The debate on this topic will be examined more deeply in chapter 2.4.

2.2.2. Sustainability

Another topic which has gained the attention of scholars and practitioners is sustainability. It has been included in this study because, even if it is namely different from corporate social responsibility, it addresses the same issue, that is the sustainable development. Moreover, sustainability and CSR are used interchangeably by practitioners to indicate a more responsible and ethical way of doing business (Gatti and Seele 2013). Sustainable development has been defined by the Norwegian Prime Minister as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs (Bruntland 1987). Other authors have described the relationship between sustainability and CSR in this way: the former includes three dimensions, which are the economic, the social and the environmental one, while the latter links these dimensions with specific responsibilities for business players (Van Marrewijk 2003). Porter has considered sustainability as one of the four justifications for CSR. He has been a bit sceptical on this topic, claiming that it works in a good way when economic interests coincide with the principles behind it, but it ends to be vague in other occasions. It also fails to give an answer able to conciliate the short-term costs which the firm has to bear and the long-term goals it is pursuing to achieve (Porter and Kramer 2006). In addition, the success of the term sustainability is quite recent: it has gained a huge attention in the early 2000s, and it has become an integral

part of all the CSR discussions (Carroll and Shabana 2010). It is useful to observe that various companies have started using the term sustainability in their reports (Karen 2008) and that the term sustainability has increasingly being used in European companies' reports in the recent years, while the terms "environmental" and "social" have lost consensus at least in frequency of usage (Gatto and Seele 2013). Many companies are persuaded by the fact that if they become sustainable, this effort could make them lose. By contrast, if sustainability is elevated as a real goal for one firm, it could provide a real competitive advantage. This is not an easy process, since changes related with products, supplier's activities and business model in general are needed. Still, it could offer a good path to innovate and succeed in the market (Ndimolou, Prahalad and Rangaswami 2009).

2.2.3 Triple Bottom Line

One of the possible applications of the principles linked with sustainability is the one individuated by the studies of John Elkington, who have created the concept of triple bottom line. It is formed by the 3 Ps, that are People, Planet and Profit. The triple bottom line has been considered as the practical framework for sustainability (Rogers and Hudson 2011). The research developed by Elkington has stated that in contrast to the anti-industry, anti-profit, and anti-growth orientation of much early environmentalism, it has become increasingly clear that business must play a central role in achieving the goals of sustainable development strategies. This has brought to a wider control on the entire life cycle of the products, to the supply chain and to the changing needs of the customers (Elkington 1994). Moreover, this scholar, beyond his concept of triple bottom line, has given a definition of sustainable society. It needs to meet three conditions: its rate of use of renewable resources should not exceed their rates of regeneration; its rates of use of non-renewable resources should not exceed the rates at which sustainable renewable substitutes are developed: and its rates of pollution of emission should not exceed the assimilative capacity of the environment (Elkington 1997). The studies from Elkington have been considered with attention from other scholars: it has been noted how the use of the concept of sustainable business is considered as progress even if it is related with firms inside the boundaries of capitalism. Business is sustainable when it lives up to the "triple bottom line" of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social justice

(Jeurissen 2000). It could be noticed how Elkington has stressed the balance between the three factors: any of them has the same importance (Alhaddi 2013). The economic line measures and links the economic growth of the company and that of the economy in general, checking how much it contributes to the prosperity of the system around the company. The social line assesses the policies implemented by the firm in terms of labour, human capital and community. They are meant to facilitate the life of the workforce and of other stakeholders, but they are intended to create value also for the company itself. Finally, the environmental line refers to those practice which take into consideration the environmental resources. The goal is to keep them available also for future generations through concrete actions such as the reduction of energy's consumptions and the minimization of the ecological footprint (Alhaddi 2013). It is important to remark that the author has recognized how these three lines could be in conflict among each other and that pursuing all of them requires a revolution, even if classic market mechanism will be required to act in order to reach sustainability targets. The author has proposed a shift towards a wider set of value to pursue in the general activity of the firm and a real attempt to make the policies implemented transparent: in this way, firms could be considered more credible and the triple bottom line could be added to the general strategy of one firm (Jeurissen 2000).

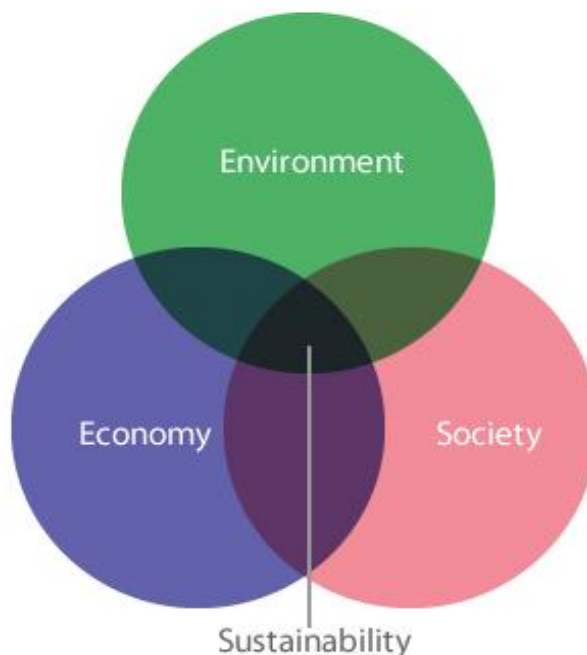


Figure 3. Triple Bottom line

Table 2: Concepts related with CSR

Name of the Concept similar to the CSR	Brief definition of the concept related with CSR	Main author involved in it
Stakeholder Theory	“Stakeholders are any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organization’s objective”. “Managers must formulate and implement processes which satisfy all and only those groups who have a stake in the business”.	Freeman (1984)
Sustainability	“Sustainable Development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.	Bruntland (1987)
Triple Bottom Line	“Triple Bottom Line is the approach that aims to measure the financial, social and environmental performance of the corporation over a period of time”	Elkington (1994, 1997)

2.3 Strategic CSR

In response to the conceptualization that Carroll has given of CSR, other scholars have started considering the possibility of an evolution of this concept. In fact, the older definition was considered as not deeply linked with the core of the business and the entire strategy of one firm (Vogel 2005). In particular, the philanthropic responsibility was refused, because it was considered as disconnected from the goals of the firm and not related with the means that the society could exploit to do something good. The need for philanthropic responsibility to make business sense was acknowledged quite early, in 1982: philanthropy must contain a strategic perspective (Fry, Keim and Meiners 1982).

Even if it was not properly emphasized at the beginning, it is important to remark that a study realised on the philanthropic donations in the '90s have shown that a lot of them were addressed to gain a strategic business benefit (Brammer and Millington 2004). Some authors have developed a new framework able to propose a different perspective, that is useful for this analysis because it could show how firms can put CSR at the core of their strategy. Many scholars have considered the shift towards a social responsibility that makes business sense and gives benefits to the companies that implement it as the main feature that distinguish strategic CSR from the previous one (Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2008).

In the '90s, the expectations of the citizens that firms would have provided better solutions in their CSR efforts have risen. As a consequence, many companies have tried to satisfy these requests by widening the spectre of their initiatives. However, the results of these attempts were very poor because they were not able to offer concrete benefits neither to the business nor to the society, mainly because they were not focused enough (Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2008) and so they were missing the expertise needed to try to solve efficiently the issues addressed (Levitt 1958). The risk behind these attempts were to fall in the mistake that Friedman was warning of in 1970, that is the possibility to waste the resource of the shareholder and so that managers do not behave as good agents. This paradigm of CSR was no longer acceptable even in scholars' opinion: for instance, Mc Williams and Siegel have stated that "managers should treat decisions regarding CSR precisely as they treat all investment decisions" (Mc Williams and Siegel 2001:125). CSR is implemented in order to capture value: this is the reason behind the shift from privately to socially responsible actions (Baron 2001 cited from Mc Williams and Siegel 2011). The cause behind CSR implementation is in their opinion the profit maximisation, which is joined with a general stakeholder satisfaction when there are the opportunities to differentiate themselves from the competitors and so to increase the demand. Still, there should not be any loss because of the choice of implementing CSR. Carroll himself has recognised the usefulness of this concept, claiming that it could become helpful for business to achieve strategic goals (Carroll 2001). Other scholars have observed how it could mean a win-win solution for business and society: the former could see its

performances improved, while the latter is helped in trying to solve specific problems through investments (Bruch 2005).

The best possible results from strategic CSR could be reached when the initiative supported and the core business are synchronised (Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2008:267). One clear example of application in this sense concerns investments in the environmental field: firms usually dedicate a huge part of their efforts to the waste management and the energy efficiency, which are able to reduce operative cost in addition to the benefits gained from the society as a consequence of the smaller carbon footprint generated (Jones 2005). Another determinant study, led by Neville, has shown how there is a positive relationship between the results obtained at a social level from one firm and its financial results (Neville 2005).

The author that has given a dramatic visibility to the concept of strategic CSR is Michael Porter. In fact, the studies realised by one of the most famous living economists in the world have permitted to enhance the awareness of this concept especially in the case of multinational enterprises. In order to emphasize the importance that he has attributed to corporate social responsibility, he has stated that “CSR has emerged as an inescapable priority for business leaders in every country” and that the practices implemented in the past have not been effective enough, since they were considering business against society and they were too generic (Porter and Kramer 2006:77). Moreover, it has been vigorously remarked that CSR could be a source of competitive advantage. The author has noticed that many firms have approached this topic because of the constantly increasing pressure that citizens are putting in order to improve some policies of the companies. Some country has understood the strength of this phenomenon and, because of it, it has entered legal requirements to be fulfilled in relation with social responsibility reporting at least for the listed company. Nevertheless, firms are not capable of acting in a strategic and coherent way in this field: the highest part of the reports describe single policies implemented by the firms which are meant to demonstrate their involvement to the social and environmental cause. Unfortunately, they are not effective, because they do not manage to make an impact since there is a lack of consistency in the practices adopted.

There are four main causes which have been used as justifications for CSR: they are the license to operate, the reputation, the sustainability and the moral obligation. All of them have shown some strengths in describing why a firm should invest in CSR, but at the same time they are not able to give the entire picture to one practitioner who wants to understand why he (or she) has to invest on it. In fact, what they lack is that “they focus on the tension between business and society rather than on their interdependence” (Porter and Kramer 2006:83). This is the core of the Porter’s thoughts on CSR: without keeping this consideration in mind, any firm will fail to reach the goals pursued at the beginning of its actions. If one firm focuses only on its personal success, then it is obvious that its success could be only temporary, because it is not providing benefits to the customers that it serves. At the same time, society needs healthy firms if it wants to have a strategic support in the issues that it has to deal with. The practical action that any company could try to develop is to choose a specific societal problem which is linked with its business. Therefore, the possible issues to be attacked should be assessed and ranked in relation with the impact that they can provide. This is able to show one fundamental point: according to Porter, the CSR policies implemented by the firms are not chosen by customers. There is a shift with theories developed in the past: CSR should “look beyond community expectations to opportunities to achieve social and economic benefits simultaneously” (Porter and Kramer 2006:85). Therefore, policies are selected by the companies in relation with the opportunities that they are able to provide.

This means that the policies implemented could not be limited at the so-called responsive CSR, but they must evolve towards strategic CSR. The former has as pre-requisite the fact that a firm must behave as a good corporate citizen and that these actions are directed to the limitation or the anticipation of risks which come from business activities (Porter and Kramer 2006). However, this approach is limited by the fact that the effect that it has on companies’ performance is limited, since the actions implemented does not affect the core of the business. The latter, instead, “moves beyond good corporate citizenship and mitigating harmful value chains impact to mount a small number of initiatives whose social and business benefits are large and distinctive” (Porter and Kramer 2006:88). It means that strategic CSR is able to create competitive advantage while providing social or environmental benefits. If previous studies of Michael Porter are considered, there

should be two basic ways to gain a competitive advantage: the differentiation and the cost leadership (Porter 1985). In the case of CSR policies, the path that the author has mainly suggested to practitioners is the first one: he has proposed to “do things differently from competitors in a way that lowers costs or better serves a particular set of customer needs” (Porter and Kramer 2006:88). The ideas already introduced by Porter and Kramer in the paper “Strategy and Society: the link between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility” have shown the birth of a new concept, the creating shared value, which has been better described and defined in another paper written later, the “Creating Shared Value”.

2.4 Creating Shared Value

It is important to underline that this concept is totally linked with the two scholars Porter and Kramer. In the first of the two main papers devoted to this topic, the authors have started delineating the creating shared value. At first, they have stated that the main goal of the CSR should be the creation of shared value, that is a remarkable benefit which involves both society and business (Porter and Kramer 2006). This means that companies should try to invest not only to pursue their own interests, but also the ones of their stakeholders. However, the first paper did not have the purpose to introduce a new concept in the literature, but to clarify and better explain some details about CSR. This is confirmed by the words of the scholars, who have shown how they are persuaded by the fact that CSR will become increasingly important to be successful in the market competition (Porter and Kramer 2006).

This has utterly changed five years later, when Porter and Kramer have stated that creating shared value (CSV) is going to substitute CSR in guiding companies in their own investments towards the interests of the society (Porter and Kramer 2011). Moreover, a more precise definition of creating shared value has been presented in this paper: it “focuses on identifying and expanding the connections between societal and economic progress” (Porter and Kramer 2011:6). This could provide an effective solution to the delegitimization of business in society: in fact, even if some firms are starting investing

in CSR, they are considered guilty for the failures of the society in the economic field. This approach is able to enlarge the strict views of the firms because they are still quite often focused only on short-term financial goals, while they avoid thinking about the health of what is outside their boundaries. The primary goal of CSV is to create economic value, because it is needed to stay on the market, but it is required to create also societal value. The importance of this last aspect is considered very high in comparison with the one attributed to it in CSR, because in this case societal needs are at a core level (Porter and Kramer 2011). Still, the solutions to the problems of the society could be provided only through capitalistic mechanism also in the case of CSV: the best opportunities could be exploited when “business act as business and not as charitable donors” (Porter and Kramer 2011:4). The use of the capitalism as an economic model able to solve problems and not as the problem itself was shared also by Elkington with his triple bottom line. By contrast, it presents an implicit criticism on the philanthropic responsibility of CSR: the duty of the business is not to donate, but to invest.

In the authors perspective, some paths should be implemented to make the action of the firms more effective in this field: companies have to understand more precisely which the society's issues are and with whom they could collaborate. On the other side, governments should legislate in order to facilitate investments in this field and not to counteract them. In practice, there are trade-offs between society's and companies' interests mainly because of the limited reasoning of both parts. The firms are not able to see the opportunities embedded in the investments in defined issues: many of them do the least required by the law, but not anything more, since they consider that it is a governmental duty to solve societal problems. By contrast, governments have legislated in a way that obstacle the attempts to invest on it (Porter and Kramer 2011). The main goal of CSV does not deal with equality in the actual business conditions, but it has the ambition to create more value for each of the parts involved in the business practices. CSV's actions have the purpose to satisfy new needs, to serve new customers and to change the value chain configuration (Porter and Kramer 2011). There are many sectors where the reduction of the production costs, the increment of the effectiveness in internal processes and the resolution of societal issues are compatible. This brings to the creation

of a virtuous circle: a healthy society is able to create demand for firms' products, while a successful business could offer job positions to the citizens.

After having defined the concept of creating shared value, the authors have presented three concrete ways to reach it: through reconceiving products and markets, redefining productivity in the value chain and building supportive industry clusters at the companies' locations (Porter and Kramer 2011). As far as the first is concerned, firms have started reconsidering to build products that are useful for their customers also in relation with energy consumed or environmental issues. It is important that companies lead this revolution, since they have more capabilities to market these products and to make customers desire them. In addition, they have to consider all the societal needs, benefits, and harms that are or could be embodied in the firm's products. (Porter and Kramer 2011). The investments in the productivity in the value chain were considered as costly until few years ago and, because of it, firms were not that focused in investing to reduce pollution or increasing the health of employees at work. Nowadays, these investments are not forced anymore by the laws, because firms are starting to obtain savings while betting on this kind of solutions. The creation of clusters, which are formed by a concentration of firms and institutions that belong to the same sector in the same geographical area, is another means through which CSV could be gained. In fact, companies could find partners able to make firms more effective in terms of logistics and competences, and this could enhance the innovation for the entire sector. On the other hand, society benefits of a richer environment, with more capillary infrastructures and facilities. Moreover, citizens usually have a higher purchasing power and their income increases when they belong to a cluster.

The core idea inside the concept of creating shared value is that capitalism has to focus on profits in a new way, which does not look for profits per se, but pursues also a social purpose. This will be able to make both society and companies grow and to make profit become sustainable and durable. CSV enables business to obtain a competitive advantage in a more sustainable way in comparison with traditional cost reduction or quality improvements (Porter and Kramer 2011). In fact, the advantage of these policies is more widely shared between companies and the society as a whole, and it is not only limited to

the money savings or to a product that is more functional. The authors auspicate that any company invests on it and, in this sense, it seems that they do not consider shared value itself as means through which differentiating from competitors. The differentiation should lay in the projects chosen to create shared value and in the channels used to deliver it. Still, it is useful for firms to select a sector close to the one in which they operate to develop policies of CSV: the biggest opportunities to exploit are in those fields, because firms can impact them more heavily, also thanks to their stronger expertise in comparison with other more general topics.

The concept of creating shared value, also thanks to the authority recognised in the economic field to its inventors, has obtained a huge success in a short period of time. It has had a strong approval both from practitioners, since it is a “dramatic outlier in terms of the rapid scholarly attention it has gained” (Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo 2014:133), and companies. Some big multinational corporations, such as Coca Cola, Nestlè and Wal-Mart, have been moved by this concept to have a stronger commitment towards social issues and to put more efforts in relation with what could be done by a firm for the society. Nevertheless, this concept has also been criticised by other scholars because of some limits embedded in its proposals and conceptualization. Therefore, it is important to analyse the point of view of the other literates in order to have a wider picture of the existing thoughts on it.

Table 3. Comparison between CSR and CSV in Porter’s and Kramer’s opinion, adapted from “The big Idea- Creating Shared Value”, 2011

	CSR	CSV
Main Value	Doing good	Economic and Societal Benefits relative to Cost
Principles behind it	Citizenship, Philanthropy, Sustainability	Company and Community Value Creation
Reason behind CSR Practices	Discretionary or in Response to External Pressures	Integral to competing
Relationship with Profits	Separate from Profit Maximisation	Integral to Profit Maximisation

Practical Impact	Impact limited by Corporate Footprint and CSR Budget	Realigns the Entire Corporate Budget
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2.4.1 Criticisms on Creating Shared Value

The authors who have been less generous with the concept of CSV are Crane, Spence, Palazzo and Matten. They have contested the value of this new concept, even if they recognise that CSV has had a strongly positive reception by academic literate (Crane *et al.* 2014). The strongest accuse that they have made is that CSV is “a reactionary rather than transformational response to the crisis of the capitalism” (Crane *et al.* 2014:132). This is due to different aspects. First of all, the authors make a theoretical observation to CSV, stating that it is not new and that it has altered the features of the main previous concept, that is CSR, in order to make it appear that this new one have surpassed it. As they have noticed, CSR has been defined as separated from profit maximisation, while there have been many papers developed to find the business case for CSR. This final one, which represents the “specific benefits to business in an economic and financial sense that would flow from CSR activities and initiatives” (Carroll and Shabana 2010:92), has been largely ignored in the CSR conceptualization of Porter and Kramer: their analysis seems to limit CSR to a mere act of philanthropy. By contrast, a big part of the strategic CSR’s literature has shown how the goal is to gain business related benefits, especially by supporting core business activities (Burke and Logsdon 1996). Moreover, the authors have observed that Porter and Kramer have failed to recognise the bond that CSV has with other theoretical concepts such as Freeman’s stakeholder theory, Emerson’s blended value, but also with a practical form of company, legally defined and recognised in the USA, that is the Benefit Corporation. These reasons have lead Stuart Hart to define CSV as “intellectual piracy” (Crane *et al.* 2014; Paramanand 2011:6-7).

Another crucial point that is not consistent in Crane’s opinion is the analysis of the trade-offs between companies and society. In fact, they are recognised as existent in the everyday life, but it is also suggested to go beyond them, even if no path is designed by the authors in order to do so (Crane *et al.* 2014). This is a point of weakness in this concept, since, as Vogel has stated and Crane, Spence, Palazzo and Matten have reported,

“there is no evidence that behaving more virtuously makes firms more profitable...the market for virtue is not sufficiently important to make it in the interest of all firms to behave more responsibly” (Crane *et al.* 2014:136; Vogel 2005). It is a matter of fact that it is not always possible to obtain a win-win solution among the players involved in a specific problem because the interests of different parts could be alternative. There is the risk that the firms who choose to follow are motivated to invest more in the communication of the solutions rather than in the solution itself: this could let bigger issues unsolved while enhancing companies’ reputation (Crane *et al.* 2014).

Another big problem that CSV has is given by the fact that it is largely confined to specific projects and products rather than the entire firm (Crane *et al.* 2014). This means that this concept does not bring to a radical shift of the business model of one company, but it advises the creation of specific projects able to exploit the strength of the company in one determined sector and so to improve reputation while keeping the core -even harmful- activities of the firm unaltered. This could be linked with another weakness that this concept has: it is openly stated that “CSV presumes compliance with the law and ethical standards” (Porter and Kramer 2011:15). This is not enough, since many multinational corporations have suffered in the past because they were missing to respect the laws. It is also important to notice that different countries have different legal systems and so what is considered as mandatory in the developed world, both in environmental and social terms, is not required in the developing countries. Moreover, the authors have found some criticisms in the three paths designed by Porter. In a general way, their perplexities are also related with a more ideologic issue: the old capitalism is not reformed, since the principle of self-interest as a cause for any actions undertaken by the firm is not questioned at all. The CSV is focused on improving the efficiency of the business and does not agree on reducing the profitability of the firms in order to make capitalism more acceptable by the different stakeholders on the field. There is not, in Crane’s opinion, any reflection about how to make the interests of the stakeholders enter in the decision process of the firm. By contrast, the five-forces model that Porter has revisited in 2008 has treated customers and suppliers as competitors of the firm in the battle for profits (Crane *et al.* 2014). Using the lenses of the competition, Crane has described CSV as another step in the process of differentiation that some firms apply instead of a systemic solution which

could be used by many players and aims at a good that could be shared by different players inside the society. This wider societal responsibility could realise projects in which the company is a simple stakeholder in the solution of an issue and not the centre of the solution (Crane *et al.* 2014). Still CSV, apart from the initial claiming, is not able to provide a consistent theoretical framework to understand the firm as a multi-purpose venture (Crane *et al.* 2014).

Porter and Kramer have replied to the criticisms highlighted by Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo. First of all, they have considered the newness of the topic and the similarities with other works. In their opinion, the concept should have something new, since it has pushed many companies to invest money in order to follow its principles. The novelty has lied in the fact that it has described precisely the strategic role that a company should have in the society (Porter and Kramer 2014). Moreover, the authors have acknowledged the contributions that other scholars have given to the debate in this field and they have recognised that there are some points of contact with other works. Nevertheless, they have remarked that there are also different perspectives with the already quoted studies, and so that they have not copied anyone. Later on, they have considered the issue of the legal compliance: it is a prerequisite of the creating shared value, together with social responsibility and it is not only presumed, but it is mandatory. Finally, they have replied to the criticism about the goal of the CSV, which has remained company self-interest. In Porter's opinion, the multi-stakeholder approach proposed by Crane is a classic solution that would never be implemented by the companies. It could be attractive for the scholars of CSR and sustainability, because it has proposed to the company to target a benefit greater than profit through solutions developed with other stakeholders, but it is not feasible in practice. This because it could enlarge the trade-offs between companies and the society, since the goal of the profit maximisation cannot be reached following these principles. It is not a company's duty to solve all the societal problem, but a better situation in comparison with the contemporary one could be gained "using the profit motive and the tools of corporate strategy to address societal problems" (Porter and Kramer 2014:150).

A final reply has come from Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo. They have emphasized how Porter and Kramer have not recognised enough the strong bond that CSV has with other concepts such as strategic CSR, and the difference among the two is not clear at all. The risk is to perceive CSV as a “nice new label” or a “re-brand” (Crane *et al.* 2014:151) and to struggle to distinguish which actions is inspired by the two of them. In addition, it is highlighted how the trade-offs between economic and social value have been hidden and not solved by creating shared value. In fact, it is a big challenge for a multinational corporation to try to respect legal and ethical requirements all around the world, and a very small number of them could proceed with CSV actions if the others are considered as prerequisite. What this part seems to suggest, even if it is not openly mentioned, is that Porter and Kramer have tried to help managers in developing policies able to distract companies’ stakeholders -in particular customers – from the harmful actions undertaken by the firm. Moreover, they have contested the concept that corporate self-interest is the only economic vehicle able to address social problems: they do not agree with this view, and they are not the only one. In the end, the authors have brought existing cases which are trying to reshape specific sectors through the collaboration of different stakeholders: there is novelty in these initiatives, because the reason behind them is a new one, while CSV is defined as an “attempt to reinvent the past” (Crane *et al.* 2014:153).

Apart from the disputes between the initiatives implemented from these two school of thoughts, it is important to understand if the second one is feasible on a practical level. As it has been explained by Porter, his CSV model has its basement on the capitalistic mechanisms of corporate self-interests and profit maximisation. He has stated that “addressing systemic problems of injustice with broader solutions embedded in democratically organised multi-stakeholder processes could be appealing for many, but it is not reality” (Porter and Kramer 2014:150). On the other hand, the approach proposed by Crane is a more radical one, but, in his opinion, a possible one. In fact, he has explained how it has been already recognised the Benefit Corporation in the American laws: it has the purpose to have an effective impact on the environment and the society (Porter and Kramer 2014). Therefore, it is useful to analyse benefit corporations to understand if they could provide a good compromise between the two point of view previously presented and an effective solution to the exigence of both firms and society.

2.5 For-benefit and Benefit Corporations

The main goal of this kind of corporation is to go beyond the dualism between for profit and non-profit firms. They aim to create a for-benefit model to follow: these organizations “generate earned income, but they give top priority to an explicit social mission” (Sabeti 2011:99). For this kind of companies, it is mandatory to submit on an annual basis the results obtained in relation with the social mission chosen. They must be assessed externally in order to guarantee a certain reliability to the process (Wilburn and Wilburn 2014). Among the other way to evaluate the firm’s commitment, the B Lab, an American non-profit organization, has managed to offer the best tools and practices thought to understand if a firm has realised a shift towards a double bottom line, formed by profit and social benefits (Michelini, Nigri, Iasevoli and Grieco 2016). BIA, the B Impact Assessment, is the most used tool to assess the performances of the company at an economic, social and environmental level. Any firm could receive between 0 and 200 points and it should get 80 points to obtain the B corporation level. In 2017, 65000 firms have already used this analysis, but only 2300 of them has obtained the certification. (Di Cesare and Ezechieli 2017).

It is important to notice the difference between benefit corporations and Certified B Corporations, also known as B Corp: the former has chosen a higher standard of corporate purpose and wants its way of operating to be as transparent as possible. The latter, instead, has gained a certification that should prove the rigorous practices used throughout the entire activities of the firm. This label is able to show if the firm is creating or destroying value for the society. (Michelini *et al.* 2016). It is noticeable that many countries are missing a legal framework able to shape the features, rights and duties of these benefit corporations. The formalisation of this structure is able to create another sector that differentiate itself from governments, for-profits and non-profits, even if it can communicate with the others. (Sabeti 2011). It should have some features of the for profit: it should “attract customers and charge premiums”, but at the same time it must direct its profits in advancing the missions, which comes before the maximisation of the profits.

Moreover, this mixture of the two is observable in their main features: the “commitment to one social purpose and the reliance on earned income” (Sabeti 2011:100). The success of this new concept is remarkable also because of the acknowledgement that it has received from the scholars in this sector: for instance, John Elkington has defined this kind of corporations as a “bright ray of hope” because of the efforts put from them in order to be “best for the world” (Elkington 2018)

There are different legal frameworks able to embed the for-benefits approach: among the others, benefit corporation is widely spread in the USA, the country where this phenomenon was born in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It has been recognised also in some European country: for instance, benefit corporations have been introduced in Italy with the law 28 December 2015, no. 208, art. 1, para. 376-382 with the name of “le società benefit” (Michelini *et al.* 2016:2). These societies must edit their company statute and they have to enter in the business objective that they have a double purpose: to pay dividends and to have a positive impact on the society (Di Cesare and Ezechieli 2017).



Figure 4. The B Corp Label

The model of the for-benefits is strongly different in comparison with CSV because it questions the structure of the old-style capitalism: “It is required reimagining entrenched organizational structures that many consider immutable” (Sabeti 2011:100). Capitalism as it is known today is criticised even more widely: there could not be any effective reform to re-legitimate it until it is only fuelled with profit maximisation (Sabeti 2011). The relevance given to the social mission behind the action of the firm is another strong difference between these two models: in the case of the for-benefits, it has a primary importance, while for CSV it comes after profit maximisations. These aspects are able to

show the contrasts with the previous concepts and the novelty embedded in the for-benefits one: the economic duties of a firm are still considered, and it is natural if the goal is to keep operating efficiently, but the priorities have moved towards the realisation of a noble social or environmental goal. This choice is disruptive, and it is more able than any other proposals related with CSR to transform capitalism in an economic system that is acceptable for consumers. Therefore, this model is closer to the multi-stakeholder approach desired by Crane and Matten: it attributes higher responsibilities to the stakeholders and creates prizes for them in order to increase their commitment to the final goal. For instance, a British start-up has permitted its stakeholders to have an influence in some specific decisions and to share part of the company's profits (Sabeti 2011). The involvement of other stakeholders in projects developed by for-benefits firms enlarges the distance with CSV concept and shortens the one with Crane's ideas. In fact, even if for-benefits approach could become a way for one company to differentiate itself from the competitors- of course economic success is considered as positive also in this concept- it is thought for a different purpose: "to provide social benefits rather than to maximise financial return" (Sabeti 2011:101). In addition, this aspect is able to strengthen the difference between for-benefits firms and those companies who implement strategic CSR: the formers are trying to follow a new way of doing business, while the latter are more strongly linked with the old mechanisms of the capitalism. Moreover, firms that try to follow the principles of the strategic CSR have the desire to implement policies that provide benefits to the environment and the society only when there is a link between firms' capacities and the possible benefit to deliver. It is about selecting a unique position that allows to reduce costs or to serve customer needs in a better way (Porter and Kramer 2006). For-benefits, instead, try to go beyond this approach: even if the profits are considered as fundamental, the social goal to be reached is the real fuel that moves this kind of firm.

It is important to notice that it is not possible in the short term to imagine that for-benefit companies would substitute for profits, non-profit and government. In fact, this model is thought to fill the gaps created by the failures of the other three parts involved in the economic life (Sabeti 2011). Still, its development is fundamental to skip from the present capitalistic model which is no longer sustainable nor effective and to widen the stage of

firms who invest in a more responsible growth. The companies that has chosen to be certified from the b Corp certification are quite small: on average, they employ 70 people with revenues of 22 million euro. Nevertheless, big multinational corporations, such as Danone, Unilever and Enel, are monitoring the evolution of this tool: their structure is still too complex to forecast a rapid shift towards joining the b Corp companies, but they would like to start improving their practices to become closer to this achievement (Di Cesare and Ezechieli 2017).

Finally, it is remarkable that for-benefits approach aims at joining different concepts developed in the past, such as corporate social responsibility, sustainability, venture philanthropy, social investing, cause oriented purchasing (Sabeti 2011). All of them share the attempt to remove the barriers that separate for profits, non-profit and governments. The choice to combine economic and social goals without limiting in any way the efforts aimed at achieving the second ones is typical of the for-benefits companies. They exploit the most mature conceptualization as far as the responsibilities of the firms are concerned. The approach introduced through the concept of for-benefit is the most modern one, because it manages to go beyond the older view of CSR. This one is questioned also by other concepts which are gaining stronger attention in the recent literature and practices. For instance, practitioners in Europe are using the term sustainability with a higher frequency in their reports (Gatti and Seele 2013). By adding the social purpose into the statute of the company, benefit corporations are able to enhance the credibility of their investments. In fact, with other kind of concepts, there is the risk that companies invest more resources in communicating that a problem has been transformed in a win-win solution rather than in seriously addressing the problem itself (Crane *et al.* 2014). Moreover, this allows to avoid that the policies implemented are not at the real core of the society and that they are not limited to specific areas or functions of the firm. It could be considered as innovative also because, for the first time, an economic model that pursue profits has the strength to give priority to the social issue and not to the financial results: governments and the economic world are developing new forms of ownership, capitalization, legal and tax treatment. These are implemented in order to provide an appealing and effective framework able to facilitate the spread of this form of enterprise.

The transition towards this model will not be easy or fast: some firms will keep avoiding investments in aspects different from their economic objectives. Other companies will maintain their focus on a more or less true engagement in strategic CSR policies: this situation is better than the previous one because it considers some problems caused by the firms and follows the richest stream of literature on social and environmental issues. However, the introduction of for-benefits, and in particular of benefit corporations and b Corp, shows that there is room for novelty also in this sector, and the astonishing growth of the firms which are investing in this field could demonstrate a trend that should be followed also in the future. It will be determinant to check in the next few years if the consumers will reward these investments with a convinced adherence to the principles behind this choice and so if they will make these companies become more successful than their competitors. Some of the present b Corp are already well known in their market as leaders in the attention towards environment and society. For instance, Patagonia is a worldwide known brand that operates in the outdoor clothing: it has historically considered these principles as fundamental in their way of doing business. It remains to be proved if the involvement in these ideals is a significant cause of their success and if the example of this company will be followed by others.

3. PROPOSITIONS

The introduction of the for-benefit model has not the purpose to destroy the classic for profit sector: as it has been stated by Sabeti, “for-benefits cannot replace for-profits, governments or non-profits; a resilient, competitive 21st century economy needs all four sectors” (Sabeti 2011:104). Therefore, even if a shift towards benefit corporations is desirable, there should be a bright future for both CSR in the classic for profit world and benefit corporations in the incoming world of the fourth sector- the one that does not belong to the old for-profits, non-profits or government division. It becomes useful to structure the analysis as it follows: the main part will be devoted to demonstrating some considerations about the present strategic CSR. A smaller part, instead, will be in charge of understanding whether customers desire a stronger commitment towards specific goals in the business world or if the current situation is considered a positive one or the only feasible one. As it has been explained in the introduction, the analysis will be limited to the outdoor sector, since in customers’ minds many of the brands that operate in this field have a strong bond with the sustainability, both in environmental and social aspects (Schnitzspahn 2008 cited from Dargusch and Ward 2010). Therefore, the fact that this industry is already perceived by its customers as greener than the others could mean a stronger sensibility towards these topics. The interests of the customers and of the firms for the responsibilities of the companies could lead more easily than in other sectors to a more conscious form of capitalism, moved not only by profit maximisation, but also by specific goals that need to be achieved.

It could be useful to develop a model able to provide some considerations about CSR and other related concepts in the outdoor sector. The first part will be devoted to make some considerations on the CSR as it is now in this field. The second one, instead, is addressed to analyse certain aspects able to ignite the effectiveness of the CSR policies in the outdoor sector. The third stage of this analysis aims at understanding more the importance and the real dimensions of some of the benefits that CSR brings to those firms that implement it. Finally, the possibility of an alternative system different from the practices that dominate the contemporary situation is tested.

3.1 General Features of the Present CSR in the Outdoor Clothing

First of all, it is important to understand where is directed the highest part of investments in CSR policies, but also to verify if the direction followed by the investments nowadays is consistent with the desires of the customers. On a general basis, it should be noticed that in Europe the relevance given to the actions implemented in favour of the employees is higher than the one towards the environment and the local community, while the opposite happens in the USA (Kolk 2006). The definitions of CSR around the world take less into consideration the environmental issue in comparison with the social one: according to Dahlsrud, only 59% of the definitions that he has analysed include the first one, while the 88% of them mention the second one. This could be caused by multiple factors, such as the lack of this aspect in the first famous definition- the one written by Carroll- and the fact that CSR is often distinguished from Corporate Environmental Responsibility. Still, when the definition is explained more widely, the environmental aspect is cited more often (Dahlsrud 2008). However, this does not seem to be true in the outdoor sector, where there is a perceived equilibrium for what concerns responsibilities in three different categories, that are the financial, the environmental and the social issues, at least for what concerns the American market. In fact, a study on this geographic area has already been realised on the managers to discover this and “no single category of issue has been emphasized by a majority of participants” (Dargusch and Ward 2010:98). In particular, the ones that have underlined the environmental responsibility have as a reason behind their choices the desire of gaining positive outcomes for the nature. (Dargusch and Ward 2010). On the other hand, the managers that have considered the social responsibility as the core of their actions have highlighted the importance of the relationships with their suppliers (Dargusch and Ward 2010). After these considerations, it should be verified if the customers perceive a similar situation in the European market: the first theoretical proposition to be tested empirically is structured to achieve this purpose.

***Proposition 1.** In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms are perceived to put similar CSR efforts in environmental and social issues.*

Another aspect related with the present situation which needs to be verified through this study is about the source of information on CSR practices used by customers. In fact, it is important to understand whether customers trust firms about their CSR policies or if they consider as reliable only that information that come from outside of the firm, such as labels and certifications. First of all, it should be observed that customers recognise the usefulness of the non-profit involvement in a CSR initiative: this is seen with less scepticism in comparison with the for-profit's one (Sen, Du and Bhattacharya 2016). Moreover, customers “respond negatively to high spending on CSR-related advertising”, but also to contradictions between the communication and the policies implemented (Sen, Du and Bhattacharya 2016:72). This means that customers need to be aware of the implementation of CSR policies, but it is dangerous if they perceive that CSR has been sold to them (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). Moreover, a huge stream of literature has questioned the fact that there is a factual link between CSR communication of one firm and its real engagement in it (Gatti and Seele 2014; Greer and Bruno 1996; Mitchell and Ramey 2011; Bansal and Clelland 2004; Russo and Harrison 2005; Walker and Wan 2012). In general, it is believed that customers do not have enough information on production condition (Hustvedt and Dickson 2009). Certifications have been introduced also to fill this gap, but it is noteworthy that they are not always enough to guarantee the respect of what or who should be protected (Russo and Harrison 2005). Nevertheless, they are able to demonstrate the existence of some minimum requirements on specific issues: for instance, ISO 14001 is aimed at regulating environmental issues, while SA8000 forbids to work for more than 12 hours (Ksiezak 2016). In addition, they are able to satisfy an exigence of the customers: “they do not want to feel guilt for taking part in harming people, therefore they need assurance that the clothes they want to buy were made in decent working conditions” (Ksiezak 2016:57). These are able to provide a competitive advantage for those firms which manage to obtain them, because they give more authority to the actions that they have implemented. It is possible to state that:

Proposition 2. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers partially trust the communication implemented by the firms in relation with CSR policies. However, certifications are useful to strengthen this trust.*

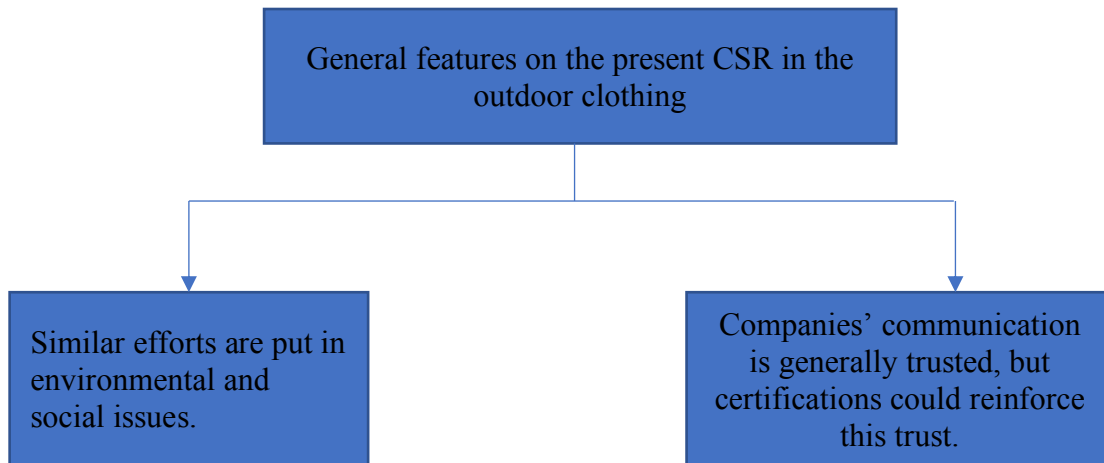


Figure 5. General Features on the present CSR

3.2 Aspects of the CSR remunerated by the Customers in the Outdoor Clothing

In order to consider the aspects that are rewarded by the customers for those firms that invest on CSR in the outdoor sector, it is possible to start by comparing the two principal directions that these policies could pursue: the environmental and the social one.

It is remarkable that customers consider the outdoor clothing as a “clean and green industry” (Dargusch and Ward 2010:94) and that those managers that prefer to invest in environmental problems behave like this because they perceive that customers align themselves with brands that invest on these issues (Dargusch and Ward 2010). This could mean that investments in the environmental side of CSR are not only desired, but also required to the firms which have to maintain a reputation. Nevertheless, also the social part of the CSR is gaining more attention: for instance, American companies in the outdoor sector, who sell also in Europe, have realised the OIA fair labour toolkit, able to certificate some minimum standards for the fair trade and for improved working conditions in relation with suppliers (Dargusch and Ward 2010). Therefore, it should be verified that customers’ preferences are as it follows:

Proposition 3. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers desire slightly higher CSR efforts in the environmental sector.*

After having considered this aspect, it is also important to investigate what are the factors that customers appreciate while choosing if they want to reward the implementation of CSR practices. First of all, it is very important to understand the relevance that customers give to the consistency of the specific actions with his/her own ideals. As it has been reckoned in the introduction, the customers play a significant role in the spread of CSR policies, since the relevance that they attribute to them is decisive for managers to increase investments in this field (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018). Moreover, even if this is partially against the strategic CSR theory which tries to exploit the points of strength of the firm, there exist companies which develop their policies with their stakeholders in order to satisfy their needs (Bondy and Starkey 2014). Previous studies have already found that when there is a congruence between the moral foundation of the consumer and the actions implemented by the firm, then the results of the implementation of CSR policies is more positive for the company (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018). Customers appreciate when their moral identity shares some point with the one of the firms that he or she is assessing. As a consequence of these, they become more loyal to the brands with whom they share ideals, they create a positive word of mouth for them, and it is more unlikely that they trust negative information on these brands (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018; Du, Bhattacharya and Sen 2007). Moreover, it is stated that “consumers prefer to act in ways that are consistent with their social identity” (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018:10). The analysis of Bhattacharya divides consumers’ ideals in individual and binding, while CSR actions are named group-oriented and individual-oriented: the morality’s consistency between firms’ practices and consumers is assessed on the basis of these categories (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018). In the case of this study, instead, the purpose is a bit different: what it is aimed to be demonstrated is the coherence between the main interests of the consumers for specific actions to be undertaken and the rewards that firms receive because of the actions implemented. In general, customers appreciate to buy from firms that invest on CSR, especially if in domains relevant for the customers (Du *et al.* 2007). This should be contextualised in the outdoor clothing sector. Therefore, the fourth theoretical proposition is structured as it follows:

Proposition 4. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers appreciate those firms that implement CSR practices that are consistent with their own ideals.*

The consistency between the general values of one firm and the CSR practices implemented by the firm itself is another aspect that will be deepened in this study. In fact, the study realised by Bhattacharya previously mentioned describes how “consumers’ reactions to CSR hinge to a significant degree on the extent to which a company’s CSR actions reveals its values or souls” (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018:5). It should be demonstrated that customers require this as a pre-requisite to the firm they would like to buy from. In particular, it is observable how CSR and CSV- that is, apart from Porter’s considerations, a form of CSR- could take external problems and transform them in business opportunities following their resources and values (Crane *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, many real cases are able to show that some specific CSR or CSV policies could be implemented also in controversial business such as tobacco, arms manufacturing and petroleum, while traditional business is not touched in different functions inside the firms in these sectors (Crane *et al.* 2014). In general, it seems true that a fit between a CSR policy and the firm that implements it could generate a more positive consumer’s response (Sen, Du and Bhattacharya 2016). Therefore, it is useful to investigate what do customers think about the congruence between firms’ and CSR policies’ values in the outdoor sector.

Proposition 5. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms that implement CSR practices are more remunerated by the customers if the policies implemented are consistent with companies’ ideals.*

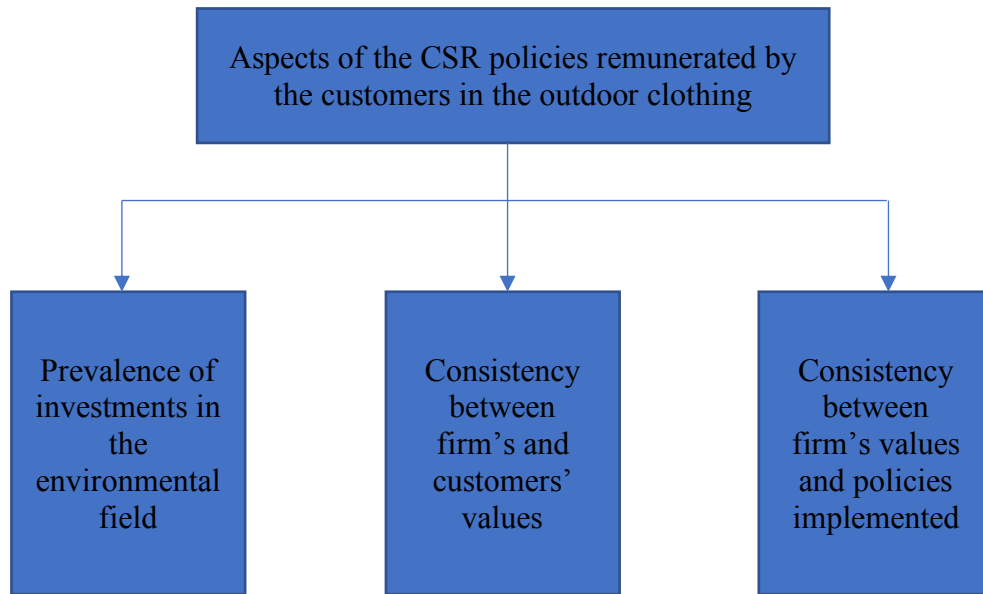


Figure 6. Aspects of the CSR policies remunerated by the customers

3.3 Advantages derived by the Implementation of CSR Policies in the Outdoor Clothing

After having analysed what are some of the factors able to boost the appeal that CSR policies have on the customers in the outdoor clothing sector, the following part will be devoted to emphasizing some of the advantages that the implementation of CSR practices could provide to the firms that enter them in their common behaviours.

First of all, it is useful to understand the relevance that CSR policies have to enhance the reputation of one firm or of a specific brand if it is part of a wider portfolio. The improvement of the brand image is one of the strongest reasons behind CSR. Some companies have also measured how investing in CSR reinforce the overall image of one brand: for instance, SAS realises every year a market research for Scandinavian citizens aimed at comparing the environmental and the global image of the company. In this case, the general image of the firm has boosted because of the environmental improvements of the airlines. Unfortunately, no considerations have been done on the social responsibility (Lynes and Andrachuk 2008). Therefore, it is possible to say that firms that apply CSR policies can gain intangible resources, such as reputation and brand name, which are

strategic for their success (Russo and Fouts 1997; Branco and Rodrigues 2006). The credibility that a firm could obtain through these policies is higher both in relation with internal and external stakeholders (Burke and Logsdon 1996). These practices are able to provide practical advantages, such as easier access to funding, a stronger attention from media that could increase brand awareness in the public, a social license to operate and, in the end, a more favourable customer choice. It could have also a redeeming effect: in fact, “CSR initiative can also mitigate negative corporate image caused by past corporate bad behaviour and hence help in protecting firm reputation from being tarnished” (Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2008:276). This last factor has been called resilience and is due to the trust that the customer has towards a specific firm (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2004). However, consumers can punish those companies that present themselves as socially responsible but act as socially irresponsible (Kotchen and Moon 2011; Lange and Washburn 2012). In one study realised by Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 52% of the interviewees accepted to boycott those organizations that implement an irresponsible behaviour when proofs of it are available (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore and Hill 2005 cited from Gupta and Hodges 2012). The previous aspects seem to be shared in the outdoor sector: among the other factors, managers consider CSR implementation as important because it permits to avoid a negative image of the company, it facilitates the diffusion of a positive image about the brand and it makes it easier to receive financial investments. By contrast, the fact that consumers are aligning the outdoor sector with the notion of environmental sustainability (Dargusch and Ward 2010) could make the reputation of those brands that do not take CSR into consideration decrease. Finally, it could be observed that some authors have noticed that CSR could become a form of positioning when a firm is able to tie its own values with a specific cause: this choice create a strong firm’s identity (Du *et al.* 2007). However, it is important to investigate whether these practices are able to enhance the brand reputation also in the customers’ perspective and, in case of a positive answer, to understand which the most appreciated ones are.

Proposition 6. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the firms that implement CSR policies are rewarded with an improved brand reputation, while those firms that do not consider any investment in this field have a worse reputation, which in extreme bad cases could bring to the boycott of one brand.*

Other issues which could be investigated throughout this study are related with the possibility that CSR could become a means of competitive advantage for one firm and that it could increase, even if slightly, the willingness to pay of the customers. In particular, there could be strong advantages for those firms that decide to position themselves on CSR. In fact, they are considered more effective not only in the CSR actions, but also in activities unrelated with the previous ones (Du *et al.* 2007). Moreover, this kind of firms is very close with the for-benefits ones, since they try with their strategy to link themselves with a particular issue and, by consequence, to shape their behaviours in function of this specific goal. As far as the willingness to pay is concerned, it has been observed that a majority of customers does not want to pay more because of socially responsible actions. Nevertheless, there is a minority of customers that is available to pay more because of this (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). The studies realised in the past on the clothing sector have brought diverse results. For instance, Kim and Damhorst have found that some customers are willing to pay more for products if this could increase their environmental quality (Kim and Damhorst 1998). On the other hand, it has been found that the likelihood to buy a t-shirt realised with organic cotton decreases when the price increases (Hustvedt 2006). More recently, the consultancy giant Nielsen has discovered that 66% of the costumers around the world are willing to pay more for responsible products (Nielsen 2015). Being this Master Thesis a qualitative study, it is not aiming at verifying the dimension of this trend, but it tries to confirm that it exists. In fact, other studies have shown that this criterion is not used by a huge part of the millennials in their purchasing choice in the apparel sector (Conrad and Kambara 2018).

***Proposition 7.** In the European market of the outdoor clothing, some customer is willing to pay a bit more for products that are more socially and environmentally responsible. However, it happens that a higher willingness to pay is often not translated in the purchase of the sustainable cloth.*

The last fact that should be investigated in this Thesis regards the role of the CSR in the purchasing choice. According to the study of Meyer realised on the clothing sector, the good environmental features of an eco-friendly product could not be the only added value

for a successful product: customers must perceive that there are also other advantages in purchasing one product instead of another one (Meyer 2001). It is observable that, in general, the link between CSR and purchasing behaviour is positive when there is a good fit between consumer and the policies implemented and between the company itself and the policy implemented, when the product sold has a good quality and when the customer does not have to pay more to buy the product (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). It remains to be checked if these conditions are kept true also in the outdoor clothing sector and if, in the case of a firm that respect for-benefits principles, this could gain a wider importance.

Proposition 8. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the implementation of CSR policies has some impact in customers' purchasing choice, but it cannot be the only added value of one firm.*

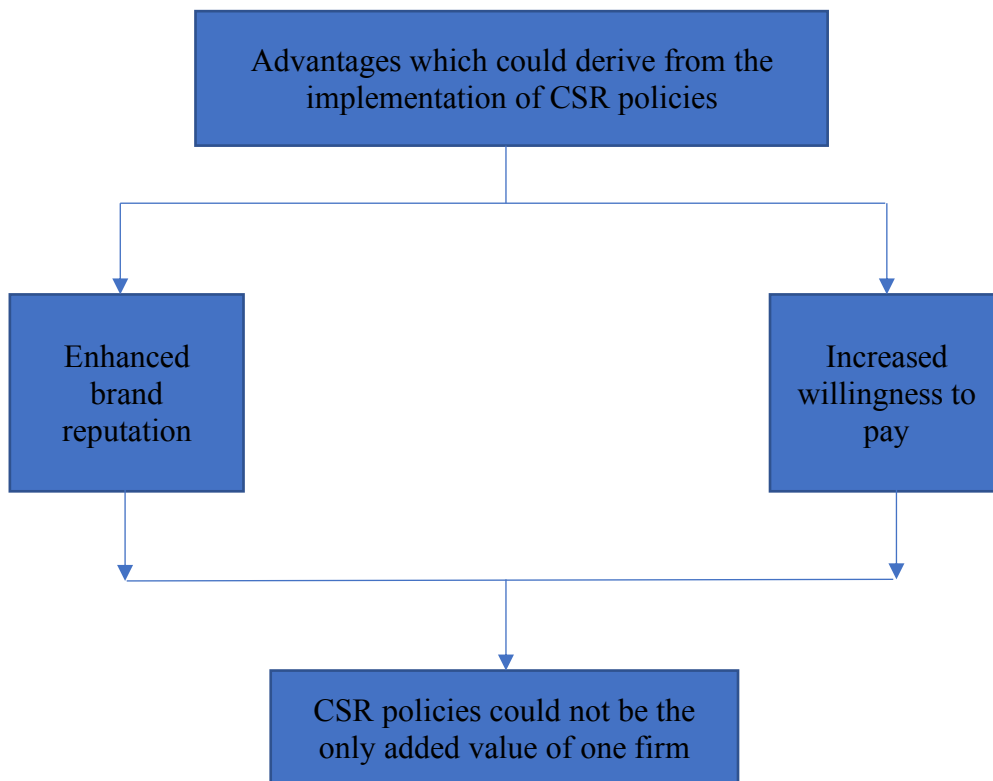


Figure 7. Advantages for Firms derived by the CSR Policies

3.4 Alternatives to standard CSR Investments in the Outdoor Clothing

Finally, it is important to understand if there are alternatives to the present forms of CSR. In particular, a fundamental part that should be investigated in this study tries to understand if there are the conditions for a wider involvement of different stakeholders in the implementation of CSR policies or if there is a desire for single companies able to solve specific problems. The debate on this point could also deal with the desire that customers could have of firms that are putting consistent efforts to solve one issue and that are considering this as fundamental in their way of operating. Some positive signals have started arriving already few years ago: “Increasingly firms talk to NGOs and governments, and...get together with their competitors in the same industry in an effort to set common rules, spread the risk and shape opinions” (Franklin 2008:3). In particular, a multi-stakeholder approach is quite difficult to implement, but it is feasible for those companies that have really invested on CSR and that consider it as strategic (Franklin 2008). It can be easier to do wider actions if you are not traded publicly, otherwise it is dangerous, because you have to focus more on the short-term results. Nevertheless, some encouraging examples are emerging: for instance, the Danish firm Novo Nordisk is traded publicly, and it has a strong commitment towards a goal related with diabetes. It is controlled by a foundation which allows it to focus on the long term and to use profits for humanitarian purposes. Moreover, there are specific holding companies that select their portfolio using concern for stakeholders and community as a criterion to choose them: they also contribute with their own expertise to improve performances on a social, financial and environmental level (Sabeti 2011). Some attempts to use a multi-stakeholder approach have been implemented in the outdoor sector for mountain clothing: for instance, many companies have entered the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), which collect many of the brands in this market in the USA. It has a Working Group on Sustainability since 2007 that is particularly focused on environmental responsibility: it tries to control and trace the materials used in the production, to reduce the use of dangerous chemicals and to develop sustainability indexes in collaboration with SAC, that is Sustainable Apparel Coalition. This last one has been founded by Patagonia and Wal Mart: it involves different stakeholders, both in firms and governmental side, which

have the goal to develop the best possible index for sustainability. Their last creation is Higg Index, which “measures environmental and social labor impacts across the value chain” (SAC 2019). This tool is divided in order to address three different parts of the companies: the product, the facility and the retail activity. These subsections provide also information on best practices useful to be environmentally responsible, even because consumers are becoming interested in supporting sustainable and transparent brands.

According to Crane and the other scholars, the implementation of a multi-stakeholder initiative is very important since it could offer a solution to the crisis of the capitalism (Crane *et al.* 2014). For-benefits firms, which share with the previous approach the attempt to engage stakeholders more widely in the life of the company and in the path to reach the mission, are another solution to the delegitimization of the capitalism, because they do not focus only on profit maximisation (Sabeti 2011). It needs to be checked if the customers do agree on the relegitimization of these new forms of capitalism through the rewarding of them, or if they prefer the older version because of different factors.

Proposition 9a. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the CSR actions promoted by different stakeholders are considered more effective by customers in comparison with policies developed by single firms, and, because of this, they are more rewarded.*

Proposition 9b. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers would like to reward more the policies implemented by a for-benefit firm rather than the ones of a classic capitalistic firm.*

Proposition 9c. *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the most rewarded firms are those that manage to make them identify with a specific cause*

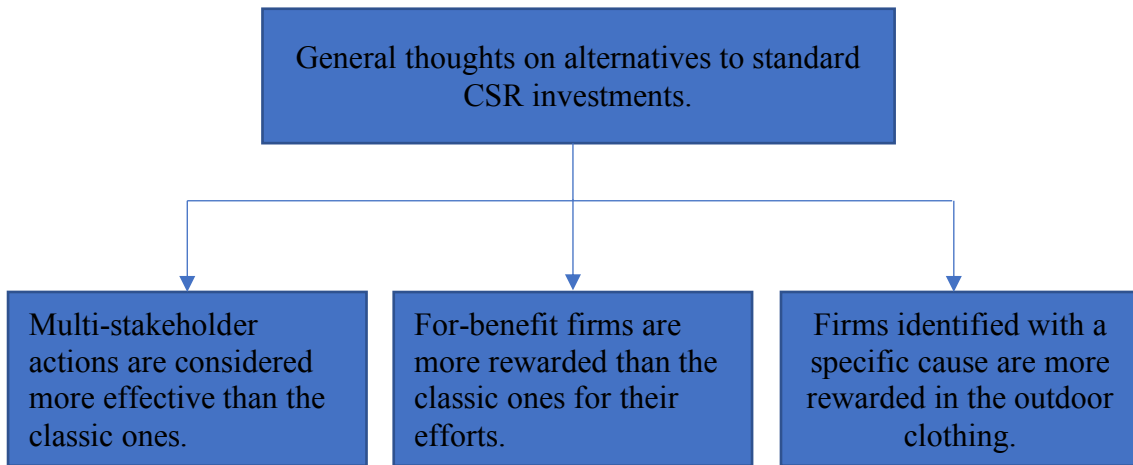


Figure 8. Alternatives to Standard CSR Investments

4. METHODOLOGY

The following section has the purpose to introduce the choices done at a methodological level. The chapter begins with the design of the research, which is formed also by the methods used to collect data and to analyse them. Later on, the reliability and the validity of the study will be briefly discussed. Finally, some considerations will be proposed on the sample of this study.

4.1 Design of the Research

This research aims at understanding how customers are influenced by the implementation of strategic CSR policies in the outdoor clothing sector. Moreover, it has the goal to verify the effect that specific aspects of the practices implemented has on the customers while choosing to purchase a product. Finally, it wants to discover if there is a latent demand for something more radical than strategic CSR or if customers are more focused on the product itself. The research design is set up to decide on, among other issues, how to collect further data, analyse and interpret them, and finally, to provide an answer to the problem (Sekaran 2003).

4.1.1 Research Choice, Research Strategy and Research Approach

The philosophy that has been embedded in this study is a pragmatic one: it is the most useful in this occasion because it recognises that multiple points of view are needed to obtain more interesting results. In fact, the pragmatism “recognise that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, that no single point of view can ever give the entire picture and that there may be multiple realities”. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2015:144). Therefore, it is in between the objectivist and the subjectivist ones, even if the latter is closer with the approach used in this study, and it has the goal to reconcile the both of them, together with fact and values (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2015). Because of this, as it will be observed, the chosen research approach will involve both deductive and inductive aspects, even if the first one is more used.

Moreover, another aspect that makes this research pragmatic is given by the fact that it is structured to obtain findings meant to support the action of the companies (Kelemen and Rumens 2008).

Two different methods could be used to conduct this research: the quantitative and the qualitative ones. Since the primary goal of the study is to try to understand how the customer is influenced by the implementation of CSR policies, a qualitative approach is believed to be the most effective to the development of this study, because it is able to provide more in-depth insights for the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study. In fact, the data collected are richer and they preserve the perspective of the participants, even if the sample used is usually smaller. The researcher has, using this approach, the possibility to describe existing phenomena and to have a general view on them. Nevertheless, the results in the qualitative research are limited to the context, they could not be generalised and there is a risk that conclusions could be influenced by the researcher's perspective (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Merriam 2009). However, the possibility to choose a quantitative approach has been excluded for two other aspects: the fact that it loses contextual details and that it gives less details about behaviours and their motivations (Babbie 2010). This limitation is very important, because another objective of this Thesis is to observe what are the reasons that push customers to trust CSR policies and to understand if there is an interest in practices that goes beyond the strategic CSR.

The method used in this qualitative research is the case study, and in particular the intrinsic one (Stake 1995). In fact, the researcher should use it when there is a specific interest to understand more about the case. Moreover, it is particularly appropriated when the goal is to answer to an explanatory research question, that respond to an "how" (Yin 2009). In this study, the case inquires a phenomenon, that consists of the customer response to strategic CSR policies and the investigation of a possible desire for more radical forms of investments in the outdoor clothing sector. This is a very particular context, since companies in this sector have invested in CSR quite early and, as it has been explained in the introduction, some of them are globally perceived as strongly engaged in this field. Therefore, it is important to verify what are the European customer thoughts, preferences and rewards in relation with CSR in the outdoor clothing, even

because it has never been done before, as it is clear from the literature review provided by Woo and Jin (Woo and Jin 2016). The case study “has often been associated with description and with theory development” (Darke, Shanks and Broadbent 1998:275) and so mostly with an inductive approach, but Cavaye has acknowledged that it could be related with a deductive one (Cavaye 1996). Therefore, the approach used has been mostly deductive, because the path followed throughout the work has been to structure some propositions based on the previous literature available on CSR usually applied to general fields. The previous theory has been studied and used as a starting point for a model that takes into consideration some important points that concern the outdoor sector. However, because of the limited number of studies available for the specific context studied in this research, that is the outdoor clothing sector, many propositions have been formed by following the insights which come from the general literature and they need to be tested in a narrower sector. Moreover, especially in the theoretical debate, a well-developed literature on customers’ thoughts towards b Corps and multi-stakeholder approaches is missing. Therefore, a specific part of the study will follow an approach that is aiming at discovering something that has not been discussed before, and so it uses a method closer to the inductive: this will be done because of the peculiar attention towards the environment and the society that people interested in the outdoor sector have. This aspect makes this sector a suitable one to investigate if there are possibilities to evolve from the present form of capitalism. The choice to consider diverse approaches is supported by the existing literature: in fact, it could be noticed that many inductive researches include deductive elements and vice versa (Ghuri and Gronhaug 2005; Kromrey 2006) and that a combination of these two is often advantageous for the result of one study (Ghuri and Gronhaug 2005; Saunders *et al.* 2009).

4.1.2 Data Collection and Interview Guide

The primary data have been collected using semi-structured interviews: this approach is able to guarantee to the interviewee some freedom in enlarging the generally used set of questions when more in-depth insights could be gained and so to avoid an inflexible approach, but, at the same time, it is not so wide that results could not be compared and matched in quite an easy way (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Therefore, the goal is to

leave some space for personal contributions without losing the focus of the study. The questions involved in the interview guide (see appendix number 1 for the basic sample) were both containing questions which could be reconducted to the theoretical part, in particular to the debate between Porter and Kramer against Crane, Spence, Palazzo and Matten, and the more empirical one, that is related with the customer thoughts on and reactions from strategic CSR policies. The interviews have been divided in two parts: the former included demands on the propositions aimed to be proved, while the latter took into consideration a practical example able to deepen the topic of the willingness to pay. Moreover, also secondary data have been collected: outdoor companies' websites have been analysed in particular to understand what their main focus is on. In addition, blogs on this sector have been controlled in order to check if the thoughts obtained through the semi-structured interviews are shared throughout the customers in this specific sector.

The interviews have been recorded and the content was summarised in order to have some materials useful for an initial analysis of the most common answers. These summaries have been read several times to understand if the people interviewed shared some perspectives on the theoretical and practical issues raised. After that, findings from different interviewees have been combined in order to conduct an analysis able to consider together different points of view on the same issue. At this point, meaningful quotations have been reported in the empirical part and they have been sent to the interviewees in order to check if the words used in this research are consistent with the concepts that they wanted to express during the interviews. Finally, the propositions developed in the previous part have been matched with the findings that has come from the empirical analysis.

4.2 Reliability and Validity

4.2.1 Reliability

Even if some scholars have stated that reliability is not relevant in qualitative research because it concerns measurements (Stenbacka 2001), other scholars have argued that it

should be a topic of concern also for this kind of studies to prove them (Patton 2001) and that trustworthiness is crucial to analyse these two concepts in the qualitative analysis (Seale 1999; Bashir, Afzal, Azeem 2008). Another aspect that reliability aims at measuring is the consistency of the data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornill 2009) that is obtained when the same results of one specific study could be reached from different researchers. The recordings of the interviews have been realised also in order to operate coherently with this goal. The description of the path followed to extrapolate meaningful information from the data has the same purpose. Furthermore, interviewees have been asked to confirm the quotation used into the research in order to ensure that the meaning of their words has not been misunderstood. Robson has acknowledged in relation with reliability four risks: participant's error, participant's bias, observer's error and observer's bias (Robson 2002 as cited from Saunders *et al.* 2009). The first concerns the factors that alter the ways in which participants perform, the second regards those aspects that bring to a false response, the third deals with the factors that modify the researcher's interpretation, and the fourth is about the elements that include biases in the researcher's comprehension of the responses. (Saunders *et al.* 2009) Some actions have been implemented as an attempt to limit them: for instance, the fact that the name of the interviewees is kept anonymous is used to avoid the respondent's error. The pilot test has underlined the risk of a misunderstanding in the question on the willingness to pay in the experiment: a better explanation has been added in order to remove the respondent's bias. In order to reduce the possibility of an observer's error, some choices have been made: for example, a structure of the interviews has been realised and maintained throughout the work. Moreover, the interviewed have been selected following specific criteria such as the strong and long-lasting passion for the outdoor sports. In addition, there have been attempts aimed at reducing the observer's bias: every interview has been analysed following the same procedure. The author has taken notes during the discussions with the interviewees and he has always listened the recordings in the following three days. Furthermore, the most important concepts have been summarized and compared with the other major findings previously emerged.

4.2.2 Validity

Validity in qualitative researches maintains difficulties that are similar with the ones of the reliability. In general, it is “concerned with whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about” (Saunders *et al.* 2009: 157). In order to enhance the validity of the study, the structure of the interview has been pilot-tested to understand whether the prepared questions were appropriate to deal with the elected topic in a proper way. This test has emphasised some aspects that needed an improvement: for instance, the risk that interviewees could perceive the willingness to pay as their assessment on the price of the product has been understood and, because of this, a precise explanation on the concept of willingness to pay has been introduced. The choice to conduct interviews in the mother tongue of the interviewees whenever possible has been done also to be consistent in relation with this issue, because interviewees were more facilitated to express concepts that they have in mind using the language that they know better. In the end, in relation with the theoretical part of the Thesis, the highest part of the articles quoted comes from authoritative sources and journals in the field considered.

Finally, in relation with the generalisability of this study, it is fundamental to remark that the results could not be extended to strategic CSR policies applied out of the outdoor clothing sector: it is not the purpose of this study to obtain something that could be generalised outside of the context considered.

4.3 Sample of the Study

The people interviewed share a strong multiannual passion towards the mountains and for the outdoor activities in general. The belongingness to this category of people is very important because it permits to design a proper boundary that is fundamental in order to make the empirical findings be consistent with the case study previously defined. The long-lasting timeline of this passion has been introduced to ensure that the interviewed customer has a certain familiarity with the outdoor brands and a precise idea on them. People considered for the study have been selected following two procedures. The first

six people involved in this research has come from personal knowledge of the researchers: all of them could be considered as expert in the mountainous environment, and three of them work in fields that are related with it. Since the main part of the components of this group are Italian, a second mechanism has been introduced to contact people. In fact, following the advice of one of the interviewees, the researcher has participated to the 25th edition of “La Skieda”, a meeting of outdoor enthusiast which took place in Livigno, in the Italian Alps, at the beginning of April 2019: it has been able to attract enthusiasts from all over the world. During this event, some people has been involved in the research on a voluntary basis: they have been briefly informed on the main topics of the interviews without adding many details not to influence them. The participation to this meeting has been very useful also to widen the provenience of the people interviewed: it has been an effective way to keep the thematic focus of the investigation while enlarging the too narrow geographical provenience reached previously. The final sample is not a big nor a representative one- it is formed by 14 people- but it has been formed considering as the main criteria of selection the attention of the interviewee towards the mountains and the outdoor. Moreover, all the people involved in this research has decided to join it voluntarily. The saturation has been reached considering two main aspects: the sample should be balanced between Italian and non-Italian people, and the newness introduced by the last interviews should be so thin that the entire process could have been considered ended. This is the case, since a certain similarity with previous concepts expressed has been underlined in the final recordings. The interviews have been predominantly conducted face-to-face in places agreed with the interviewees. However, due to the impossibility to schedule a physical meeting with two of the people involved, Skype calls have been used as an alternative. The interviews have lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. The language used during the interviews is the Italian when the interviewees were Italian, especially to make them feel at ease, since it is suggested to create empathy and a sentiment of trust during the process. In the other cases, English has been elected as the most suitable one. The attempt to create a comfortable environment has been pursued also with the choice of maintaining their identity anonymous. Their permission to record the content of the meetings has been asked and they have conceded it.

Table 4. Sample of the Study

Number	Age	Occupation	Educational Background	Residence
1	24	Photographer	IED, Photography	Bormio (IT)
2	24	Student	Environmental Engineering	Teglio (IT)
3	38	Alpine Guide, Butcher	High School in Accounting	Grosio (IT)
4	26	Student	Economics	Milano (IT)
5	21	Student	Law	Saragoza (ES)
6	22	Student and Ski-Alper	Law	Bormio (IT)
7	25	Student	Environmental Science	Brescia (IT)
8	58	Entrepreneur	Business	Czech Republic
9	51	Sales, Partner Responsible	Engineering	Sweden
10	20	Student	Engineering	Germany
11	44	Kayak Instructor	Physical Education	Innsbruck, Austria
12	33	Dentist	Dental School	Lappeenranta, Finland
13	34	Doctor	Medicine	Biella (IT)
14	33	Athlete	High School	Moscow (RU)

5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This chapter aims at providing a description of the main results obtained through the interviews. The analysis has not been presented dealing with any singular proposition involved in the theoretical part, but it has been realised grouping some topics which were recurrent in the discussions. However, in general, the most of them could be reconducted to the content of the statements that need to be verified. Even if not every question was an open-ended one, as it is observable from the Appendix 1, interviewees have been often asked to explain more widely their point of view on specific issues: this aspect has led to richer insights on the issues proposed.

The empirical findings will be presented as it follows: first of all, an important consideration on the general knowledge of the customers on this topic will be presented. After that, the insights related with the sources of information and their reliability will be introduced. Later on, the general thoughts on the sectors more involved in CSR investments and the ones that regard the customers' preferences will be described. Furthermore, the main benefits that the firms could obtain by implementing these policies will be discussed. Finally, customers' beliefs on solutions alternative to the practices which are spread in the present time will be highlighted.

5.1 The concept of CSR

The first aspect that should be underlined from the analysis of the interviews conducted is that customers in the outdoor clothing sectors do not have a homogeneous comprehension of the Corporate Social Responsibility. In fact, for many of them it is not particularly clear the meaning of this term. It is possible to divide the answers in three groups: the first one is quite numerous, and it does not have any ideas on the meaning of this concept and, when they try to understand what it could be, they avoid making any guess or they are totally wrong in their attempts. This group is formed by the interviewee number 2, 4, 8 and 14. Among the others, the ones chosen could represent this in a proper way:

“I don’t know precisely what CSR is. It reminds me that products will be used by people and therefore you have to guarantee them a certain quality, a certain functionality and so this is a responsibility that producers have in relation with consumers”. (Interviewee n. 2)

“I don’t know what CSR is. I could imagine that it is a responsibility linked with the products of the firm. They could guarantee for instance a maximum number of falls for the ropes”. (Interviewee n. 4)

A second group of people have a vague idea about the topics involved in the CSR. Nevertheless, the people who are part of it have not been able to provide a structured definition of the CSR: they have tried to delimitate what CSR is about, but they have not said what it is. This group is the wider one: it is composed by the interviewees number 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12. The factor that has been presented the most is the environmental one.

“CSR is when brands are responsible with the wild and the nature”. (Interviewee n. 6)

“CSR is about green products: at the moment there is a lot of marketing behind it”. (Interviewee n. 10)

However, also the social aspect has been reckoned by some interviewees as a part that constitutes the concept of CSR. For instance:

“CSR concerns respecting human rights, being good with the employees and also the nature”. (Interviewee n. 12)

Finally, there is a third group, formed by the interviewees number 1, 3 and 13, that has tried to give a deeper and more structured definition of CSR. They have acknowledged both the social and environmental components of the CSR. For instance:

“CSR is how much a firm commits itself to realise its products in a sustainable way and to have a positive impact on the global economy also at a social level”. (Interviewee n. 1)

“My idea is that the product of a responsible firm must respect a certain ethics both in productive terms, and so in relation with the environment and

those who materially realise the product, and with the market proposal”.
(Interviewee n. 13)

Moreover, there is one case in which a wider commitment of the firm is required, since it is involved also a certain attention of the firms towards their supply chain:

“CSR is the responsibility that the firm has towards the environment, the employees and the entire supply chain used for the production of its clothing”. (Interviewee n. 3)

It is possible to notice that nobody has introduced in the personal definition some factors typical of the strategic CSR, such as the goal to create value with these policies and their importance in one firm’s strategy. Therefore, it could be derived that from the customers’ perspective, it is quite difficult to have an active comprehension of the difference between strategic CSR and CSR as a whole. A final factor that could be remarked on the definition of CSR is given by the strong division drawn by one of the people met, the interviewee number 9, between the concept of sustainability and the one of CSR:

“If you purchase something from a brand that is implementing CSR policies, then it will give something in return for specific project to save animals or doing something like that. I find CSR as a nice to have, but I think that customers are not that keen to validate that”. “Companies should invest on making products more durable: it is stupid to construct products which last for a short period of time”. (Interviewee n. 9)

It is observable that the definition provided in this case reconstitutes CSR to the highest level of the Carroll’s pyramid, that concerns philanthropic responsibility. In this sense, CSR consists more of projects not linked with the core business of one company, while the recent evolution of this concept has introduced a shift aimed at increasing the relevance of these practices in the life of one company.

These quotations have been introduced also to show the need that companies that want to invest in this field have: they must specify which are the goals that they are pursuing and give a definition to the actions that they want to implement. However, this part will be discussed more widely in the Chapter 6.3 in the section about the Managerial Implications.

5.2 The Information on CSR and the Reliability attributed to it

After having discussed what does customers in the outdoor clothing think about the concept of CSR, it is useful to understand how they inform themselves on the practices implemented by the firms in this field.

5.2.1 Information on CSR Practices

It is remarkable that the biggest part of the interviewees receives information in a passive way, while only a small minority of them search for news in a proactive way. This latter group is formed by the interviewees 9, 13 and 14: they approach their path to the research in three different ways, since the first has to control this kind of information at work, the second deals with an online research that could last for a long time, while the third uses websites, social networks and feedback from friends.

“I collect information on these issues on my own. For instance, I have discovered through my research the work realised from Patagonia on the traceability of the feathers used in their jackets. I didn’t receive any information on this in a passive way. I have used specialised websites that has moved me to video references and official websites of the firms”.
(Interviewee n. 13)

However, the vast majority of the customers receive information on these policies in a passive way. The most cited sources of information are social media, direct communication from the firms and the word of mouth caused by discussion with friends and experts. The direct social channels of the firms are quite often used by the customers as a source of information: many interviewees are updated on the practices implemented through this means. Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6, 11 and 14 declare that they follow at least one brand of the outdoor clothing on the social media and that this is one considerable channel able to provide them information. Another channel used to collect information on these practices is formed by the newspapers specialised on the mountains: they sometimes deepen the practices implemented by the firms using an external point of view, and they

are considered as a reliable source from the interviewee number 4 and number 10. Nevertheless, almost all the people interviewed in this study have acknowledged a problem of trust towards the news received in relation with corporate social responsibility.

“Since I have not deepened enough the aspect of the CSR, I am always quite suspicious on the information that I receive, also in relation to those brands famous for having invested a lot on this issue”. “I trust more about concrete practices on materials than other declarations of commitment”. (Interviewee n. 1)

“It is not possible to inform yourself on your own. You receive news from social media, and the news that come from social media in the last five years are not reliable. Therefore, you trust what the firm is saying, you fall in love with one brand and you hope that they strongly commit themselves to the idea that they would like to communicate”. (Interviewee n. 3)

It is also useful to understand if customers are interested in what happens in the entire supply chain or if they are keener on controlling only the actions undertaken directly by the firms. In general, customers inform themselves only on the policies implemented by the companies: this is mainly caused by the lack of means necessary to remain updated on the topic.

“I don’t check the policies implemented in the supply chain, and I don’t have any idea on how to do it, if it is not the brand that communicate it”. (Interviewee n. 7)

“I have never checked policies implemented by the suppliers of the firms because I don’t know any source to do so”. (Interviewee n. 13)

It is possible to observe that there are also customers that are convinced of the opposite. In addition, some of them consider the possibility to be informed on what happens in the supply chain as important as what is realised by the firm itself.

“Thanks to my personal experience I look also at the suppliers. If a firm communicate heavily on these topics and then it uses textiles that don’t have ecological provenience, one brand loses reputation. Textiles’ producers communicate a lot in this sense, it is their way of differentiating”. (Interviewee n. 1)

“I would like to check also the suppliers’ policies, because they are just as important as the firms’ ones. Companies can buy materials from places that are not ethical with the employees because they try to find the cheapest way to operate”. (Interviewee n. 12)

A factor that is, or would be, really appreciated to enhance the trust towards the practices implemented is the personal knowledge of the entrepreneur or of someone who has relevant roles inside the firm involved. However, this factor is possible when the firm considered is a small one or when the customer has obtained relevant results in a specific sport, and so he has started a collaboration with the company. In other cases, it is this lack of personal knowledge of the firms that causes a lack of trust.

“I have never realised research on these issues. Information arrives from the enterprise. I trust in particular representatives from Ski Trab and Campa because I know them, while if I watch an advertisement from Mammut for instance, then I only partially rely on them, since I don’t have a personal relationship with them”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“I don’t really trust any brand or any company that produces in places like China, because the reasons why they are there is the money”. “I just listen to what people talk, so it’s not very reliable”. “Personal knowledge is my base for trust when it’s about the money”. (Interviewee n. 12)

5.2.2 Certifications

One tool that has been introduced in order to make the trust towards the responsible practices increase are the certifications. There are different opinions on them: one group of people states that they would be influenced while purchasing, especially if they are able to understand the added value that the certifications would witness about the operations of the firms involved. Nevertheless, it is observed that there is not enough communication on them: there are many people that are not aware about any certifications, such as the interviewee 2, 4, 5, 6, 11, 14. An independent communication from certification bodies is asked to increase the perception of the truth behind it.

“I am not that informed on certifications. I give for granted that laws should be respected to sell the products on the market. I would trust the certifications

and I would be curious to understand what is behind them, but it should be easy to get information on them. Moreover, if I know that something exists, I could be more cautious about some aspects. It would be enough that one firm communicates the certifications gained to make me more careful to the practices implemented also by competitors". (Interviewee n. 2)

"All the big firms have a marketing office. I feel that certification bodies haven't, the customers are hardly aware of their initiatives and their product". (Interviewee n. 13)

The fact that they are not known by many of the interviewees shows how they could be potentially effective, but their actual present effect is limited. However, they could move one customer to prefer one product instead of another one.

"I don't check them as the first factor every time, but if I see that a firm owns an environmental certification, it could make me more willing to buy one piece of cloth instead of another one". (Interviewee n. 7)

The fact that they are independent source of information is assessed as their most appreciated quality by this first group: this fact could be used also to form a common pattern useful as a base to assess the behaviours of the companies:

"I perceive that certifications are more reliable because there is an independent authority that analyse any firms without making any differences among them". (Interviewee n. 4)

Another aspect that has been claimed as positive in relation with certifications is given by the fact that they are able to show in an easy and immediate way a certain commitment from the firms in relation with environmental and social stances:

"It is quite easy to observe a green label on outdoor clothing". (Interviewee n. 10)

A different group, instead, does not rely on them. In general, they acknowledge that certifications are able to demonstrate a minimum engagement towards a certain issue, but they are not enough to show a real and strong commitment that has the power to transform the firm. One of the people belonging to this group attributes her lack of trust to her

scepticism on different facts and questions the effectiveness of the market mechanisms behind them:

“I would be quite sceptical on certifications because it is possible to buy everything”. (Interviewee n. 12)

The other ones that do not trust that much certifications base their judgment on their own life experiences and on the need of the certification bodies to be profitable as well in order to survive.

“I don’t even look at TUV certifications because they are not reliable. I give a bit more attention to the ISO’s ones because they must respect some minimum requirements. For personal experience for other kind of certifications, it is possible to bypass them. You trust them a bit, but in the end, it is the trust toward the brands that matters”. (Interviewee n. 3)

“I don’t trust certifications at all because of my own experience. Many of the certifications institutes live on companies that provide them business and therefore it’s very hard for them to be tough and to say what must be done. They are depending on each other”. (Interviewee n. 9)

Finally, it is interesting to notice that this last interviewee has questioned not only the power of the certifications, but also the role of the companies in being the leading force able to introduce the change in relation with environmental issue:

“I believe that the change will come from the consumers. My daughter, she will demand better solutions, and not only in the clothing industry”. (Interviewee n. 9)

5.3 Sectors in which CSR investments are spread and required

Another topic that needs a deeper discussion is the one aimed at analysing which is the field more involved in the present forms of CSR practices, but also which is the field towards whom the interest of the customers is the highest.

5.3.1 Diffusion of CSR Practices

First of all, it is noteworthy that there are different thoughts in relation with the diffusion of CSR policies. There are customers that do not perceive any kind of investments, while others think that they are less relevant in relation with the effort put to communicate them. It is remarkable that the points of view included in this group are radically different: in fact, the first interviewee considered in this part of the analysis does not care about CSR in general, while the second one would be interested in real CSR investments sustained by the firm and, even more, in a change of the paradigm behind the companies' actions. The general thoughts of these customers on the spread of CSR in environmental and social fields are briefly presented as it follows:

“I don't perceive that companies in the outdoor clothing sector are investing in CSR”. (Interviewee n. 8)

“Companies are not investing in any of these two fields. I guess that one tenth of the investments is in CSR and environmental issues and nine tenth is more into marketing, communication and influencers. Everything related to that is done to sell more”. (Interviewee n. 9)

Apart from this small group of people, a bigger one perceives that companies are mainly investing in environmental issues. The cause behind this is generally reconducted to the intrinsic bond that the outdoor clothing industry has with the environment as a wide stage where its products are consumed. Moreover, a stronger sensibility of the customers towards this topic in comparison with other industries is expected and it is considered trendy to invest in this field.

“I think that firms primarily invest in the environmental field, because they are linked with the environment thanks to their own activity and it is in their own interest to create an awareness that the environmental issue exists and that their production is potentially harmful for the environment”. (Interviewee n. 4)

“I think that nowadays firms are investing more in the environment, because these brands live in the environment”. (Interviewee n. 6)

“I think that firms in the outdoor sector are investing in CSR because a lot of people expect them to do so”. (Interviewee n. 10)

“I hope that these brands invest in CSR because they are really committed, but I perceive that it is also mainstream now to do so”. (Interviewee n. 1)

It is also interesting to notice that in diverse cases, all of them linked with the brand Patagonia, the environmental policies have been quoted as the only ones that has come to the customers' minds: it has happened for the interviewee number 10 and 11. Other customers able to recognise different aspects of the CSR have quoted the commitment of this firm to the environmental issue: they are the interviewee 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12 and 13.

“I would only know from Patagonia that they are doing a lot of marketing in Austria at the moment to communicate what they do. They support us in environmental defence of the rivers. Moreover, we can bring our clothes back and they repair them”. (Interviewee n. 11)

It is also important to remark that the dimension of the effort recognised to the firms is different inside this group: even if someone perceives that the vast majority of the firms are trying to deal with these issues, others are persuaded that these investments are at their beginning.

“I perceive that firms are investing on an embryonal level, at least in my perspective of average consumer, for what concerns the environmental level, and not in the work's and employees' issues”. (Interviewee n. 13)

Inside the group that acknowledge a wider attention toward the environmental issue, there are also customers that have noticed in the recent past the tendency to an increasing awareness on the social issue. The following ones are sentences able to witness this aspect:

“I feel that the environmental side of the CSR is a bit more considered nowadays. However, the awareness on the social one is increasing: for instance, I have just come back from the ISPO exposition and the communication of big firms such as Patagonia have been focused on the social problem”. (Interviewee n. 1)

“CSR firms are investing in CSR both for the environment and for the employees. The first one is more common, only in the Scandinavia there is a strong commitment for the quality of the life of their employees because of a cultural aspect: they don’t live to work, also because of the lack of the light for a certain period of time, while in other areas it is different”. (Interviewee n. 3)

Moreover, there is an interviewee that, while recognising stronger efforts in the environmental area, criticises the production choices of the entire industry, which is considered guilty to produce in the developing world in order to cut costs and to avoid stringent regulations on the workforce.

“I know that some firms are trying to give the impression that they are doing a lot for the nature, but they are still producing in the same places as everybody else, so I don’t know what is the real difference”. (Interviewee n. 12)

Finally, there is a small group who perceives stronger investments in the social sector. They share one aspect: the actions considered by these customers are philanthropic, rather than strategic, and they are more directed to the wider community that surrounds the company rather than to just the employees. For instance, the causes quoted are sportive associations or sports in general. The interviewees 5 and 14 form this group:

“When we look to some brands that provide telemark stuff, some of them are supporting competitions and championships. It means that these brands support some activities that are relevant for us, while others don’t. It means that they have attention to details, while others haven’t”. (Interviewee n. 14)

This means that for them social activities are not only the most spread, but also the ones that they would require to the firms. Another factor considered to distinguish the importance of the different causes is the closeness that they have with the customer: the closer they are to the subject, the more likely it is that they are requested and positively supported.

“The actions that have the strongest influence on me are the ones that touch me more personally. It is easier that I am more touched by social actions, because it is more likely that some people that I know is helped, otherwise they have an equal importance”. (Interviewee n. 5)

5.3.2 Most required CSR Practices

The most common thoughts on the different relevance that social and environmental practices have consist of a balance between these two issues: they are generally considered as equally important. Many interviewees underline how they are supposed to exist together, since they are strongly connected.

“I think that these two sectors are strongly interrelated and that they have the same importance. The two problems are strongly linked and there is the possibility to solve only one of the two only temporarily”. (Interviewee n.2)

There are two cases in which the interviewees, while stating the premises mentioned before, notice that, even if in theory environmental and social policies have the same importance, in practice the environmental ones are the most rewarded because they are more common in the outdoor clothing industry and they are the most verifiable ones.

“I think that both are really important, but if I were the CEO of one brand, the environmental would be the most important because they need the environment. Personally, even if I don't think about it a lot, I think that both are important”. (Interviewee n. 6)

“CSR has an impact especially in the environmental level, because, thanks to the new technologies developed, I like to support those brands that are investing in this field. I would be happy to support also investments that concerns the employees, but it is difficult to do so since the production is realised abroad. I would be glad to do a responsible choice in this sense, but the working conditions there are less verifiable”. (Interviewee n. 7)

In the end, there is also the opinion that at least the southern Europe is more influenced by the environmental investments because a stronger communication has been done on this issue, while the most important should be the social one.

“I am more interested in the policies implemented at the environmental level because nowadays they are the most spread. However, I should be more focused on the social level: when people are healthy, then they are able to start reasoning on the people around them and by consequence to live in a

healthy environment. I do the opposite because I feel closer the environmental issue rather than the social one on a cultural level". (Interviewee n. 3)

5.3.3 Consistency between CSR Practices and Personal Ideals

Another aspect that could be analysed through this section is devoted to assessing the importance of the consistency between the firms' and the customers' value in the purchasing choice of the latter ones. It is observable that a great part of the interviewees has underlined this as a fundamental criterion while buying any goods in the outdoor sector. Some of them has observed that it is impossible to find firms that behave in a perfect way, but that it is a duty of the customers to try to understand which of the companies is doing the least possible compromise. Moreover, the particular relevance of this factor for this industry has been emphasized:

"I cannot think that I am choosing any company that stands for anything that I disagree with". (Interviewee n. 9)

"I believe that those that love the outdoor should have a greener footprint since they are by definition nature lovers. I think that the possibility to own a piece of cloth that has contribute to pollute the environment doesn't make any sense". (Interviewee n. 13)

5.4 Possible Advantages derived from the CSR Policies

5.4.1 Brand Reputation

The first advantage that could derive from the implementation of CSR practices which will be investigated through this study is the overall improvement of the brand reputation. There is a big group of interviewees that agrees on the fact that CSR policies are able to enhance the reputation of one brand and that, implicitly, this factor could increase the customers' willingness to pay, an aspect that will be analysed later. It has been reckoned that the implementation of these practices gives value to the firm at different levels:

“CSR is not used as the main criterion of choice while purchasing, but it could contribute to move the preferences towards one specific brand. It gives value to the perception that you have of a firm both on a conscious and unconscious level”. (Interviewee n. 1)

The aspect that diverse interviewees have recognised to the structured implementation of this kind of actions is the increased credibility: practices undertaken are considered in a more positive way than declarations of commitment toward a specific cause. Credibility could have an impact also on other factors, such as the perceived quality. In addition, they could represent a mature firm’s sensibility towards the recent evolution of the market.

“The CSR policies give credibility to the firm; therefore, I could trust the firm and so I perceive it as a high quality one. Because of this, even if one product has not a perfect comfort, it is still fine for me, since it is giving me something else”. (Interviewee n.3)

“I think that CSR policies influence my thoughts on the brand. It means that firms are aware of what the market is asking, that is not anymore only the outlet price, especially in the outdoor sector, which intrinsically has an ethic”. (Interviewee n. 13)

However, it is important to notice that some limitations on the effect that a high brand reputation can have on the customers’ willingness to buy. Two aspects related with this issue that has emerged are the stronger relevance attributed to the bad reputation and the time needed to observe the benefits of the CSR policies.

“Positive CSR practices have a smaller effect than negative practices implemented by one firm. I would be less influenced from them: it is more likely that I don’t buy from someone that does something harmful”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“I think that social responsibility has a good influence in the long run. If I were the CEO of these brands I would take care about this. Maybe in the short term it doesn’t have a big importance”. (Interviewee n. 6)

Another issue that could be linked with the credibility, the brand reputation in general and the purchasing choice is the consistency between firms’ practices and firms’ ideals. It has been recognised that it is difficult to behave coherently in the entire amount of the operations implemented, but also that sometimes avoidable mistakes happen. Customers

that are more influenced by the implementation of CSR policies choose those firms that accept the least possible compromises.

“It is ironic that a firm that speaks about sustainability behaves in a hypocrite way. For instance, sometimes they communicate these positive practices through videos realised in the slopes with helicopters or using a big fleet of cars and contacting many Sherpas. Another practical case comes from France: in an event that talk about sustainability, there are firms that pretend to support these causes and build a trampoline and artificial snow. It doesn't make sense”. “If you are a big firm, it is not possible to be consistent at 100%, you have to accept compromises. You choose one firm that accept some compromise, but that manages to safeguard important aspects”. (Interviewee n. 3)

It is possible to observe that a majority of customers assess with attention the consistency of one firm's declared commitment with the real policies implemented. This is observable from the reaction that customers have while discovering that a brand has been involved in a scandal. Many of them would lose faith in the company: they would stop purchasing from this specific brand and they would not believe in actions aimed at repairing the damage created, because these attempts would be perceived as efforts to rebuild a positive image of the company and not as a real new commitment towards the CSR issues.

“If a firm is involved in a scandal, this is very harmful for its reputation. Following investments in CSR would be a mere attempt to limit the damages caused by it. The reputation could be regained only in the long run”. (Interviewee n. 4)

“I usually choose firms investing in CSR rather than boycotting those brands that don't do that. However, if a firm is involved in a scandal and tries to repair through CSR practices, I attribute more weight to the initial mistake, since these investments are forced by the necessity to rebuild their image”. (Interviewee n. 7)

However, there are also few exceptions to these thoughts. For instance, one customer observes that he would not be that moved from minor scandals: in case of a brand that he used to trust, he would think that there could be the possibility to repair them.

“If I trust the firm involved in the scandal, I think that it is a mistake, and mistakes are human. If I don't trust the firm, I think it is just another brick in

the wall. For instance, Norrona has been involved in a scandal some years ago because the environmental impact that they had in recycling plastic bottles to realise t-shirts was higher than realising a product from scratch. However, they have noticed this aspect, they have stopped that kind of action and they are now restarting a real eco-sustainable recycling". (Interviewee n. 3)

Finally, there are also customers who declare themselves as possibilist in trusting firms that have understood their previous mistakes. Nevertheless, this could be linked with the seriousness of the previous mistakes and with the goodness of the actions directed to repairing the wrong ones. For instance, one interviewee observes:

"I believe in the apologies. I don't like boycotting and hating one brand, I would only think about what I want to support". (Interviewee n. 6)

Furthermore, some customers do not perceive that the reputation that they have of some brands could be linked with the implementation of CSR policies. This is mainly due to the questionable reasons behind them. In fact, as it has been partially introduced before, these customers have observed that the main factor behind the CSR policies is the marketing. Moreover, they have criticised the fact that the business model of the companies most known for these practices and the geographic areas in which they locate their production are the same of their less responsible competitors. The interviewee number 12 sustains this thought, as it has been previously quoted: she perceives any investments in CSR as ineffective and, in the end, false because she knows that choices about production sites are done just considering where it costs less to produce and where there are the less stringent rules on the workforce. In general, these factors cause a loss in trust towards them and they are the reason why there is not a real growth in the reputation of these brands.

"Even brands with good stomach feeling about CSR issues are living on selling products. The sponsored people that they have in their own portfolio are very important also for the brand, but that has anything to do with sustainability and environmental issue, it is more marketing and sales". (Interviewee n. 9)

In the end, it is useful to notice that, in general, CSR policies have the power to enhance brand reputation, and this could have beneficial consequences for the firms, such as an increased willingness to pay.

5.4.2 *Willingness to Pay*

The effect that CSR practices have on customers' willingness to pay has been checked in two ways: through questions and through a practical experiment.

5.4.2.1 *Questions on Willingness to pay*

It is observable that almost everybody declares themselves as willing to pay more for a product that comes from a responsible brand. Only one interviewee states that he is not.

“Since I don't care about the CSR policies, I am not willing to pay more for a responsible product”. (Interviewee n. 8)

Moreover, there are two other interviewees that should be convinced about the effectiveness and the true commitment behind CSR policies before being willing to pay more for a product. In their case, one more time, the biggest problem related with CSR practices is the trust conceded to the firms:

“CSR could influence my willingness to pay. If they can convince me that their product is produced in the best manner and that the company is giving something back to the society in any way, then it could be the case”. (Interviewee n. 9)

“I think that CSR investments affect my willingness to pay. If I really know that they are really investing on it, if I know the people that are working on it, if I know exactly where the materials are coming from and so on, then I would buy their products at a higher price”. (Interviewee n. 12)

There is one last customer that has declared that he is not totally sure that his willingness to pay is affected by the implementation of CSR policies while buying outdoor clothing. The reason behind it lays in the non-rationality of the purchasing choice. However, he

believes that the CSR policies adopted can enhance the brand reputation, and so that the improved brand reputation can move one customer to spend more for one product.

“I believe that my willingness to pay is more linked with unconscious factors rather than with conscious ones. After thinking about it, I have never been that convinced that it could push people to spend more. It is possible that it does it, in the sense that it gives value to the brand and this moves people to spend more”. (Interviewee n. 1)

All the other interviewees agree without any doubts that they are willing to pay more for responsible products. However, almost all of them agrees that there are other factors that are more important in the purchasing choice. For instance, the quality should be the same and the prices must be quite similar, otherwise CSR practices are not enough to change the purchasing choices of the customers.

“I am willing to pay something more for a responsible product. It is less important than the quality in my purchasing choice, but it is more relevant than the versatility and the made in”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“I think that my willingness to pay is higher for those firms that implement CSR policies. I would pay a little more for them, but not that much, because on the other side I think that a lot of things are more important, and I would expect efficiency and so a quite stable price”. (Interviewee n. 10)

However, it is important to notice that the implementation of CSR policies could have an effect that is smaller than declared. This could be caused by the aforementioned aspects and by the fact that some customers have admitted that they have never purchased one product because of the CSR commitment of its brand.

“I have never bought products considering the ethical behaviour of one company in my purchasing choice”. (Interviewee n. 6)

It is also remarkable that there are customers who have a more radical approach. They are available to renounce to some quality in order to buy responsible quality. For them, the implementation of CSR practices is a relevant factor in the purchasing choice: they prefer to buy a smaller number of products, but with a higher quality. Moreover, they

acknowledge the price as a factor that could indicate the strength of the commitment towards CSR in general:

“If one piece of cloth is 10 for quality, but it is harmful for the environment, and another one is 8 qualitatively speaking, but it is sustainable, then I prefer to buy the second one”. “If the price is high, then I think that it is more likely that good practices are really implemented, while if it is low I know that they have to cut something. How can a cheap product be sustainable and provide a profit?”. “CSR practices influence my willingness to pay. I prefer to buy one less jacket and to know that this firm is maintaining a high standard level in relation with these issues. For instance, I like the policies to repair products which could last longer”. (Interviewee n. 3)

“I am partially willing to pay more for responsible products. If the product is out of the market for its price I think about it, but I am willing to make an effort, because I understand that the firm is making an effort as well, since other firms that do not invest in this field are able to offer a cheaper product and this is not a fair play”. (Interviewee n. 13)

In this case, the entire choice of purchasing could come from CSR practices implemented by the firm:

“I have bought a jacket from Patagonia because it has been the first firm to provide the traceability of the feathers. I have chosen it because of this, I didn't want to have a fur”. (Interviewee n. 13)

5.4.2.2 Experiment on Willingness to Pay

The second procedures used to understand the effect that CSR practices have on the willingness to pay of the customers in the outdoor clothing sector consists of one experiment. Two different jackets, one from The North Face and the other from Patagonia, have been shown to the customers. A brief assessment on the general perception about the products, the brands, their investments on CSR and on the willingness to pay has been asked to the interviewees. Finally, a label provided by Zalando able to guarantee the sustainability of the Patagonia's product has been introduced and a second evaluation of the willingness to pay for this jacket has been investigated. Therefore, this experiment is aimed at understanding not only the effect of

CSR practices on the willingness to pay, but also the relevance of the certifications in this sector.

The results of the experiment are quite interesting: in general, the interviewees have a stronger awareness of the CSR investments of Patagonia: almost every interviewee is aware of their commitment towards CSR causes, while it is the opposite for The North Face. Moreover, its brand reputation is generally higher than the North Face's one- it happens in 13 cases out of 14- even if both are quite high. Nevertheless, there is also one interviewee that perceives The North Face as a low-quality brand and that has an overall neutral judgement on Patagonia.

“Patagonia is better than North Face, but I think that on one hand it tries to be the good guy on the market with a nice management idea, but still they live on selling products. There is a parallel with the alcohol in Sweden: they advertise you not to buy, but still they are selling. They realised the campaign of “Don't buy our jacket”, but they also realise other ads to increase sales. It is quite inconsistent”. (Interviewee n. 9)

The willingness to pay for Patagonia's product is higher in 9 cases out of 14, but this is due to different aspects and not only to the CSR investments: for instance, this product is considered as lighter and more appealing by many customers. However, there are also two cases, given by the interviewee number 4 and number 7, in which there is a higher willingness to pay for the product of The North Face. The first of these two is paired with a slightly higher brand reputation of The North Face. The second one, instead, is more related with the specific features of the products:

“I would spend a bit less for the Patagonia's jacket, because I perceive that it has a weaker resistance to the low temperatures”. (Interviewee n. 7)

In other cases, the previous experience of products coming from this brand is determinant. Moreover, there are other factors wider than CSR and sustainability that affect the willingness to pay: for instance, a more ethical behaviour is reckoned to Patagonia:

“I am willing to pay a little bit more for Patagonia because it is feather, it is related with the treatment of the animals”. (Interviewee n. 10)

It is also very interesting to observe what happens after showing the certifications that guarantee the sustainability of the product: even if some customers increase their willingness to pay, others do not, mainly for two reasons previously considered. The former is the brand reputation: Patagonia is already well-known for its efforts in this field, and because of this, a certification is not needed to enhance the good results already achieved by the company’s communication. In fact, the customers’ awareness of Patagonia as a brand that cares about sustainability is already high. This is true for the interviewee 1, 2 and 11.

“My previous higher willingness to pay for Patagonia’s product was already taking into consideration this thing. This is a confirmation that my ideas were right on their higher commitment towards environmental issues”. (Interviewee n. 2)

“I wouldn’t pay more because I was already convinced about the fact that Patagonia is a sustainable brand”. (Interviewee n. 11)

The latter, instead, is the reliability of the certification. It has been questioned that Zalando could be considered an independent authority able to provide a trustworthy certification, since it lives on selling these products. The ones that have emphasized this issue have declared themselves as interested in deepening the aspects involved in the assessment realised to give the certifications: if the improvements linked with one product are believed to be relevant, then these customers would be willing to pay more for the sustainable jacket.

“I don’t trust Zalando because I don’t like purchasing on internet. Nevertheless, if I extrapolate it from Zalando, I am happier to pay the asked price when there is this label rather than paying more”. (Interviewee n. 3)

“If I decide to spend more for one certification, I would inform myself better rather than trusting Zalando’s certification. I would like to buy a piece of cloth that has been studied to be sustainable and not only with sustainable components. I would be willing to pay 50€ more”. (Interviewee n. 7)

There are also customers willing to pay a bit more even if they do not trust that much Zalando as a society reliable in the quality of a certifier:

“I am willing to pay 190 € with this certification. However, Zalando is not an independent authority and, since it is an enterprise, it could have advantages in selling more Patagonia. With another certification, the difference could be wider”. (Interviewee n. 5)

Two tables aimed at showing customers’ answers to the experiment are provided: they can give a complete perspective on what it has been assessed in determining the willingness to pay and on the reaction to the certification.

Table 5. Answers on The North Face’s Jacket

Number	Opinion on the Product	Opinion on the Brand	Awareness on CSR investments	Willingness to pay	Main factor considered
1	Neutral, old style	Positive	No information	120 €	Materials
2	Slightly positive	Slightly positive	No information	175 €	Adapt to the winter
3	Slightly positive	Value for money, it is good	Nothing done for the environment	150 €	Used to be technical leader, not anymore.
4	Strongly positive	Strongly positive, experience	Zero impact expeditions	300 €	Reviews, comfort, colours, versatility
5	Positive	Slightly positive	No information	150 €	Functionality, hinges and wristbands
6	Strongly positive, but overpriced	Positive, but too fashionable	No information	250 €	Materials, brand, warmth
7	Neutral	Neutral, not considered	No information	190 €	Standard, not new
8	Neutral	Slightly positive	No information	100 €	Aesthetic, weight
9	Neutral	Slightly negative, copied	No information	200 €	For Americans
10	Old fashion	Neutral, good price, not specialised	No information	200 €	Materials
11	Neutral	Positive	No information	250 €	Too big

12	Neutral	Neutral, no experience	No information	150 €	colours, first wear
13	Neutral	Slightly positive, less ethical	No information	250 €	Reviews, colours, lack of traceability
14	Neutral	Positive	No information	90 €	Weight, colours, dryness

Table 6. Answers on Patagonia's Jacket

Number	Opinion on the Product	Opinion on the Brand	Awareness on CSR investments	Willingness to pay	Main factor considered	New Willingness to pay	Reasons behind
1	Simple, slightly positive	Strongly positive, quality	Strongly communicated	230€	Quality, aesthetics	230€	Already aware of investments
2	Positive	Positive, desired	Stronger commitment than the others	200 €	Aesthetics, brand, hinges	200 €	Already aware of investments
3	Neutral, bad sewings	Strongly positive, trust	Strong awareness through WOM	275 €	Brand CSR	275 €	Lack of trust in Zalando
4	Positive	Positive	More than The North Face, direct communication	200€	Materials, versatility	220€	Certification
5	Strongly positive	Positive	Environmental issues, politician	180 €	Sewings, hinges	190 €	Not independent
6	Strongly positive	Strongly positive	Initiatives for the environment	300 €	Materials, hood, brand	300 €	Price-oriented
7	Neutral	Positive	Careful to these issues	180 €	Less resistant to the cold	230 €	After more details
8	Positive	Positive	No information	150 €	More suitable	150 €	Not interested in
9	Positive	Slightly positive	Awareness on them	200 €	Light, compressible	200 €	Lack of trust in certifications
10	Slightly positive	Positive	Many initiatives, price too high	250 €	Repair, animals' treatment	250 €	More about treatment of the animals
11	Positive	Strongly positive	Investment in protecting rivers	300 €	More functional, brand	300€	Already aware of investments

12	Slightly positive	Positive	General awareness	150 €	Previous experience	160 €	After more details
13	Strongly positive	Strongly positive	Environmental issue, less on the social level	250 €	Colour, comfort, dimensions	270 €	Zalando could not certificate it
14	Slightly positive	Strongly positive	No information	110 €	Experience, design	120 €	Trust in certification

5.5 Different approaches towards CSR

This final section is devoted to investigating alternatives to the classical forms of CSR. It would be focused on the multi-stakeholder approach, that is linked with the theoretical debate between Porter and Kramer and Crane, Spence, Palazzo and Matten, and with the benefit Corporations.

5.5.1 Multi-Stakeholder Approach

A multi-stakeholder approach is in general really appreciated by the interviewees, even if there are some exceptions. In particular, the answers concerned with this issue could be divided in two groups: the first is the biggest one and it is formed by those people that prefer this approach for different reasons. A strong majority of the components of this group acknowledge the effectiveness of joining forces, competences and resources in the implementation of CSR policies. Some examples of these thoughts are the following ones:

“In my opinion, it is always better to collaborate with others because there are more people working on one cause and there is a stronger commitment. This could give a stronger trust towards one firm. I would not buy more than needed, but these aspects would be taken into consideration”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“It is a complex world, firms and groups collaborate often, also to ideate products, and complex problems should be solved mixing different points of view. My purchasing choice could be influenced if the different institutions involved are effectively collaborating in these projects and the added value that they could provide is perceivable and communicated”. (Interviewee n. 13)

Another possible reason behind this preference could be a cultural one:

“I love the cooperative approach, the people working together. This is also linked with my personal experience. It would affect my purchasing choice if I am aware of this approach and if the price of the products of these firms is comparable with their competitors”. (Interviewee n. 6)

A final motivation recognised during the interviews is the possibility to involve also small firms in the development of CSR projects thanks to the multi-stakeholder approach.

“I would prefer companies investing in CSR with partners also with associations from other fields. This because when you collaborate it is easier to do everything: this could reduce costs. Moreover, this give also the possibility to invest on this topic also to small firms”. (Interviewee n. 2)

However, it has been recognised that the multi-stakeholder approach is the most difficult to be managed and the less effective from a communicative point of view using the firm’s perspective. Moreover, it is difficult to understand the relevance of the adoption of this approach in the purchasing choice of the customers, since there are contrasting opinions in relation with this topic.

“I think that CSR policies are more effective while implemented with partners, because they could have a wider perspective. You can create a virtuous circle. Norrona is trying to do so. It is more difficult to communicate it for commercial purpose”. (Interviewee n. 3)

“I think that it is more effective that firms implement practices collaborating with partners. Nevertheless, I am not interested in the approach followed, but in the results obtained, since I am not sure if it can make a real difference”. (Interviewee n. 7)

There is also a second smaller group that perceives the action of a single firm as more effective in addressing one issue and, in general, as a more successful way to implement CSR policies. This is mainly due to the possibility to avoid the problems that could come from partners and so to the lack of necessity to make compromises.

“In my opinion it is more effective for one firm to work on its own at a communicative level. On an effectiveness level, it depends on the firms’ dimensions: a big firm could have stronger resources while collaborating, but it could also attack more directly certain kinds of problems if it works on its own”. (Interviewee n. 1)

“A firm investing on CSR in a personal way is better, because this choice gives me a stronger image of the firm and because it has a personal spirit which could shape the choices done and I can appreciate the path followed and the lack of influence from the stakeholders”. (Interviewee n. 4)

Finally, there is also a customer that questions the disruption brought in the CSR world from the multi-stakeholder approach. He states that, in his opinion, firms should implement something more radical if they want to give real answers to the needs that are behind the CSR’s and the sustainability’s issues.

“We can assume that market is changing, consumers patterns are as well, there is disruption everywhere. I believe that if I was the CEO, I would reconstruct the company, the entire value chain, and I would start renting instead of selling products. Therefore, the best that firms could do is to switch towards circular business and sustainable business rather than producing as cheap as possible in China and to sell with the maximum possible profit”. (Interviewee n. 9)

In the end, it is possible to say that the multi-stakeholder method is appreciated by a huge part of the customers, but also that it is controversial to understand the dimension of the implications that could derive for the firms.

5.5.2 Benefit Corporation and b Corp

It is important to analyse customers’ opinion on the benefit corporations and the b Corp. First of all, it is noteworthy that nobody, among the interviewees, has in mind the meaning of these concepts.

“I don’t know what the benefit corporations are”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“I have never heard about benefit corporations and b Corp”. (Interviewee n. 4)

However, it is observable that, after being informed about these, the interviewees seem interested to them, even if with some limitations. For instance, it is acknowledged the relevance of the cause addressed by the firm in the possibility to influence the purchasing choice of the customers. Moreover, an interviewee has noticed that he is already buying from firms that have an approach similar to the benefit corporations even if he is not aware of this concept.

“If they support a cause to which I am sensible, then I would be more interested in them”. (Interviewee n. 7)

“I would be for sure influenced by benefit corporations, but I think that I am already purchasing from companies with the same principles and so maybe from these firms, even if unconsciously”. (Interviewee n. 13)

One issue that benefit corporations and b Corps have to deal with is that they share some of the shortcomings already experimented by the firms that implement CSR: for example, interviewees have emphasized the need to enhance the communication on this topic. In addition, even if it is reckoned the positive influence that this strategy of the firm could have on the purchasing choice, it is also stated that it remains a secondary factor.

“I would be interested in them, but I need to be informed on what they are if I want to give importance to them”. (Interviewee n. 5)

“Benefit corporations would not be massively important while purchasing”. (Interviewee n. 7)

The most important one is for almost everybody the quality, even if it is defined in different ways from the customers: they link it with security, material, lightness and resistance. Other important factors while purchasing are the price, especially for the youngest customers, and the brand.

“Brand is important because if I trust the brand, I believe in what it does. Quality is very important as well: it is defined in relation with durability and efficiency. This last one is formed by different factors such as the comfort, the lightness, the quality of the textiles and of the production, the satisfaction of

the needs related with the specific activities played by the customer”.
(Interviewee n. 3)

“Quality for me consists of durability, comfortability and security. Moreover, price is important: I am willing to pay a lot for products that last for a long time, but, since I am really young, I can’t spend too much and ask for additional aspects to the ones mentioned before”. (Interviewee n. 6)

Even if five interviewees, the number 3, 7, 9, 10 and 13, have mentioned environmental and ethical issues in their criteria of choice, only two customers have observed that they are willing to renounce to some quality in order to buy a responsible product, while in general CSR could be useful more when customers are indecisive between two different products.

“CSR is very important in my purchasing choice. I try to find a compromise. In certain cases, with certain products, if the materials and the production are realised in a responsible way, I am willing to renounce to something in terms of performance. This is true for the more generalist products, such as hoodies”. (Interviewee n. 7)

“If the product is similar, but one is investing in relation with the environmental and social issues, I prefer to buy from this one. However, investments in CSR cannot work if the product is not a good one”.
(Interviewee n. 4)

“CSR is not that important in my purchasing choice, but if I have this choice between two similar products, then it is possible that I select the more responsible one”. (Interviewee n. 10)

In the end, it is important to observe that companies which have done this choice must educate their customers on its relevance and that the authority that provide them the certification help them in providing reliable information to the population. However, these aspects will be investigated more deeply in the managerial implications.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section will be devoted to summarising the main results of the Thesis. The first part is aimed at verifying the consistency of the propositions introduced in the third chapter of this work. After that, an answer consistent with the empirical findings will be offered to the research questions. Later on, the managerial implications will be introduced, and the delimitation of the study will be clarified.

6.1 Check of the Propositions

After having analysed the most important findings obtained through the semi-structured interviews, it is useful to compare them with the propositions previously defined in order to understand whether they have been confirmed or they have been contradicted.

Proposition 1: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms are perceived to put similar CSR efforts in environmental and social issues.*

This proposition has not been confirmed through the empirical analysis. In particular, it was based on the study realised by Dargusch and Ward on the commitment that American firms have to the environmental, social and financial responsibilities. This paper found that the focus that firms have in these fields was balanced. (Dargusch and Ward 2010) This research, instead, shows something different, as it is noticeable from the chapter 5.3. There are customers that do not believe in the truth of the investments realised in these sectors. Moreover, a small minority perceives stronger efforts in the social field, in particular in supporting the communities of outdoor passionate and the sportive associations. Nonetheless, the engagement in causes related with the environment is perceived as stronger from many interviewees: in some cases, it is considered as the only one really implemented in practice, while others think that investments in this field are just at their beginning. The customers have acknowledged the role of the specific industry behind the preferences toward the environment: this is consistent with what was stated previously. In fact, as it is mentioned in the introduction, brands in the outdoor sector are

considered among the most ardent champions in sustainability (Franklin 2008). Moreover, the issues of the sustainability are particularly considered in the outdoor clothing sector. Therefore, it is possible to state that customers in the outdoor clothing sector perceives that the firms are investing more in the environmental issues rather than in the social ones. It is interesting to notice that the communication itself of many brands is almost always directed to the environmental sector. There are some cases in which the focus addressed depends on the communication's channel analysed: for instance, Patagonia tends to focus more on this issue in its social media, while it gives more attention to the social aspect, and in particular to the employees and the supply chain, in its website.

Proposition 2: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers partially trust the communication implemented by the firms in relation with CSR policies. However, certifications are useful to strengthen this trust.*

This proposition has been partially confirmed by the empirical analysis. As it is observable in the chapter 5.2.1, it has been reckoned by the interviewees that it is not possible to be 100% sure on the true commitment that firms should have in relation with the practices implemented. However, there are different approaches that are followed by the interviewees in order to solve the problem of the trust. Some of them decide to believe in specific brands: these customers are not certain of the full consistency of the practices implemented with what they desire. However, there are factors that could facilitate the trust towards one brand. The personal knowledge of the entrepreneur or of employees that work for one brand has been quoted as a possible means through which enhancing trust. Nevertheless, it is possible to have it only in a small amount of cases, in particular when the firm involved is a small one or when there is a friendship with athletes or people deeply into this world. Other interviewees have stated that they do not trust the communication of the firm because it is partial. In relation with this aspect, it is noteworthy to observe that some interviewees believe that for instance Patagonia is communicating more than what is doing and so that the reputation of this brand is not enhanced by the CSR practices implemented. This is consistent with the study of Bhattacharya and Sen which stated that customers do not like when they perceive that

CSR is sold to them (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). Some other interviewees, showed in the paragraph 5.2.2, have observed that it is more likely to believe in a certification, because it is provided by independent authorities and so it is able to guarantee rules that are common for any player on the market. Other customers have introduced different beliefs: they have questioned the reliability of the entities that are assessing the respect of determined rules by the firms. This has happened mainly because these institutions have to work and to be profitable, and, in order to do so, they cannot be too tough with the firms under investigation. Therefore, even if certifications provide an improvement in terms of reliability, it is possible to notice that they are not the final solution to the problem of the lack of trust to the CSR policies: there is the need to work in order to obtain more effective mechanisms of assessment. This is coherent with the already quoted thoughts of Russo and Harrison, which stated that certifications are not enough to guarantee the respect of the people and the environment that should be protected (Russo and Harrison 2005).

Proposition 3: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers desire slightly higher CSR efforts in the environmental sector.*

This proposition has been confirmed through the empirical analysis. As it is explained in the paragraph 5.3.2, there are different point of views among the interviewees. There is a very small group that appreciates a lot the implementation of social policies. The examples provided by these people involve the support of competitions and associations in the outdoor sports. These examples should be reconducted to those policies that answer to philanthropic responsibilities: in fact, the actions undertaken are not expected by the customers, but they are desired from them (Carroll 1991). Moreover, they could be considered as responsive policies, since the main goal of the companies that implement them is to act as good corporate citizens (Porter and Kramer 2006) One thought that has been repeated by the interviewees emphasizes the impossibility to choose between CSR investments in the social or in the environmental fields, because they are both considered fundamental. There is also an interviewee who states that, even if both kinds of practices should have the same importance, he accepts to observe a more spread usage of the environmental one because he understands that they could be more rewarded by the

customers in the outdoor clothing industry. Moreover, it is noticeable that many customers recognise the issues in the environmental sector as more perceived also because of cultural reasons at least in southern Europe, where it is quite common to consider the job as something not that pleasant that takes a lot of time. In addition, the solutions in this field are more required because they are considered as easier to be checked and, because of this, more reliable. In the end, it is possible to derive that customers in the outdoor clothing industry have on average a stronger desire for environmental policies and that the implementation of these is considered as more trustworthy and verifiable.

Proposition 4: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers appreciate those firms that implement CSR practices that are consistent with their own ideals.*

This proposition has been confirmed by the empirical findings of the study. In fact, it has been stated by different customers that they appreciate even more those firms that implement policies aimed at addressing issues close to their passions and interests. For instance, as it is written in the chapter 5.3.1, one interviewee has declared that he is more influenced by those actions that touch him personally. This is consistent with Sen, Du and Bhattacharya, who stated that “consumer affinity or support for the CSR issue is a positive moderator of consumer responses” (Sen, Du and Bhattacharya 2016:72) and that customers identify themselves with those brands that they like (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Moreover, another customer has declared that he has bought one jacket because of the traceability of its feathers, a CSR policy not implemented by any other firm on the market which has moved his preference. Another aspect already considered in the theory that has been demonstrated through this study is the following one: it exists the possibility that one customer that share values with the company that he is purchasing from does not give a strong weight to negative news on it. In fact, one interviewee has declared that he does not trust minor scandals that involve firms that he considers as reliable. In particular, this is consistent with the idea that the trust towards negative news on one brand is more unlikely when it invests on CSR (Bhattacharya, Sen, Du 2018; Du, Bhattacharya and Sen 2007). It is also noteworthy that customers in the outdoor clothing sector do not appreciate the idea to wear one product realised from one brand that stands for something harmful

for the environment or the community, as it is observable from the paragraph 5.3.3. Even in this case, the consistency between the practices of any outdoor clothing firm and the environmental needs is considered as fundamental, because it should be required by any customers, since they are passionate of the nature. Therefore, it is observable that relationships proposed by the general theory are true also for the specific sector of the outdoor clothing industry. One example is given by the fact that customers prefer to buy from firms that invest on CSR, especially if in sectors in which they have some interests (Du *et al.* 2007). In the end, the proposition could be considered as fully confirmed.

Proposition 5: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms that implement CSR practices are more remunerated by the customers if the policies implemented are consistent with companies' ideals.*

It is observable that this proposition has been confirmed by the empirical analysis. In particular, one customer has reckoned that it is impossible, at least for big firms, to operate in a way that is completely consistent with ideals that pay attention to the environment and the society. Nevertheless, customers that are affected from CSR want to buy those companies that accept the least possible compromise and that manage to safeguard important aspects in this field. As it is observable from the paragraph 5.4.1, the interviewees perceive inconsistency even in some of the events that should talk about sustainability and in the realisation of those materials that should communicate the efforts done in this sense. Moreover, it seems true that a positive fit between CSR policy and the company that implements it could provide a more positive response from the customers (Sen, Du and Bhattacharya, 2016). This study is able to show that it is even stronger the effect that a lack of fit could have on them. Emblematic in this sense is what could happen when a scandal emerges: many interviewees declare that they would be strongly influenced from it. For instance, one says that he is much more affected by negative policies implemented rather than the positive ones. Others, instead, affirm that they are more focused on the positive ones, but also that the involvement in a scandal would make them boycott the brand. Only a small minority of the customers interviewed answer that they are not that influenced by scandals. These findings are consistent with the negative relation that exist when there is a divergence between CSR communication and practices

implemented (Sen, Du, Bhattacharya 2016) and could exist together with the initial proposition and widen it. In fact, not only a firm is rewarded when its practices are consistent with the company's values, but also it is strongly penalised when the opposite happens.

Proposition 6: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the firms that implement CSR policies are rewarded with an improved brand reputation, while those firms that do not consider any investment in this field have a worse reputation, which in extreme bad cases could bring to the boycott of one brand.*

This proposition is generally confirmed by the empirical part of this study, even if the truth behind the second part is less clear. The effect that CSR policies have on the brand reputation has been assessed in the paragraph 5.4.1. Different factors linked with the brand reputation are nominated as derived from CSR: for instance, one customer realizes that these practices have an active influence on his perception of the brand, and that by consequence this could have unconscious effects also on other aspects such as the willingness to pay, that will be considered by the following proposition. The aspect underlined by different customers is the enhanced credibility of the firms that decide to implement CSR. For instance, two different interviewees mention this aspect, observing that this has also a good effect on the perceived quality and it makes them aware that the companies involved are more conscious than others about what customers in the outdoor clothing industry are asking to the firms. Therefore, these insights confirm the consideration about the credibility gained by the company at least in relation with the external stakeholders (Burke and Logsdon 1996). It is less evident the redeeming effect that the adoption of these practices could have for those firms involved in scandals: in fact, the majority of the interviewees would perceive this choice as a mere attempt to reconstruct a brand image. Moreover, some of them are willing to change their idea on one brand only in the long run. Nevertheless, there are costumers that consider those efforts that follow a scandal as credible if the dimension of the previous problem were small. By consequence, the scholars' considerations are partially confirmed (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008). Still, part of the proposition is not entirely true: interviewees take into account boycotting one firm only when it is part of a bad story: some of them

mention that they are intentioned to buy also products from firms that do not invest that much on CSR because of the features of the clothing considered. In the end, it is observable that some customers do not think that CSR practices are able to improve the brand reputation: this is caused by the fact that they are perceived as a marketing tool rather than as a means by which addressing environmental and social issues, but also by the decision to keep producing in the developing countries in order to cut costs. Therefore, the proposition is generally confirmed with the emphasis of some caveat.

Proposition 7: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, some customer is willing to pay a bit more for products that are more socially and environmentally responsible. However, it happens that a higher willingness to pay is often not translated in the purchase of the sustainable cloth.*

This proposition has been confirmed by the empirical findings. In fact, it is observable that the majority of the customers declare themselves as willing to pay more for products that are more responsible. This is true in 13 cases out of 14, even if the answers are more complex in some cases. For instance, one interviewee observes that his willingness to pay is not rational, but he perceives that CSR policies affect the reputation of the brands and this have an effect on the willingness to pay. Other two customers state that they are willing to pay more if the firms can convince them about the real commitment behind the actions implemented. For the other interviewees, CSR practices have always an impact on their willingness to pay. Nevertheless, there are different thoughts also among them: for instance, the relevance of this factor is different inside this group. There are customers that perceive this factor as marginal or at least less important than many others. Some of the people who compose this sub-group notice that they have never bought one product considering the CSR policies of the producers. There is also a smaller group that consider these practices in a relevant way while purchasing: they are willing to make an economic effort in order to buy responsible products and they prefer to purchase less rather than saving on any purchasing. They are also able to mention practical cases in which this criterion has been followed while choosing the most eligible product for the purchase. Therefore, it is interesting to verify that some findings already available from the previous theory have been confirmed. For instance, there are empirical studies that have

acknowledged the so-called “30:3 syndrome”: it observes that 30% of the customers declare to be interested in responsible practices of the firms, while these products only achieve a 3% of market share. (Grimmer and Bingham, 2012). Even if it is not the goal of this study to provide measurements of the phenomena analysed, it is possible to notice that the number of people that declares themselves as interested in CSR issues and as willing to pay more for products that care about them, that is 13 out of 14, is much bigger in comparison to the one that have already bought outdoor clothing because they were responsible- in this case only 3 out of 14. Therefore, a certain tendency towards declaring a commitment to these causes that is stronger than the real intention to purchase products that defend them is remarkable. Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that the interest toward CSR seems to be higher than in other sectors: this is also consistent with what it has been already described (Dargusch and Ward, 2010). Another important aspect mentioned by many customers is that, even if they are willing to pay more for responsible product, the difference in price should not be massive. This factor could show a certain coherence between the study of Kim and Damhorst and the one of Hustvedt mentioned in the chapter 3: there is a general growth in the willingness to pay for those products that improve the environmental quality of the clothes, but the growth of the price should be limited, otherwise the likelihood to buy responsible products diminishes. (Kim and Damhorst 1998, Hustvedt 2006). In the end, it is interesting to observe the results that come from the experiment, in particular in relation with the relevance of a certification while purchasing responsible products. The case used in this study has provided different results from the interviewees: some have increased their willingness to pay because of the certification. Others state that the brand used was already known for his commitment towards CSR causes and that, because of this, a further certification is useless and the willingness to pay does not increase because of it. There is also a group that question the reliability of the proposed certification and declare that it would trust a more independent one. Therefore, the certification could play a role in increasing the willingness to pay of the customer, but not for everybody.

Proposition 8: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the implementation of CSR policies has some impact in customers’ purchasing choice, but it cannot be the only added value of one firm.*

This proposition has been confirmed by the empirical findings. In fact, many customers have recognised a certain importance to the CSR practices while choosing the products to purchase, but at the same time they have admitted that in general it is not the first factor taken into consideration. The quality is thought to be the most important element required by the customers, but this is not enough to say that people are searching the same features in outdoor clothing, since quality is defined in different ways. In particular, it is reconducted to the lightness, the durability, the comfortability, the security, the functionality and the materials used in the production. There is not an overall agreement on which of these factors is the most important, even if the durability is the most common one. However, all the interviewee agrees on the fact that one product should be good in terms of quality and only two of them are willing to renounce to some quality in order to buy a responsible product. Another aspect to which a great importance is attributed is the brand: customers in this sector tend to be influenced by it. The CSR policies could indirectly provide value on this field, because, as it has been discussed before, it is able to increase the brand reputation. Many other customers have observed that they are glad to buy this kind of clothes, but also that social and environmental responsibility is not a feature required as mandatory. Nevertheless, it is considered as useful to decide between two products when the customer is indecisive about what product to buy. The results of this study in relation with this proposition are able to confirm also what it has emerged in previous researches: in particular, the inner words of one interviewee, reported in the paragraph 5.5.2, confirm that CSR could not be perceived as the only advantage that one firm is able to provide to its customers, otherwise it could not work (Meyer 2001). This means that the findings reached by this scholar are also valid in a sector that is particularly interested in the CSR field, as the outdoor sector is.

Proposition 9a: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the CSR actions promoted by different stakeholders are considered more effective by customers in comparison with policies developed by single firms, and, because of this, they are more rewarded.*

This proposition is partially supported by the empirical findings of this paper. In fact, many customers declare that they appreciate the implementation of CSR policies together with other stakeholders. Multiple reasons behind this are mentioned in the paragraph 5.5.1: customers recognise the opportunities that could come from joining resources and competences. This especially because the problems addressed are often difficult to be solved and different points of view, together with a wider base of resources, contributes to enhance the possibilities to create valid solutions for them. Another motivation that is strictly linked with this one is the fact that this approach is able to contribute to the involvement of the small firms in the application of CSR policies: this is judged as more feasible when collaborations among different partners are developed. In the end, a cultural reason is individuated as meaningful. The idea to work together is considered by one customer as the best to obtain effective solutions to the issues attacked. These points of view are consistent with the idea that Crane, Spence, Matten and Palazzo have of strategic CSR: in fact, they aim at “solving systemic problems of injustice that require broader solutions embedded in democratically organized multi-stakeholder processes” (Crane *et al.* 2014: 141). The customers agree also on the fact that an effective approach has the firm as a stakeholder that wants to cooperate in order to face the social or the environmental problem and not as the only entity that tries to solve it. In this way, customers seem to be closer to the Crane’s and Matten’s point of view rather than with the Porter’s and Kramer’s one.

By contrast, it must be noticed that some customers disagree: they perceive that a big firm working alone is more able to follow the strategy thought at the beginning and it does not have to accept compromise forced by the collaboration with other partners. It also gives a stronger image of the company involved, because a certain strength is shown to the market when a project is developed by a singular firm. Moreover, they acknowledge that this choice pays more dividends for the company, since it is easier to communicate investments realised in this way. The point of view provided by these interviewees is closer to the Porter’s one, since in their opinion the company must act on its own or “at the center of a stakeholder network” (Crane *et al.* 2014: 141).

Finally, there is also an interviewee that question the effectiveness of the multi-stakeholder approach in disrupting the sector: he observes that in order to find more sustainable solutions it is not enough to develop partnerships with any kind of stakeholders, even if they are NGOs. By contrast, companies must reformulate their business model if they want to effectively change the economic model that is spread today, which is based on the cheapest possible production and the unrestrained consumption. This customer has expressed, together with another interviewee, the fear that companies are investing more in the communication of the solution of difficult problems rather than on these issues, as it has been suspected also by Crane and Matten (Crane *et al.* 2014). The idea to reshape the company goes even further than what Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo have done in providing alternatives to the modern form of capitalism and it consists in something that is not available on the market until now in the outdoor clothing. The lack of this intervention could be considered as keeping the present approach, that see at least some of the corporations “to focus on the low hanging fruits of the easy win-win solutions instead of solving systemic social and environmental problems to which they are connected” (Crane *et al.* 2014: 140)

However, since even Crane and Matten recognise the relevance of the business case for CSR, it is fundamental to understand if the implementation of a multi-stakeholder approach could have a positive influence on the customers. The problems with the demonstration of the proposition are in this aspect: in fact, some interviewees have answered that it is more important the resolution of the problem addressed rather than the method used to obtain it. By contrast, there are others that state that are willing to reward even economically this choice, with few conditions: one interviewee have observed that the price of a product realised from a firm that use a multi-stakeholder approach should not be massively higher than its competitors. Another one observes that he is willing to remunerate this choice if the relevance of the other partners in the projects developed is properly communicated, otherwise there is the risk not to understand the added value that these diverse stakeholders could give. Therefore, it is possible to observe that, even if the majority of the customers agree on the effectiveness of implementing CSR policies with a multi-stakeholder approach, the evidences supporting the economic relevance of this strategy are less strong and, because of this, the proposition is only partially confirmed.

Proposition 9b: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers would like to reward more the policies implemented by a for-benefit firm rather than the ones of a classic capitalistic firm.*

This proposition is not supported by the empirical findings. The main cause behind this fact is a lack of awareness of the theoretical concept: in fact, there is nobody among the interviewees who knows what the benefit corporations and the b Corp are. After being informed on these, the interviewees show interest for them, but it is noticeable that they make considerations utterly comparable with the ones realised for standard firms that invest on CSR. For instance, one customer states that her attention toward one particular benefit corporation would be linked with the cause supported: this issue is consistent also with the theory of CSR, as it has been previously discussed. Another one observes that he would be interested in this form of companies, but also that he must be aware of them and so that a wider communication must be developed by them. In relation with the companies that has gained the b Corp certification, customers ask for a stronger communication and for transparency also to the entity that is providing this certificate. In the end, it is also stated that some customers would not be particularly influenced by the benefit corporations, while one that declares the opposite observe that he is already purchasing following similar criteria and so that the objectives pursued by the firm through the benefit corporations and the b Corp certification would reinforce his choice, but they would be an added value and not a fundamental element to be judged.

Proposition 9c: *In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the most rewarded firms are those that manage to make them identify with a specific cause.*

This proposition is partially supported from the empirical findings. This could be derived in particular from the observations done in the section 5.3.1, in the one focused on the willingness to pay and in the experiment reported in the paragraph 5.4.2.2. In fact, it is noteworthy that many interviewees have identified the commitment towards CSR issues in the outdoor clothing industry with the brand Patagonia. It remains to be demonstrated that this high awareness of the practices implemented is considerable as a cause of success

of one firm. The analysis of the experiment makes comprehensible that the brand Patagonia is generally more appreciated than The North Face's one. Some interviewees add that the former is among their favourite ones. The CSR involvement and the philosophy of the firm are often quoted as the features that create this high brand reputation, together with the high quality of their products and a good previous experience with clothes from this company. On the other hand, the latter is less appealing for the outdoor enthusiast because it is perceived as more commercial, but also because its products are assessed as slightly less performing. In 9 cases out of 14, the Patagonia's higher brand perception contributes to a higher willingness to pay for its jacket in comparison with a product that is sold on the market at the same price. Even if the sample is too small to draw definitive conclusion on this issue, it could be thought that being well-known for CSR engagement could enhance one's brand reputation and, by consequence, it could provide an economic reward to the firm that has made this choice.

Table 7. Propositions

Number	Proposition	Confirmed/ Not Confirmed	Main Customers Supporting it
1	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms are perceived to put similar CSR efforts in environmental and social issues.</i>	Not Confirmed	
2	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers partially trust the communication implemented by the firms in relation with CSR policies.</i>	Confirmed	3, 4, 11
2	<i>However, certifications are useful to strengthen this trust.</i>	Partially Confirmed	2, 4, 7
3	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers desire slightly higher CSR efforts in the environmental sector.</i>	Confirmed	3, 4, 6, 7, 13
4	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers appreciate those firms that implement CSR practices that are consistent with their own ideals.</i>	Confirmed	9, 13
5	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, firms that implement CSR</i>	Confirmed	3, 13

	<i>practices are more remunerated by the customers if the policies implemented are consistent with companies' ideals.</i>		
6	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the firms that implement CSR policies are rewarded with an improved brand reputation.</i>	Confirmed	Everyone except 8, 9 and 12
6	<i>Those firms that do not consider any investment in this field have a worse reputation, which in extreme bad cases could bring to the boycott of one brand.</i>	Partially Confirmed	4, 5, 7
7	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, some customer is willing to pay a bit more for products that are more socially and environmentally responsible.</i>	Confirmed	Everyone except 8.
7	<i>However, it happens that a higher willingness to pay is often not translated in the purchase of the sustainable cloth.</i>	Confirmed	2, 4, 6
8	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the implementation of CSR policies has some impact in customers' purchasing choice, but it cannot be the only added value of one firm.</i>	Confirmed	4, 6, 10
9a	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the CSR actions promoted by different stakeholders are considered more effective by customers in comparison with policies developed by single firms.</i>	Confirmed	Everybody except 1 and 4
9a	<i>Because of this, they are more rewarded.</i>	Partially Confirmed	5, 13
9b	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, customers would like to reward more the policies implemented by a for-benefit firm rather than the ones of a classic capitalistic firm.</i>	Not Confirmed	
9c	<i>In the European market of the outdoor clothing, the most rewarded firms are those that manage to make them identify with a specific cause.</i>	Partially Confirmed	Everybody except 4 and 7

6.2 Answering the Research Questions

The comparison of the initial propositions with the empirical findings is also functional in order to answer the initial research questions. The goals of this Master Thesis were multiple: a primary one was to realise a literature review of CSR. Many different approaches to the concept of CSR have been provided in order to introduce the major contribution to the debate on it and on concepts strictly linked such as sustainability and triple bottom line (Carroll 1979; Carroll 1991; Freeman 1984; Elkington 1994; Elkington 1997). In particular, the more recent developments have been analysed with attention: the strategic CSR has been discussed together with the CSV and the discussion on the difference between these two concepts has been presented (Porter and Kramer 2006; Porter and Kramer 2011; Crane and Matten 2014). Finally, the latest juridical form of corporation, that is the benefit corporation, has been considered as a possible practical example of firms that follow a multi-stakeholder approach. Moreover, the certification able to witness the results grasped from this commitment, that is the b Corp, has been presented.

After having introduced these aspects, that are more theoretical, the Thesis has adopted the customers' perspective on CSR issues as its focus. In fact, another goal of this work has been to understand the relevance that these CSR practices have for the customers in the outdoor clothing sector. This industry has been chosen mainly for two reasons: the first is that it provides a research gap, since there is a lack of study on the relevance of the CSR in the outdoor clothing industry using the perspective of the customers (Woo and Jin 2016). The second one, instead, is linked with the relevance that this sector gives to the topic of CSR and of sustainability, both in terms of the interest of the customers and of the practices implemented by some of the firms operating in this market (Franklin 2008; Dargusch and Ward 2010). The analysis implemented following this approach gives the possibility to answer to the main research question, structured in three sub-questions.

RQ1: *What are the concrete effects that the implementation of CSR practices has on the customer in the market of the outdoor clothing? Are these practices able to create a competitive advantage?*

The effects that the implementation of CSR practices has on the customers in the outdoor clothing industry are diverse. The first one, that is the most spread, is a general enhancement in the brand reputation. In fact, customers tend to appreciate the commitment of the companies toward causes related with the environment and the society. In particular, customer attributes more credibility to the companies that adopt these practices, and this is reckoned as a factor able to limit the trust in negative information on the firm involved in a scandal, a phenomenon also called as resilience (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). The improved brand reputation derived from CSR policies could also be a cause behind a higher willingness to pay for responsible products: one customer has linked these two aspects, since he has recognised that the purchasing process is more irrational rather than rational in his experience. Interviewees in general have declared that they are willing to pay more for products realised from brands that invest in CSR, even if there are different points of view on the relevance of the CSR as a criterion of purchasing choice: some customers consider it as fundamental, while others reckon that there are other aspects much more important for them. This is quite different from what some papers in the literature are mentioning for the market as a whole, since it is stated that customers are willing to buy responsible products, but only a few of them accept to pay more for these purchases (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). However, the results are more similar to recent studies which show that more than one customer out of two in Europe is willing to pay more for a responsible brand (Nielsen, 2015). Nevertheless, there are features of the policies implemented that can increase or decrease the interest of the customers towards them. For instance, even if customers appreciate the implementation of CSR practices in general, they admit that their personal involvement in the causes in which companies are investing could have a stronger influence on their purchasing choice. This is consistent with the previous theory (Sen *et al.* 2016) and it means that policies linked with the customers' life are more rewarded by them in the outdoor clothing industry. It is noticeable that customers in this sector are strongly concerned about the environmental issue, and so policies implemented in this field are positively assessed.

Moreover, customers appreciate philanthropic support towards sportive clubs and competitions: even if it is not a form of strategic CSR, it has been mentioned as an investment able to have an influence in the purchasing choice of the customers. Another aspect that could enhance the effectiveness of the CSR policy is the consistency between the CSR policy and the customer's ideals. In particular, interviewees do not like to buy from companies that stand for something that they disagree with and, by contrast, they look for companies that they trust. The factor of the trust towards the implementation of CSR practices and towards the communication of the firms in general is a problem that has strongly emerged in this study. Many interviewees have emphasized that it is very difficult to find reliable sources, but the reaction to this fact could be different: some people decide to fall in love with one brand and to rely on it while collecting information also from athletes or other people into the outdoor environment. Other interviewees remain sceptical, because they are aware that every company could communicate whatever is advantageous for itself. In order to understand the relevance of alternative solutions, the certifications have been introduced to understand if they can enhance the trust for one firm and so, by consequence, a meaningful improvement of the willingness to pay. The perspectives of the interviewees are diverse: a certain tendency towards a higher trust for certifications is observable, especially because practices implemented by different firms are assessed by the same entity using only one set of criteria. In this case, the certifications provide a positive effect, since they enhance the reliability of the commitment of the firm involved. However, there is also a significative group that do not trust certifications, criticising the fact that they are commissioned to the institutions by the firms themselves. Moreover, personal experience in different sectors is mentioned to show their lack of usefulness. In the end, the experiment has shown that they do not provide added value to those firms already well-known for investing in CSR: in that case it is the brand perception, rather than the certification, that has a stronger influence on the willingness to pay. Therefore, it could be observed that the implementation of CSR policies has a positive effect on the customers and that it often has the power to affect the purchasing choice. It is difficult to say if they are able to create a competitive advantage: since the adoption of these practices improve the brand reputation and increase in general the willingness to pay, it seems that the adoption of these policies meant in the Porter's form of strategic CSR is able to differentiate the company from its competitors.

Therefore, firms that focus on CSR could gain a competitive advantage that should be stronger in the outdoor clothing industry in comparison with other ones. However, some observations need to be underlined: as it has been already demonstrated with the “30:3 syndrome” (Grimmer and Bingham 2013), it happens that the commitment that customers declares to have for responsible products is not transformed in sales for firms that behave responsibly. The existence of a niche of customers truly interested in these products has been proved through this analysis, since three customers state that they often buy with this criterion. Nevertheless, a quantitative analysis is more indicated to address this kind of issues and to understand the relevance in numbers of the customers that buy following these principles in the outdoor clothing industry.

RQ2: How is the positive effect that the implementation of CSR policies has on the customers' willingness to buy affected by other factors such as price, quality and previous reputation?

This study has demonstrated that customers consider the firms' commitment to CSR while purchasing outdoor clothing. It is a matter of fact that this factor is not the most important one. Many interviewees have mentioned the quality as the most relevant one in their purchasing choice, but it is interesting to notice that it is defined in many different ways. The features used more commonly to explain its meaning are the durability, the materials, the security, the comfort, the lightness and the functionality. It is noteworthy that the implementation of CSR policies is relevant only when the product assessed is considered as a good one in terms of quality. In fact, only a few customers are willing to renounce to some qualities in order to buy a responsible product and one of them declares that she would do so only for less specialised clothes. By contrast, the majority of the interviewees remark that they would consider the issues of social and environmental responsibility when they are indecisive between different products to be bought only in the case in which the considered ones have a comparable quality, otherwise CSR is neglected. The effect that price has on the purchasing choice of the interviewees is ambiguous: there are many customers that do not care particularly about it. They are generally the ones that are more strongly linked with the mountains. Moreover, one interviewee that belong to this group states that it is a good indicator able to show the real

commitment of one company towards CSR issues: in his opinion, it is not possible to sell one product at a cheap price, to be profitable and meanwhile to be responsible toward the environment and the society. Others have underlined the bond between the price and the durability of the clothes and their quality in general. On the other hand, there are also customers who cares about it, especially the youngest. They would be interested in buying responsible products because they perceive these issues as important, but at the same time they consider the ones available on the market as too expensive. In the end, it is important to observe that part of the first group, together with all the components of the second one, analyse this aspect before purchasing products from firms that invest on CSR practices. It means that they do not want to spend much more for this type of clothes. Therefore, also the price is relevant for what concerns responsible products: interviewees in the outdoor clothing industry would like to buy them if the difference in price with their competitors is a small one. The previous reputation affects the influence that CSR policies have on the customers in particular when it is a negative one. The interviewees do not trust the investments in CSR done from those firms previously involved in a scandal: they are perceived just as attempts to rebuild reputation and they are not believed. A stronger relevance is given to the bad actions rather than to the attempt to remedy it, and this is consistent also with the previous literature (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). A different perspective emerges for firms that could exploit a good reputation: in this case, their involvement in a minor scandal is considered as a temporary mistake and not perceived as a lack of real engagement to the environmental and the social practices. Nevertheless, the effect that previous reputation has in the purchasing choice of the customers is less relevant than the previous ones, since nobody has any memory about a big scandal in the outdoor clothing industry.

RQ3: In the outdoor clothing market, do customers reward firms' policies when they only consist of projects implemented by the single firm or do they appreciate more when there is a collaboration with partners? Do customers require policies that deal with the entire modus operandi of the firm? Do they look for something more radical than CSR?

It is possible to observe that in general customers prefer the projects realised by the companies in collaboration with other partners. This mainly because the resources and the competences involved in this way are wider, but also thanks to the possibility to engage through this method small firms in the development of CSR policies, fact that is not considered that common in other cases. Therefore, the approach supported by the customers seems to be closer with the one of Crane, Matten, Spence and Palazzo rather than with the Porter's and Kramer's one, because they perceive as important the contribution given by partners. Nevertheless, it is not easy to understand the relevance that this approach could have in the purchasing choice of the customers. In fact, some of them underline that the factors of the price and of the quality are still considered also in the case of those firms that decide to work on CSR together with other partners and that these factors come earlier than anyone else. The impact that benefit corporations and b Corp could have on the customers is considered as similar to the previous ones, since there is not enough awareness on these two concepts to attribute them a stronger commitment to environmental and social causes in comparison with normal firms that invest in CSR on their own.

However, one customer stresses the need for an approach more radical than CSR. In his opinion, companies that really care about sustainability and social issues have the duty to change their business model, switching its basis from a cheap production associated with a fast consumption to the sharing of the products in order to produce less and so to harm less the environment in particular. In his opinion, firms must be reshaped, and responsible causes must be kept in mind throughout the entire amount of the operations. Moreover, he is convinced that young customers are moving their preferences and so their money to those companies that behave following these principles and the companies in many sectors have not understood this, not even in a sector linked with the environment as the outdoor clothing industry is.

Therefore, it is noticeable that the majority of the customers is not influenced by the approach used in implementing CSR practices and that this part appreciates any attempt to behave in a more responsible way. Still, it exists a segment more concerned about the causes behind CSR actions: this group is critic on the policies followed nowadays because

it judges them as more symbolic than effective. By consequence, it wants a more radical approach and it is convinced that in the future this new model will be more spread.

6.3 Managerial Implications

This study is aimed at understanding the relevance that CSR practices have in the purchasing choice of the customers in the outdoor clothing industry. Because of this, some findings could be useful also for the managers in this field.

First of all, the results concerning the willingness to pay highlight the fact that almost all the interviewees are willing to pay more for responsible products, even if quality and price are two variables that need to be taken into consideration. Therefore, it could be advisable for those companies in the outdoor clothing industry with managers that care about environmental and social issues to invest on CSR projects when they have a competitor that provides a similar product at a similar price. However, as it is stated in the previous literature and confirmed from the study, a real commitment is required, because customers tend to penalise those firms that pursue only profit maximisation with these practices. By contrast, they would reward this effort if the quality of the product is kept at a high level and the price does not suffer a wide change.

Moreover, the role of the communication of the actions undertaken is massively important: a reliable communication should be implemented by the firm itself. Companies should define precisely what they mean for CSR, the goals that they have set to achieve through the implementation of these policies and the paths done in practice. Furthermore, the adoption of certifications could be assessed, and a precise information on what they mean and what is the added value that they could provide to the customer is required by the customers themselves in order to trust them: it has been proved through this study that it exist a niche of passionate that tries to be updated on these issues and that would appreciate news on it.

In the end, a more effective communication is mandatory for those companies that decided to become benefit corporations and for the ones that receive the b Corp certification. It is clear that outdoor clothing customers lack the awareness on them. Nevertheless, after being informed briefly on the main features of these two, the more involved in CSR declare that they would appreciate also the legal choice of the benefit corporations and the certification of the b Corp. This choice could be more effective for one firm that is trying to improve its operative policies rather than for a company already known for its responsible behaviour: as it has been shown by the experiment, the willingness to pay of many interviewees is not affected in that case.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

This study suffers from a number of limitations. First of all, even if the interviewees share a strong bond with the mountains, people with different experiences have been included in the sample. For instance, some of the interviewees work in the mountainous environment, while others are only passionate. However, some precautions have been applied: the first six people that have been contacted share an uncommon passion to at least one sport practiced in the outdoor. The other eight interviewees have been selected from the participants to one event that is famous worldwide in the telemark sector. This choice has been made in order to shorten the differences among the interviewees: the need was to avoid tourists that only rarely go to the mountains. On one hand, it is a dangerous approach since a great part of the people that go to the mountains is removed from the study. On the other hand, it has been made on purpose, because it has been presumed that people that are used to frequent quite often this environment are the ones that purchase clothes with a higher frequency.

After that, it is important to remark that the small dimension of the sample has derived from a precise choice of the researcher, since the analysis realised is a qualitative one and not a quantitative one. Therefore, the main goal has been to collect rich insights on the factors that influence the purchasing choice of the customers and on the relevance of the CSR in the outdoor clothing industry rather than to collect data able to provide statistical

generalisation of the importance of these aspects and these policies. Therefore, it has been possible to understand the factors that the interviewees consider while buying, but it is not possible to state that they are valid and true for the entire population of the outdoor enthusiast in Europe. In addition, it is impossible to use the results of this study to measure the dimension of certain phenomena such as the growth in customers' willingness to pay. By consequence, it is also difficult to understand the relevance of the competitive advantage gained through CSR practices: in fact, the improvements that a firm could gain through them and the possible reasons and limitations behind them have been individuated, but their dimension could not be quantified through this study.

Moreover, the lack of education on this topic has created a barrier for this study: the concept of CSR was not clear for a huge part of the interviewees. Therefore, it has been quite difficult to understand whether customers were speaking about the same issues during the interviews. In order to reduce these risks, the most important factors involved in the strategic CSR policies have been mentioned to the customers that were not aware of them. Furthermore, personal experience of some of the customers met has shaped the idea of CSR towards a concept more linked with philanthropy rather than with its latest evolution of strategic CSR. The lack of an agreed definition of CSR in the literature could be among the causes of the difficulties to understand the meaning of this concept for the society as a whole.

In the end, an important limitation to this study is given by the topic addressed. In fact, the results of previous studies on the willingness to pay and on real purchases of sustainable products have been quite inconsistent, as it has been previously shown (Nielsen 2015; Conrad and Kambara 2018). This could derive from the ethical issue behind this study: customers do not want to show themselves as irresponsible or to be judged for their behaviour. In order to diminish the dimension of this limitation, interviewees have been informed that they would have remained anonymous and they have been asked politely to respond through a description of the real reasoning that they do while purchasing.

6.5 Topics for Future Research

The research gap that has been the starting point of this study was the lack of papers adopting the customer's perspective with the goal to understand the relevance of the CSR in the outdoor clothing industry. This study has contributed to understand that customers in this field are generally willing to pay more for responsible products, and also to gain insights on the influence that other factors such as the quality and the price have in the purchasing choice of the customers. However, it could be interesting to measure quantitatively how much customers are willing to pay for responsible products and to compare it with the standard ones. Furthermore, it could be meaningful to draw a parallel between the outdoor sector and the other ones, in order to understand the effective attention that customers in this field have and to discover if a stronger commitment to the CSR policies could start from this market. Moreover, the relevance that customers of the outdoor clothing industry attributes to the certifications could be quantitatively investigated so that managers could understand whether or not it is useful to invest on them.

In the end, being inspired from the observation provided by this study that some customers are desiring more radical approaches to solve the issues addressed from CSR, it could be developed a study with the goal to understand the dimensions of this group of consumers. This should be realised on young customers in the Nordic countries, because the youngest could be the most influenced by this issue: for instance, there is a sustainable report that shows that the percentage of people willing to pay more for sustainable products is higher for millennials: almost three customers out of four in these ages declare this (Nielsen 2015). The geographical delimitation of the study is thought because the Nordic countries are on the top of many different tables that assess the implementation of policies that care about the environment. Moreover, one iconic figure that is trying to boost the awareness on these issues is Greta Thunberg, a young girl that comes from Sweden. She is admired by a huge crowd of young people in the same country according to the interviewee number 9. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether a revolution in the way of consuming could come from the young customers starting from the outdoor clothing industry.

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2 APPENDICES:

Appendix 1. The Structure of the interview.

Part 1.

1. General data: name, surname, age and provenience.
2. What is your bond with the mountain?
3. Which factors do you consider while purchasing mountain clothing? Why?
4. How important is any of these factors in the purchase of one product?
 - 4.1 Brand: which weight do you attribute it in your choice? Do you trust the fashion, your previous experience, the word of mouth or other aspects? Why? (during the interview, I name the factor and add the other part only if it is needed).
 - 4.2 Comfort: which aspects do you consider in assessing the comfortability of one product?
 - 4.3 Price: is it a relevant factor in your purchase? How much does it influence you?
 - 4.4 Quality: how do you define it?
 - 4.5 Versatility: do you like products which could be used in different occasions?
 - 4.6 Durability: do you choose products which last for a long time?
 - 4.7 Made in: do you check the origin of the product that you want to buy? Are you affected by it?
 - 4.8 CSR: do you know what is it? Does it matter in your purchasing choice? Why? Do you ask for it to the firm where you are buying?
5. Do you perceive that firms in the outdoor sector are massively investing on CSR? In which field specifically? Explain.
6. How do you collect information on it? Do you inform yourself on your own? Do you trust what firms are advertising on this topic? Do you consider those campaigns trustworthy or do you perceive them as false and misleading? Explain.
7. Do you check if firms have gained certifications on CSR issues? Do you trust these certifications? Do they affect your willingness to buy?

8. Do you appreciate if the firm tries to collaborate with other players (competitors, NGOs, customers) in order to achieve more effectively one specific goal, or do you mind only about “individual” investments? Do these kinds of investments have the capacity to influence your willingness to buy? Explain.
9. Do you control if CSR policies are implemented also throughout the supply chain or do you mind only about the firm itself?
10. If you give importance to CSR, do you choose firms which invest on CSR or do you boycott those firms which have a bad reputation in relation with this issue? Do you boycott also companies that do not care about their suppliers?
11. If you are influenced by these actions, which ones do you care more of? Why? What is your reaction when you observe that a CSR that you care more of has been implemented?
12. Does it happen that you use as a criterion of choice or of preference the implementation of investments in these topics? How important is this criterion in your purchasing choice?
13. Do these actions have an influence on the brand perception/reputation? Why?
14. Do you check if the firm is involved in some scandal or unethical practice and if the implemented actions are consistent with the ideals and the market in which the firm is?
15. In this case, do you reward these actions, or do you punish the involvement in previous scandals?
16. Does it happen that you buy products because of the philosophy behind the firm? If you know that a firm has put on its statute the effort to reach a specific goal for the society and that it has been assessed on the creation or the destruction of value for it, what would be your reaction? Would this affect your willingness to buy the products of this firm? Explain.
17. Does this philosophy influence your willingness to pay of one product?

Part 2: Experiment.

The interviewee observes two products with similar features without knowing that they are sold at the same price on Zalando. Moreover, he/she can observe the referrals that

other customers have given on them, the different colours with which they are sold, and the materials used during the production. He/she is asked for each product:

18. How do you assess the quality of this product?
19. Aesthetically speaking, do you like this product?
20. How long do you think that this product could last? (or, “in relation with the aspects that you have emphasized in answer number 4, what is your opinion about these two products?)
21. What is your opinion on the brand of this product?
22. How much do you think that this brand is investing on CSR?
23. How much would you pay to buy this product?

After a while, the label “sustainable” that Zalando has created for Patagonia’s products is shown: it is used to guarantee that the products of one brand are realised using sustainable materials. It is also observable that the same has not happened to The North Face.

24. Do you change your willingness to pay for Patagonia’s product?

Appendix 2. The Images used for the Products

Product 1: The North Face



DETTAGLI TAGLIA E FIT SPEDIZIONE **RECENSIONI (34)**

COMPOSIZIONE E ISTRUZIONI DI LAVAGGIO

Composizione: 100% nylon

Materiale dell'imbottitura: 90% duvet, 10% piume

Fodera: 100% nylon

Fodera: Imbottitura calda

Elementi non tessili di origine animale: Sì

Avvertenze: Lavaggio a macchina a 40 gradi, Lavaggio delicato

DETTAGLI PRODOTTO

Colletto: Foderato

Chiusura: Cerniera

Tasche: Chiusura a cerniera, Tasca interna

Codice articolo: TH322T005-K11

THE NORTH FACE [+ SEGUI](#)

Product 2: Patagonia

Caratteristiche

Robusto tessuto esterno realizzato in 100% in poliestere ripstop riciclato, dotato di trattamento DWR (idrorepellente a lunga durata)

Piuma Tracciabile Advanced Global 800-fill-power (piuma d'oca certificata da NSF International, che ne garantisce il monitoraggio dall'allevamento delle oche parentali fino allo stabilimento di confezionamento, per avere la certezza che non provenga da oche e anatre sottoposte ad alimentazione forzata o a spiumaggio da vive)

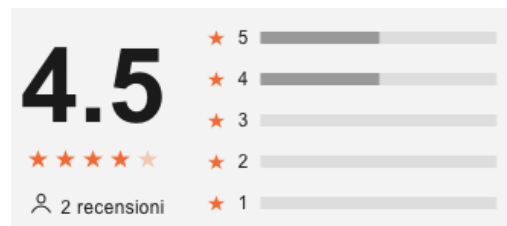
Cappuccio regolabile con un unico movimento; zip Vislon® centro-frontale dotata di flap di protezione interno traspirante (con alloggiamento per la zip) per la protezione e il comfort del mento

Le due tasche scaldamani di sicurezza si chiudono con zip Vislon® dotate di alloggiamento; la tasca interna con zip sul petto può essere utilizzata come sacca di contenimento e ha un'asola interna per moschettone

Comodi polsini elasticizzati con bordo in nylon che impediscono la dispersione del calore

Orlo regolabile con stopper nella parte frontale

428 g

**SOSTENIBILE****Eco-sostenibile**

Questo marchio è stato introdotto da Zalando per evidenziare gli articoli realizzati con fibre e materiali a ridotto impatto ambientale o di provenienza sostenibile come TENCEL® / lyocell, lino, canapa, fibre riciclate e cotone del Better Cotton Initiative.