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Environmental and social programmes and rapidly growing retailers

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Abstract

This paper looks to provide an exploratory review of the extent to which the world's fastest growing retailers are publicly reporting on their environmental and social commitments and programmes. The paper begins with an outline discussion of corporate environmental and social programmes and on public reporting processes. The paper draws its empirical material from the most recent information on environmental and social commitments and programmes posted on the world's top twenty fastest growing retailers' corporate web sites. While the majority of the world's top twenty fastest growing retailers provide some public information on their commitment to environmental and social programmes there is marked variation in the extent, the nature and the detail of that information. The findings suggest that the integration of environmental and social programmes is not one of the hallmarks of rapidly growing retailers and in part this reflects the fact that many of the selected retailers are trading within emergent markets where price and availability are the principal factors driving consumer buying behaviour.

Keywords-rapidly growing retailers, environmental and social programmes, emergent markets.

Introduction

The vast majority of the leading and well established retailers at the global level increasingly acknowledge the impact that their activities have on the environment and on the communities in which they operate. More specifically they report on a wide range of environmental and social initiatives they are undertaking or planning in their annual corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability reports and many of them claim to be integrating environmental and social responsibility commitments into their core business strategies (Jones et. al 2011). In the 2013 *'Global Responsibility Report'* published by Walmart the world's leading retailer, Mike Duke, the company's President and Chief Executive Officer claimed, for example, that *'going forward you can expect even deeper integration of our responsibility initiatives into our business'* and that the company looks *'to put sustainability right at the heart of what we do as a retailer'* (Walmart 2013). However Richardson (2008) argued that while *'the sustainable business concept has gained credence featuring in academic, consultancy and practitioner texts'* retail academics have *'not prioritised sustainability.'* More recently Fuchs and Kalfagianni (2009) have demonstrated how retailers reshape sustainability discourses to *'legitimise their presence as political actors in global food governance'*, Kotzab et al (2011) have developed a scale designed to measure environmental supply chain activities and Jones et al (2011) have provided an exploratory review of the sustainability agendas being pursued by the world's leading retailers.

Newly emergent retail companies might traditionally have looked to develop their initial strategic thinking focussed around themes such as target markets, the development

of a sound operational base, operational flexibility, supply chain management, product and service assortment, customer service and location (Coca Cola Retailing Research Council 2010; Walters and White 1987). That said RetailCustomerExperience.com (2011), identified one of the eight characteristics associated with successful new retail concepts as the integration of *'social and environmental programs into the brand.'* Here the argument is that such companies *'have the advantage of creating a brand rather than adopting an established brand and thus can credibly build this dimension into it'* (RetailCustomerExperience.com (2011). With this in mind this paper looks to provide an exploratory review of the extent to which the world's fastest growing retailers are publicly reporting on their environmental and social commitments and programmes.

Environmental and Social Programmes and Commitments

During recent decades an ever growing number of companies have looked to address environmental and social issues, to develop a range of environmental and social commitments and to integrate these commitments into their business practices and strategies. The principal vehicle for the development of these activities has been as an integral part of corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability programmes and strategies. In theory corporate social responsibility and sustainability are different and contested concepts. The former being typically defined, for example, as *'a view of the corporation and its role in society that assumes a responsibility among firms to pursue goals in addition to profit maximization and a responsibility among a firm's stakeholders to hold the firm accountable for its actions'* (Werner and Chandler 2005). Diesendorf (2000) has argued that *'sustainability'* can be seen as *'the goal or endpoint of a process called sustainable development.'* The most widely used definition of sustainable development is *'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). However in practice many companies have used these concepts, sometimes interchangeably, to capture and publicise their environmental and social commitments and achievements.

A variety of factors have been cited to explain companies' increasing commitment to environmental and social programmes. These include the need to comply with a growing volume of environmental and social legislation and regulation; concerns about the cost and scarcity of natural resources; greater public and shareholder awareness of the importance of socially conscious financial investments; the growing media coverage of the activities of a wide range of anti-corporate pressure groups; and more general changes in social attitudes and values within modern capitalist societies. More specifically a growing number of companies are looking to publicly emphasize and demonstrate their commitment to environmental and social agendas in an attempt to help to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enhance corporate brand reputation. However it is important to recognise that a number of critics have seen the growing business interest in environmental and social programmes as a little more than a thinly veiled and cynical ploy, popularly described as *'green wash'*, designed to attract socially and environmentally conscious consumers while sweeping pressing environmental and social concerns under the carpet.

During the past decade reporting on environmental and social commitments and programmes has become an increasingly important business imperative as *'stakeholders are demanding more transparency and companies themselves are under increasing competitive and regulatory pressure to demonstrate a commitment to corporate responsibility.'* In a similar vein, Rangan et. al. (2012) suggested that many companies have increasingly become *'concerned with how to bring coherence to their CSR programmes and how to measure and report on the social and environmental values in an authentic fashion.'* Growing numbers of companies are publishing annual corporate social responsibility and sustainability reports which cover a wide range of environmental and social commitment and achievements and while reports initially focused primarily on operations, they now also look at products and services from a life-cycle perspective.

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

In an attempt to obtain a preliminary picture of the extent to which the world's fastest growing retailers reporting on their environmental and social programmes within the public realm, the top twenty of *'the 50 fastest growing retailers'* (Table 1), ranked by retail revenue, from the report *'Global Powers of Retailing 2013'* (Deloitte 2013) were selected for study. The selected retailers are based in a variety of countries but many/the majority are based in emergent retail markets including South Africa, Russia, China, United Arab Emirates and Brazil and they embrace a range of retail formats including supermarkets, convenience stores, electronics speciality stores, discount stores and online retailing. X5, for example, is a leading Russian retailer, based in the west of the country, and it trades from over 4,500 outlets including a discount chain under the Pyaterochka brand, a supermarket chain under the Perekrestok brand, a hypermarket chain under the Krause brand and convenience stores under different brands. Wu-Mart, is a Chinese non state owned retail organisation founded in 1994 and principally engaged in the operation of supermarkets and mini marts in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei and the north west of the country. The Landmark Group, founded in Bahrain in 1973 operates within the United Arab Emirates and India has a diverse portfolio of retail brands which embraces fashion, electronics and home products and confectionary, a franchise from Auchan, the major French retailer, and an e-commerce mall. By way of contrast Wesfarmers, based in Australia, and formed in 1914 as a Western Australia farmers' co-operative, acquired the established retailer Coles in 2007, and its retail operations include supermarkets and department and home improvement stores.

Companies use a wide variety of methods to communicate and report on environmental and social commitments and programmes and the European Commission Directorate-General for Enterprise lists a number of methods that businesses currently utilise including *'product labels, packaging, press/media relations, newsletters, issue related events, reports, posters, flyers, leaflets, brochures, websites, advertisements, information packs and word-of mouth'* (European Commission Directorate-General for Enterprise undated). During recent years *'the importance of online communications as part of an integrated CSR communications strategy has grown significantly'* (CSR Europe 2009) and *'sustainability reporting has evolved from a marginal practice to a mainstream management and communications tool'* (Global Reporting Initiative 2007). With this in mind the authors undertook an internet search for material on environmental and social programmes using the key words 'corporate social responsibility' and 'sustainability', for each of the selected

retailers' corporate websites in October 2013 employing Google as the search engine. The precise patterns of navigation varied from one retailer to another but the information revealed by the search provided the empirical material for this paper. The specific examples and selected quotations from, and attributed to, the selected retailers' websites within this paper are used primarily for illustrative rather than comparative purposes, with the focus being on conducting an exploratory examination of the extent to which rapidly growing retailers are introducing environmental and social programmes rather than on attempting to provide a systematic analysis and comparative evaluation of these programmes.

In discussing the reliability and validity of information obtained from the Internet Saunders et.al. (2009) emphasise the importance of the authority and reputation of the source and the citing of a contact individual who can be approached for additional information. In surveying the selected retailers the authors were satisfied that these two conditions were met. At the same time the authors recognise that the approach chosen has its limitations in that there are issues in the extent to which a company's public statements realistically, and in detail, reflect strategic corporate thinking and whether or not such pronouncements are little more than thoughtfully constructed public relations exercises. However given the need to drive forward exploratory research such as this and to begin to understand the extent to which rapidly growing retailers are pursuing environmental and social programmes the authors believe that the Internet based analysis adopted in this paper offers an appropriate approach for this study.

Findings

The findings revealed considerable variation in the information the top twenty of the fastest growing retailers publicly provided on environmental and social programmes. Six retailers, namely Wesfarmers Limited; China Resources Enterprise Limited; Jumbo Supermarkets BV; Grupo Pao de Acucar; Landmark Group; and Lojas Americanas S. A. had posted either recent corporate social responsibility or sustainability reports while OJSC Company M Video provides some information on corporate social responsibility within their 2012 annual report. Ten of the selected retailers namely, Steinhoff International Holdings Ltd.; X5 Retail Group; Wu-Mart Group; Belle International holdings; Amazon.com.Inc; Apple Inc./Apple Store; Emke Group/Lulu Group International; BiM Biriesik Magazalar; Gome Home Appliance Group; O'Reilly Automotive Inc.; and Cencosud posted varied but generally much more limited commentary on their environmental and social programmes. The remaining two retailers posted no information on environmental and social programmes.

A close interrogation of the reports and information on corporate social responsibility and sustainability posted by the 18 retailers cited above reveals major variations in the commitment to environmental and social programmes, to their role in retailers' corporate strategies and in the evidencing of environmental and social achievements. In his opening message to the Wesfarmers 2013 Sustainability Report, Bob Every, the company chairman, emphasised that '*understanding the environmental and social impact of our businesses is a key part of ensuring that Wesfarmers continues to be able to create value for its stakeholders*' (www.wesfarmers.com.au/). Steinhoff International Holdings, asserts that its strategic approach to corporate social responsibility recognises responsibilities towards '*the natural resources on which our business depends*'

and *'the surrounding communities in which we operate'* (www.steinhoffinternational.com/). Cencosud claim that *corporate social responsibility is one of the main pillars of Cencosud's business strategy'* . (<http://cencosud.com>) and Landmark Group stresses that *'corporate social responsibility is an integral part of the Group's activities'* (www.landmarkgroup.com). . In a similar vein China Resources Enterprise Limited claims *'as a leading consumer goods company in China, we endeavour to embrace the principles of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development into our business operations'* and *'the Group considers environmental protection to be an integral element of its corporate culture and decision making process.'* (www.cre.com.hk/index.asp?lang=e). Perhaps more broadly the Emke Group/Lulu Group stresses that it *'has always been in the forefront when it comes to giving back to society'* and that *'the Group strongly believes in playing its role in environmental protection'* (www.lulugroupinternational.com). At the same time some of the selected retailers provide relatively limited and in many ways superficial information on their environmental and social activities. The Gome Home Appliance Group, for example, simply lists a number of charitable donations and Wu-Mart simply states *'we play an active role'* in *'introducing community concept'* (www.wumart.com/html/en/home.html).

A number of the selected retailers sought to evidence their commitment to environmental and social programmes across a range of agendas. A number of environmental issues are addressed including environmental footprint; climate change, greenhouse gas emissions and carbon pricing; water and energy conservation; recycling, waste and the production of environmentally friendly packaging; pollution control; bio-diversity; eco-friendly building design; and land remediation. In addressing its environmental footprint, for example, Apple Inc. /Apple Stores reports taking *'a comprehensive life cycle analysis approach to determine where our greenhouse gas emissions come from'* which involves *'adding up the emissions generated from the manufacturing, transportation, use, and recycling of our products, as well as the emissions generated by our facilities'* (www.apple.com/companystore/). Furthermore the company reports that *'though our revenue has grown, our greenhouse gas emissions per dollar of revenue have decreased by 21.5 percent since 2008.'* At the same time the company also reports *'Apple's data centres are 100 percent powered by energy from renewable sources- solar, wind, hydro and geothermal. And so are many of our corporate facilities'* and that *'the ultimate goal is to power all Apple's facilities by renewable energy'* (www.apple.com/companystore/). More generally Wu-Mart reports that *'rigorous targets were set for all our business units in order to reduce the consumption of energy, water and paper'* and also that the company *'actively advocates environmental consciousness with the commitment to promoting the concept of green living'* (www.wumart.com/html/en/home.html).

In focusing on its recycling, waste and packaging initiatives Wesfarmers reports that rolling out an organics recycling programme to one third of its supermarkets helped to reduce waste sent to landfill by 10%. A number of the company's supermarkets are also involved in the *'Second Bite'* scheme which redistributes surplus fresh food to community food programmes. The company is also a signatory to the Australian Packaging Covenant, a voluntary packaging, waste reduction and recycling initiative involving government, the packaging industry, retailers and consumer brand owners. Apple Inc. /Apple Stores argues that its *'approach to recycling begins in the design stage, where we create compact, efficient*

products that require less material to produce’ and that ‘once an Apple product reaches the end of its useful life we will help you to recycle it responsibly’ (www.apple.com/companystore/). Amazon provide information on the development of a software programme that determines the ‘right sized’ box for any given item to be shipped to customers, based on the item’s dimensions and weight. The company also reports that in a number of countries most of its orders are dispatched in corrugated containers which are produced from 100% recovered fibre content and that these containers are themselves 100% recyclable and are subsequently re-used in the manufacture of new paper products. While Steinhoff International holdings argues that *‘bio-diversity is not deemed material for the group’* but recognises that it has *‘an indirect impact on how we manage and monitor our own use and procurement of sustainable raw materials’* (www.apple.com/companystore/) and reports that all its plantations are managed according to Forestry Stewardship Council standards.

The selected retailers report or provide information on a number of social programmes including, community care and community services; investment in employees; charitable donations, particularly to aid and health based organisations; and cultural conservation. China Resources Enterprise Group, for example, reported the launch of an array of community activities including visits to the homes of the elderly, organizing children’s activities and hosting charity events for the underprivileged. The company also reported that its Vanguard chain of supermarkets partnered with television stations and hospitals to encourage traditional family values and health care for the elderly. The company has also participated in poverty alleviation programmes and in agricultural development programmes in rural China. These programmes have included the implementation of ecological farming measures, the provision of fresh food supplies, funding the stocking of chicken and goat farms and the development of a cherry plantation. The Landmark Group reports on its adoption of the *‘Beat Diabetes Initiative’* designed to spread awareness of the growing incidence of diabetes in the countries in which it operates. Since 2009 the Landmark Group has expanded the geographical reach of the programme and activities include mobile testing clinics, awareness raising radio talk shows and celebrity endorsements. The China Resources Enterprise Group is involved in education and cultural conservation programmes. In the former the company reports, inter alia, having established 73 libraries in rural China while the latter looks *‘to raise public awareness about the current status of ancient buildings in China and traditional Chinese culture’* (www.cre.com.hk/index.asp?lang=e).

Landmark Group asserts its belief that *‘employees are its true assets’* and claims that the establishment of the *‘Landmark Employee Foundation’*, which aspires to empower, engage and enable staff, acts as an initiative which creates opportunities for strengthening employee relationships, develops corporate culture and values and builds morale, pride and employee loyalty. The aim here is *‘to conduct knowledge and life skills development programmes for support staff’* (www.landmarkgroup.com/) and this programme, established in the United Arab Emirates is to be rolled out throughout the company’s network of stores. In a similar vein Wesfarmers claims that *‘employing outstanding people and providing opportunities for them to apply their talents is critical to our sustainability’* and that it is *‘committed to continually improving the attraction, development and retention of talented people.’* The company also stresses its support for *‘an inclusive and non-*

discriminatory culture through Group-wide policies and processes’ and reports on its ‘gender diversity plans’ (<http://www.wesfarmers.com.au/>). The Chinese Resources Group claims to ‘attach great importance to each member of staff and recognizes the value and contribution of each and every one of them’ and to be committed ‘to providing a good working environment, encouraging continuous learning and supporting personal career development’). More specifically the company emphasises that it is ‘devoted to promoting culture of continuing education and talent development’ and reports that it provides ‘opportunities for training for staff at different levels, with programs that include training courses, visits and seminars covering management, sales and marketing, occupational safety, as well as technical and interpersonal skills’ (www.cre.com.hk/index.asp?lang=e).

Discussion

While the majority of the world’s top twenty fastest growing retailers provide some public information on their commitment to environmental and social programmes there is considerable variation in the extent, the nature and the detail of that information. Three issues merit discussion and reflection. Firstly the general findings presented above would seem, in part at least, to run counter to the suggestion by RetailCustomerExperience.com (2011) that the integration of environmental and social programmes is one of the hallmarks of successful new retailers. This may reflect the fact that some of the retailers, more specifically Whole Foods Market and Muji, cited by RetailCustomerExperience.com (2011), as illustrating this trend are predominantly trading in mature retail markets within developed economies where research suggests a majority of consumers believe living an ethical or sustainable lifestyle is relatively important (Innovation Center for US Dairy 2013). Elks (2013), for example, argues that consumers’ decision making is prompted by a brand’s corporate social responsibility efforts and that retailers seen to be ‘*protecting and improving the environment,*’ and ‘*positively impacting local communities*’ can be ‘*a driver of purchase decisions*’ for up to 60% of consumers.

Many of the top twenty fastest growing retailers are predominantly, but not exclusively, trading within emergent markets and while growing consumer awareness is seen to be increasingly stimulating the demand for sustainable products within such markets (United Nations Environment Programme 2012), economic necessity often means that price and availability are the principal factors driving consumer buying behaviour. At the same time many of the selected retailers are ‘*operating within challenging business environments*’ and may be ‘*pursuing basic commercial formulas for delivering a limited product assortment at the lowest possible price*’ (Coca Cola Retailing Research Foundation 2010). In outlining its ‘*Hard Discount Concept*’, the Turkish based retailer Bim Birlesik Magazalar AS , for example, stresses that its ‘*goal is to minimize operational costs in an effort to offer discount to its customers*’ which leads it ‘*to avoid any unnecessary expenses that might raise the product price*’ and ‘*to minimize the management, store design , personnel, distribution and promotion costs*’ (<http://www.bim.com.tr/english/>). Even where companies stress their commitment to environmental and social programmes they will surely need to monitor their operational economics. Thus while Steinhoff International Holdings Ltd., for example, stresses its commitment to ‘*continuously improve our environmental practices*’ but effectively qualifies that commitment by reporting that ‘*where*

viable we will minimise our use of water and energy, our emissions to air and water and contain our production of waste' (www.steinhoffinternational.com/).

Secondly the selected retailers' commitments to environmental and social programmes can be seen to be built around business efficiency and the search for competitive advantage and as such can be seen to be driven as much by business imperatives as by concerns for the environmental impacts of their activities and for the welfare of their employees and the development of the communities in which they operate and source their products and sell their merchandise. Thus while many of the environmental initiatives are designed to reduce energy, water consumption and waste emissions, for example, they also reduce the retailers' costs. In a similar vein the selected retailers' commitments to their employees focusing for example, upon educational training programmes, diversity and health and safety at work all help to promote stability, security, loyalty and efficiency within the workforce. The Chinese Resources Group, for example, explicitly recognises *'the importance of being an inclusive employer because a diverse workforce delivers significant social and commercial value'* (www.cre.com.hk/index.asp?lang=e).

Thirdly there are issues concerning the way that the selected retailers report on, and provide information on, their environmental and social commitments and programmes. Generally the accent is on providing a simple narrative of these commitments and achievements sometimes illustrated with simple statistics and micro case studies with pictures and simple diagrams being widely used to illustrate general themes. Only one of the four retailers which posted corporate social responsibility or sustainability reports on the Internet, namely Wesfarmers, sought to comply with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines while the other three selected companies' reports had their own idiosyncratic house style. Overall the lack of common and agreed frameworks and standards and the use of simple case studies make it difficult to make any meaningful comparison between one retailer and another or to chart collective progress on environmental and social programmes over time.

At the same time there is currently very little evidence of independent external assurance of the information on sustainability posted by the selected retailers. Wesfarmers was the only one of the retailers to commission independent external assurance of its annual sustainability report. In its assurance statement the environmental consultants Net Balance reported *'overall it is Net Balance's opinion that on the information provided within the report is fair in all material respects, and that the report was found to present a reliable account of Wesfarmers sustainability performance during the reporting period'* (www.wesfarmers.com.au). However the widespread lack of independent external assurance can be seen to undermine the transparency, reliability and integrity of the sustainability information posted by the overwhelming majority of the world's top twenty fastest growing retailers. That said it is important to remember that these retailers are large, complex and dynamic organisations. Capturing and storing comprehensive information and data across a diverse range of business activities throughout the supply chain in a variety of geographical locations and then providing access to allow external assurance is a challenging and a potentially costly venture and one which the majority of selected retailers currently demonstrably choose not to publicly pursue. Thus while data on a company's carbon

emissions may be systematically collected, collated and audited as part of the company's environmental commitments, information on their impact on local communities and levels of staff satisfaction may be more difficult to measure, collate, interpret and assure.

Conclusion

This exploratory review reveals that there is considerable variation in the extent to which the world's top twenty fastest growing retailers are committed to, and publicly provide information on, environmental and social programmes. While their environmental and social commitments embrace a wide range of issues, these commitments can be interpreted as being driven as much by business imperatives as by concerns for the environmental impacts of their activities, for the welfare of their employees and the development of the communities in which they operate. That said many of these retailers are predominantly, but not exclusively, trading within emergent markets and are operating within challenging business environments where the pursuit of basic commercial strategies offer the most attractive options for growth. While the exploratory nature and tightly defined focus of this paper does not provide a basis for policy development it does offer a mirror in which new and rapidly growing retailers and the retail industry in emerging markets at large might reflect on their current approaches to the development of environmental and social programmes and on public perceptions of those approaches. Looking to the future if rapidly growing retailers, particularly those in emergent markets, believe that retailers which are widely perceived to be pursuing environmental and social programmes may have a competitive advantage then they may want to undertake or commission research to investigate the most effective way that they can use marketing communications to promote and disseminate such programmes.

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Open Joint stock Company Magnit <http://www.magnit-info.ru/en/>

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BELLE Communities, Employees, Environmentally Friendly

Lojas Climate change, environmentally friendly, water and energy conservation

