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# RELATION BETWEEN CUSTOMER-FOCUSED CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INITIATIVES AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY INTENTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

The number of research concentrating on the implementation of social responsibility initiatives in the context of extraordinary circumstances, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased. This paper examines the links between the customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives (in the period of COVID-19 pandemic) and customer loyalty intentions, focusing on whether customers' age or gender has any effect in this regard. Research results have shown that social responsibility initiatives with respect to customers carried out during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic are related to their loyalty intentions towards the company. It is worth to emphasize that no data has been obtained to support the statement that customers' age and gender are proper moderators affecting the relation between customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives carried out in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the customers' loyalty intentions.

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## Key Words

Social responsibility initiative; customer loyalty intention; COVID-19.

## INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of social responsibility initiatives is often analysed from the viewpoint of customers' behaviour, loyalty to the company, satisfaction with the company's products, etc. Most studies confirm the connection between customers' behaviour, their decision to buy or repeatedly buy and corporate social responsibility initiatives (Castaldo et al., 2009). The study commissioned by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania Public Opinion Research on Corporate Social Responsibility in 2020 revealed the attitude of most respondents that companies should not only seek profit but also take into consideration the principles of social responsibility such as responsible treatment of employees and customers, protection of natural environment, etc. Most customers of the modern market perceive corporate social responsibility initiatives as necessity (Onlaor and Rotchanakitumnuai, 2010). The existing and potential clients expect that business companies will operate in accordance with standards of ethical conduct and should a company adopt a socially irresponsible business approach customers can "punish" the company (Joyner and Payne, 2002). Only appropriate, proactive initiatives improve consumers' attitude towards company's products or services and boost their buying intentions; for this reason, it is important that customers realize initiatives as necessary and reasoned (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). One must understand that social responsibility initiatives shall match not only the company's main activities but also consumers' values (Chuah et al., 2020). Customers' buying intent, assessment of a company and its activity (products) are affected by a subjective level of consumers' perception which becomes important in pursuance of customers' loyalty and long-lasting connection with the company (Marin et al., 2009). The perception of social responsibility initiatives is based on values and is influenced by demographic characteristics of customers; therefore, the author(s) of the paper chose to analyse the factors of customers' age and gender as moderators.

As regards research on connections between social responsibility initiatives and customer loyalty and loyalty intents, it should be noted that regardless of the many existing evidence of relationship between social responsibility initiatives carried out by companies and customer loyalty or loyalty intents, this field of research is still limited. Research on the potential benefits of social responsibility initiatives in the hard times, under the conditions of unfavourable external environment, is insufficient and lacking. According to Liu et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has some unique aspects. First of all, it implies a long period and a large area of coverage. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled many small and medium-sized companies to suspend their activities to certain extent and to tackle the encountered difficulties. There is little research into social responsibility initiatives carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic as a measure of combating the problems the present crisis has posed and at the same time promoting customers' loyalty intents. There have been little studies with the research of the benefits of individual social responsibility initiatives (focused

on customers, employees, natural environment, etc.) in the period of crisis either. The impact of social responsibility initiatives in the segments of different customers (e.g., of different age, gender, education), particularly in moments of crisis, has not been much analysed either.

The research of this paper examined the attitude of customers of a specific company, products of which have become popular and relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, towards social responsibility initiatives focused specifically on customers and carried out during the said period of the pandemic. This decision was determined by the fact that the authors wanted to analyse the advantages of social responsibility initiatives implemented during the crisis in the real-world context. Thus, customers of this company were asked to provide their attitude on responsible actions of the company aimed at customers in time of crisis and the researchers explored whether such social responsibility initiatives had an impact on customers' loyalty intents with respect to the company. The purpose of the article is to analyse the links between customer-oriented corporate social responsibility initiatives and clients' loyalty intents in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on a specific example of wholesale and retail sale of personal protective equipment company.

The article starts with the theoretical aspects of social responsibility initiatives and customer loyalty as well as the development of a conceptual research model. The methodological part describes the sample of the respondents and the measurement scales; afterwards, a discussion on the results of the research is presented. Finally, the theoretical and managerial benefits of the research are highlighted; limitations of the research and potential future research are outlined.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Responsibility Initiatives**

Social responsibility initiative is a characteristic or an obligation (of a company) to perform in a responsible and ethical manner both within the organisation and outside it (Blenkhorn and MacKenzie, 2017) or a concept of running business with a voluntary contribution of a company to the improvement of the environment and processes taking place in the society (Mello et al., 2020). As McWilliams and Siegel (2001) put it, corporate social responsibility initiatives demonstrate that a company strives to not only safeguard its interests but to also engage in activities that would promote social welfare. Numerous authors (Maignan, 2001; Maignan and Ferrell, 2000; Simanaviciene et al., 2012; Seifert et al., 2003) emphasise the diversity of social responsibility and its manifestation through different forms, however, Dimitriadis and Zilakaki (2019) state that most often the true goal is a positive corporate image and reputation. Corporate social responsibility initiatives foster ethical balance between the profit seeking and the benefits

for the society and may be related to the problems of employment of people with disabilities, production and use of nature-friendly products and other environmental problems, communication with the public, employees and customers about initiatives carried out. Espasandin-Bustelo et al. (2021) stress employee-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives which increase the level of staff motivation and satisfaction with work. According to Lo and Kwan (2017), a company, which implements social responsibility initiatives, operates on the basis of a sustainable financial model, develops innovation, re-invests part of its profit in specific selected social activities, offers its employees favourable opportunities, acts in accordance with the existing laws, also promotes other companies to implement social responsibility initiatives. Qiu et al. (2021) also support the latter statement claiming that social responsibility initiatives may be linked to the development of employees' benefits, consumption of renewable resources, protection of nature, charity, volunteerism or cooperation with local communities.

Welford (2005) analyses twenty different aspects of social responsibility starting with the commitments to local community and finishing with the improvement of the rules of ethics and support for sustainable development. Other authors analyse customer focus, natural environment, ethics-moral, and charitable dimensions of social responsibility (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, et al., 2015). Aspects, which are most often accentuated in relation to social responsibility, are the following: environmental, community (society), interested parties, economic and free will or volunteerism (Dahlsrud, 2008), also workplace and a distinct individual (Lacey and Kennett-Hensel, 2010). Carroll (1991) suggested that social responsibility be made of economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic aspects which were later elaborated on by many other authors (e.g., Burton et al., 2000). Most studies involve an analysis of social responsibility initiatives which is based on a few aspects, for instance, Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al. (2015), Martinez et al. (2014) measure social responsibility initiatives in terms of social, environmental and economic dimensions. Salmones et al. (2005) examined service customers' attitude towards social responsibility initiatives from the point of view of three (economic-financial, ethical and philanthropic) dimensions. The research dwelled on in the article analyses corporate social responsibility initiatives with the focus on the aspect of customers.

### **Customer-focused Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives**

Studies on social responsibility initiatives conducted by a number of authors (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, et al., 2015; McDonald and Hung Lai, 2011; Yusof et al., 2011), who assessed different aspects, confirm the impact of customer-

oriented initiatives on clients' loyalty or satisfaction with the products bought (services provided). Results of the research by Yusof et al. (2011) revealed that customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives, specifically, have the biggest effect on customers' loyalty. McDonald and Hung Lai (2011) approved of the latter idea stating that social responsibility initiatives focused on customers are more significant in terms of customers' behaviour and attitude compared to philanthropic initiatives and environmental ones as they give direct functional benefit to the customer. Conclusions of the study carried out by Saleem and Gopinath (2015) also demonstrated that the environmental aspect of social responsibility initiatives has no significant impact on the customers' behavior (trust in company, loyalty to the brand, desire to pay the price). This was acknowledged by Auger et al. (2006) who identified greater significance of customer-focused social responsibility initiatives compared to environmental initiatives.

### **Social Responsibility Initiatives in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various corporate social responsibility initiatives and projects have become even more important in the area of public relations and image development (Tworzydło et al., 2021), and this, undoubtedly, is oriented towards the existing and potential consumers. To tackle the challenges of the crisis and operate under new conditions of the pandemic, it is important for the companies to carry out customer, employee and other interested parties-oriented social responsibility initiatives and secure their profitability as well as to manifest social sensitivity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Panagiotopoulos, 2021). As He and Harris (2021) put it, the COVID-19 pandemic has given the companies the opportunity to actively carry out their social responsibility initiatives (especially, in relation to the efforts to fighting the virus) to strengthen their relationship with customers, to develop a more durable connection with customers and the general public. Conclusions drawn by Vătămănescu et al. (2021) following the research into the attitude of fashion company clients towards social responsibility initiatives in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (the authors also analysed the pre-pandemic period) have revealed that consumers put a great emphasis on various actions by companies in relation to circle economy, respect to employees' rights and well-being, and usage of reusable, renewable resources, as well as targeted initiatives aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. Although there is plenty of evidence of the importance of social responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be stressed that the skill to be a sustainable and responsible company cannot be expanded within a brief period of time (Hassan et al., 2021). According to the authors, it is very likely that companies which have managed to overcome the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, had acted in a socially responsible way before the crisis and had presented their attitude to social responsibility to the customers.

## **Customer Loyalty Intentions**

A considerable number of studies on correlation between corporate social responsibility initiatives and customers' behaviour (buying or repeated buying, buying intents, and loyalty intents) have been carried out (Amatulli et al., 2018; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Ellen et al., 2000; Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Sen et al., 2006; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). The significance of such studies is substantiated by the fact that social responsibility is one of the key components which may shape customers' attitude towards a brand, its evaluation and intents to buy products or services of that brand (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006), which, in turn, evolves into customers' loyalty intents. Akbari et al. (2020), Choi and La (2013), Lacey and Kennett-Hensel (2010), Markovic et al. (2018), Stanaland et al. (2011), Yusof et al. (2015) highlight the impact of social responsibility initiatives on the increasing customers' loyalty to the company, development of a long-lasting connection with the company and its build-up in the course of time. Social responsibility initiatives, in particular, form a company's reputation, view in the eyes of customers, which may positively affect customers' loyalty to the company (Aramburui and Pescador, 2019). For example, an image of a socially responsible service provider may boost customer satisfaction and loyalty through emotions which are generated by the company and through emotions and feelings evoked by products or services the company offers (Perez and Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2015a). Dimitriadis and Zilakaki (2019) emphasize the mediating function played by company image and client satisfaction for developing the relationship between social responsibility initiatives and client loyalty. The latter conclusion is approved of by Walsh and Bartikowski (2013) who state that a positive customers' opinion about a company as a result of socially responsible performance of a company is closely related to customers' loyalty. Corporate social responsibility initiatives visible to customers shape their attitude and feelings and, certainly, their behaviour and tendency to buy repeatedly or recommend to others (Perez and Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2015a). The tendency of customers to maintain their consumption habits forms their loyalty to the company (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). The same was concluded by Mercadé-Melé et al. (2018) whose research illustrate positive causal relation between the understanding of social responsibility and customer loyalty intentions or buying intents.

## **Customer Age and Gender as Moderators**

Social responsibility initiatives are frequently analysed taking into consideration customers' demographic aspects, such as age, gender, and education (Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; Perera and Hewege, 2016; Perez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2015b). Outcomes of the studies which examine social responsibility initiatives in terms of demographic aspects turn out to be very different. For instance, the results of research conducted by Perez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2015b) in the bank segment unveiled that customers' demographic characteristics (gender, age and education) are not

good moderators for shaping customers' attitude towards social responsibility initiatives. Meanwhile, the conclusions by Youn and Kim (2008) show that female as well as higher education and higher income customer groups tend to support social responsibility initiatives more.

Age is often indicated as one of the most important factors to have effect on the customers' perception of the corporate social responsibility initiatives (Quazi, 2003). According to Arlow (1991) customers' age is reflection of their knowledge, attitude towards social responsibility initiatives and a factor that determines their behaviour. An increasing amount of scientific research is carried out with a focus on the viewpoint of a younger generation representatives (Millennials and Gen Zers) to sustainable products and corporate social responsibility initiatives (Vătămănescu et al., 2021). There is considerable evidence that younger customers pay more attention to social responsibility initiatives than older customers and put more effort in trying to behave responsibly (Diamantopoulos et al., 2003); younger customers seem to be more interested in social responsibility initiatives (Arlow, 1991). Studies by Tian et al. (2011) revealed that persons born around 1970, whose standpoint was affected by both traditional and modern world values with regard to the purchase of goods or services, tend to have a neutral attitude towards social responsibility initiatives. However, some contrary conclusions may also be found, for instance, as claimed by Carrigan et al. (2004), older consumers tend to pay more attention to ethical issues when buying goods or services.

In the opinion of most authors (Arlow, 1991; Burton and Hegarty, 1999; Juscius and Dargienė, 2015; Quazi, 2003), clients' gender is also one of the key factors which influence customers' understanding of social responsibility initiatives, which, undoubtedly, has an effect on their behaviour and loyalty. Arlow (1991), Burton and Hegarty (1999) noticed a trend that women value business ethics and social responsibility more than men. The existing different results of research with regard to the impact of customers' demographic factors on their attitude towards social responsibility initiatives determine relevance of such research. Especially for the fact that today the analysis of social responsibility initiatives becomes important in the context of extraordinary external environment (the COVID-19 pandemic).

## **HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

The literature review indicated that correlation between social responsibility initiatives (oriented towards customers, in particular) carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic and customer loyalty intentions, also given customers' demographic aspects, is highly relevant but has still been little examined.

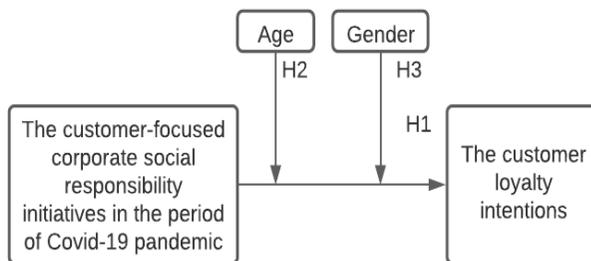
**H1:** Customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic are positively related to customer loyalty intentions.

**H2:** Customer age moderates the relationship between customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic and customer loyalty intentions.

**H3:** Customer gender moderates the relationship between customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic and customer loyalty intentions.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual model of the paper in which the hypotheses made are summarised.

**Figure 1:** The conceptual model



Source: Own survey.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample and Data Collection

The empirical research was carried out focusing on the company, which has operated since 2007 in Lithuania. The company engages in wholesale and retail sale of personal protective equipment (it offers the range of over 15,000 items from a variety of countries: work clothing and footwear, glasses, gloves, hearing protection devices, helmets, products for working at height, respirators and face masks, fire-extinguishers).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the lockdown was imposed in Lithuania (March 2020 – April 2021), the company carried out numerous social responsibility initiatives focused on customers: actively produced textile face masks and face shields, not only sold but also donated them; publicised information on the situation with regard to illegal respirator sellers in the market; taught people how to choose proper respirators, face masks, and check certificates of the goods offered in the market, etc. Products offered by the company were particularly in demand during the first lockdown when the emergency situation was declared in Lithuania (16 March –16 June 2020) and there was a shortage of protection (face masks, respirators, liquid disinfectant, etc.) against the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the market, and its social responsibility initiatives oriented towards customers were of high relevance.

Respondents of the quantitative survey were the persons who first time bought goods/services offered by the company during the first lockdown (16 March –16 June 2020) and later decided to purchase products of the company repeatedly for the second time in 2021. The research is aimed at identifying whether loyalty intents of the respondents (to buy repeatedly) might be linked to active customer-focused social responsibility initiatives which were carried out by the company in the time of crisis. The number of the respondents totalled to 204; they were customers of the company of wholesale and retail sale of personal protective equipment. The survey was carried out in the period from April to September 2021.

## Research Instrument

Evaluations of social responsibility initiatives involving the customer aspect were measured according to the adapted scale referring to Oberseder et al. (2014). This scale was adapted for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic according to the scale applied by Glavas and Godwin (2013), Liu et al. (2020). Customer loyalty intents were measured using a modified scale composed with reference to Dagger et al. (2011) and Iglesias et al. (2020). Respondents indicated their opinions on scale items on a five-point Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha values for the overall scale is 0.957, while those for each construct are between 0.902 and 0.923 (calculated using SPSS 23). The composite reliability (CR) value is between 0.76 and 0.81 (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Construct validity for scales

Factors	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability (CR)
The customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic (6 items)	I consider that the company I use its production (buy second time), at the pandemic, does... 1) ...implement fair sales practices. 2) ...label products clearly and in a comprehensible way. 3) ...meet quality standards. 4) ...set fair prices for products. 5) ...offer safe (not harmful) products. 6) ...offer the possibility to file complaints	0.902	0.44	0.81
The customer loyalty intentions (3 items)	1) I consider the company my first choice when I purchase the production or services the company supplies. 2) I am willing to maintain my relationship with the company.	0.923	0.52	0.76

	3) I want to be loyal to the company.			
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Source: Own survey.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Descriptives

The analysis is based on the sample of 204 respondents (customers of the company of wholesale and retail sale of personal protective equipment). The sample included 44.6 per cent men and 55.4 per cent women; 44.6 per cent of the respondents were up to 50 years old. The average mean scores of each of the constructs and items are shown in Table 2. Correlation between the constructs (the customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic and the customer loyalty intentions) is 0.796 (significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed).

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics (the average mean scores and standard deviations)

Constructs	Mean	SD	Items	Mean	SD
The customer-focused corporate social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic (6 items)	4.20	0.584	I consider that the company I use its production (buy second time), at the pandemic, does...		
			1) ...implement fair sales practices	3.98	0.775
			2) ...label products clearly and in a comprehensible way	4.32	0.696
			3) ...meet quality standards	4.29	0.695
			4) ...set fair prices for products	4.14	0.695
			5) ...offer safe (not harmful) products	4.33	0.691
			6) ...offer the possibility to file complaints	4.15	0.721
The customer loyalty intentions (3 items)	4.33	0.660	1) I consider the company my first choice when I purchase the production or services the company supplies	4.24	0.683
			2) I am willing to maintain my relationship with the company	4.37	0.721
			3) I want to be loyal to the company	4.39	0.725

Source: Own survey.

### Tests of hypotheses

The regression coefficient of the main effect is significant at p-levels less than 0.05, in support of the positive impact of the customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic to the intention of customers loyalty (on the table 3). The customer-focused social

responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic significantly and positively influences the customer loyalty intentions in support of the hypothesis H1.

**Table 3:** Basic model effect

Customer loyalty intentions	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F Ratio
Constant	0.514	2.553	0.011	0.645	0.643	367.207
Customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic	0.909	19.163	0.000			

Source: Own survey.

The table 4 shows that with the inclusion of the interaction effect of age in the relationship between the customers loyalty intentions and customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic, the value of R<sup>2</sup> has increased from 0.652 to 0.656, the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> has increased from 0.648 to 0.651. Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> value shows that about 65,1% of the variation in the customers loyalty intentions is represented by customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic wherein age works as a moderator. However, the model with moderation effect (on the table 4) has the p-value of 0.121 for interaction effect which shows that the hypothesis H2 of having moderating effect of age on the linkage between the customers loyalty intentions and customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic is not supported (0.121>0.05). However, the p-value of age shown in model without moderation effect (on the table 4) is less than the significance level (0.049 < 0.05). Thus, age works as an independent variable in influencing the customers loyalty intentions instead of a moderator.

**Table 4:** Moderated regression (Age)

Customer loyalty intentions	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F Ratio
Model without moderation effect						
Constant	0.765	3.231	0.001	0.652	0.648	188.201
Customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic	0.898	18.922	0.000			
Age	-0.005	-1.977	0.049			
<i>Moderation Effect</i>						
Constant	1.858	2.511	0.013	0.656	0.651	127.170
Customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic	0.890	18.733	0.000			
Age	-0.030	-1.839	0.067			
Interaction	0.067	1.559	0.121			

Source: Own survey.

The model with moderation effect on the table 5 is explaining the customers loyalty intentions with three predictors which are customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic,

gender and interaction term between customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic and gender (male or female). The table 5 shows that with the inclusion of the interaction effect of gender in the relationship between the customers loyalty intentions and customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic, the value of  $R^2$  is same 0.646, but the adjusted  $R^2$  has decreased from 0.642 to 0.640. The model with moderation effect (on the table 5) has the p-value of 0.738 for interaction effect which shows there is no indication of moderating activity ( $0.738 > 0.05$ ). The result in the regression not supported the hypothesis H3 of having moderating effect of gender on the linkage between the customers loyalty intentions and customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Gender is no good moderator for the relationship between customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic and customer loyalty intents. In addition, customers' gender as an independent variable has no statistically significant effect on customer loyalty intentions (model without moderation effect, p-value of 0.630).

**Table 5:** Moderated regression (Gender)

Customer loyalty intentions	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	$R^2$	Adjusted $R^2$	F Ratio
Model without moderation effect						
Constant	0.523	2.584	0.010	0.646	0.642	183.023
Customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic	0.910	19.132	0.000			
Gender	-0.027	-0.482	0.630			
Moderation Effect						
Constant	0.590	2.078	0.039	0.646	0.640	121.514
Customer-focused social responsibility initiatives in the period of COVID-19 pandemic	0.908	18.957	0.000			
Gender	-0.161	-0.398	0.691			
Interaction	0.016	0.335	0.738			

Source: Own survey.

## THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research fills in the gaps of theoretical insights about the influence of customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives on customer loyalty intents during a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic, in the given case. The paper expands the list of literary sources on social responsibility initiatives and substantiates the importance of customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives during a crisis. The main conclusion resulting from the research is that customers' age and gender is not a significant moderator to strengthen the impact of customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives on their loyalty intents during the crisis (in this case, during the COVID-19 pandemic). This outcome echoes previous conclusions (drawn by Perez and

Rodriguez del Bosque, 2015b), which illustrate that clients' age and gender are not good moderators to have the potential of changing the relationship between two other variables – customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives and customers' loyalty intentions with regard to a company.

## **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this research also provide several practical implications for the company under consideration as well as other business entities that carry out customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives (in particular, the companies which implement customer-focused social responsibility initiatives during a crisis under the operation of unfavourable factors of external environment, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). The research results confirm the conclusions made by Yusof et al. (2011) who stated that customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives is a significant element that influences customer loyalty intents (even during the COVID-19 pandemic). It should be noted that, nevertheless, neither customers' gender, nor their age are the factors that would successfully moderate the connection between the customer-focused social responsibility initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic and customer loyalty intents, i.e. they are not the factors that might increase or reduce the intensity of this correlation. Customers' gender and age are not the factors that intensify the effect of customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives carried out in the time of crisis on customers' loyalty intents. Companies which seek to enhance customer loyalty through social responsibility initiatives during a crisis should bear in mind that customers' gender and age are not the factors which are important in trying to promote the desired changes. This leads to the conclusion that during a crisis it is not reasonable for a company to implement social responsibility initiatives which focus more on men or women as well as on younger or older persons.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The generalizability and applicability of the research conclusions are limited by a few aspects. The first limitation is the fact that the research takes into consideration solely the attitude towards social responsibility initiatives of customers of one particular company and includes examination of their loyalty intents. For instance, the influence of social responsibility initiatives on customer loyalty intentions may be very different in companies which operate in different economic areas. It is worth to mention that products of the company under consideration was necessary and in demand by most customers during the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. respirators, face masks), also the customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives carried out by the company were of high relevance, for this reason, these aspects might have affected their desire to buy the products offered by this particular company. In the future, it would be reasonable to examine customer-focused social

responsibility initiatives carried out by the companies whose products are dispensable and inessential during a hard time such as the COVID-19 pandemic (under unfavourable external factors) and their connection with the customer loyalty intentions. The second limitation is related to the moderators involved in the research. It would be reasonable to investigate other moderating variables in the future, for instance, customers' education and income, previous shopping experience, also loyalty programmes run by a company. The third limitation was that the research involved only one aspect, i.e. customer-oriented social responsibility initiatives, therefore, it would be useful to analyse the impact of other social responsibility initiatives (environmental or employee-oriented) on customers' loyalty, particularly, in the time of crisis (when unfavourable factors of external environment act).

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