

Corporate Social Responsibility as a Catalyst for Purchase Intention. Approaches in the Restaurant Industry

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Abstract

Companies in the restaurant industry are facing a bleak outlook since the appearance of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2. To recover their radiance and increase their sales, it is necessary to identify strategies that allow them to generate a greater connection with the consumer. This article analyzes the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on the purchase intention of consumers in restaurants located in Aguascalientes, Mexico. From the analysis of 411 surveyed customers and using the multiple linear regression technique, it can be seen that CSR explains 53% of the purchase intention. In the same way, it is determined that the legal and ethical dimensions are the most crucial factors for consumers in this locality. Therefore, it is recommended that companies focus their efforts on applying and disseminating CSR activities in order to encourage sales.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, purchase intention, restaurant

1. Introduction

Currently the restaurant industry is facing serious complications due to the health emergency caused by SARS-CoV-2, mobility restrictions and the congregations of people in closed spaces severely affected its organization. In the US, an estimated loss of 240 billion dollars in sales is calculated, where 10% of all restaurants have permanently closed their doors and it is estimated that three million workers in this industry lost their jobs (Michiko, 2020).

An option to overcome these conditions comes from the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility activities; its literature has shown that it is a decisive factor to encourage purchase intention (Tian, et al., 2011; Chen, et al., 2012; Dutta, 2013). In the restaurant sector, it is vital to stimulate the purchase intention to attract more customers, increase sales and remain relevant in such a competitive environment (Park & Lee, 2009; DiPietro, 2013; Pei-Jou & Valentini, 2014).

It was the western societies of the 20th century who showed interest in the social processes that involve purchase, and it was not until the seventies that the need for a discipline exclusively dedicated to the study of personal processes that culminated in the acquisition of a product or of a service was identified. (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). As part of this process, the purchase intention is classified as a decision-making process that studies the reason for purchasing a certain product or service (Shah, et al., 2012). The purchase intention of customers is an extraordinarily complex process and is often related to the behavior, perceptions, and attitudes of consumers, since it defines the evaluation and selection of certain items.

Ghosh (1990) states that the purchase intention is an effective tool to predict the buying process, it can change under the influence of the price or quality and the perceived value of immovables. In addition, there are internal and external motivations that influence the consumer during the purchase process (Gogoi, 2013); For Spears and Singh (2004), purchase intention represents someone's conscious plans to acquire a product of a particular brand.

Corporate Social Responsibility as a theoretical construct has undergone different transformations over the years. From the definition of Bowen (1953) where he points out the obligations of businesspeople to follow lines of action consistent with the values of society. Frederick (1960) describes CSR as a tool to comply with an economic system that meets the expectations of society. That is, the means of production and distribution must increase socioeconomic well-being and not only private interest. Davis (1967) asserts that the core of social responsibility lies in the ethical consequences generated by acts that may affect the interests of third parties.

Therefore, social responsibility goes one step further and emphasizes institutional actions and their effects on the entire social fabric. According to Steiner (1971), corporations must remain fundamentally as an economic institution, with the responsibility of assisting society in achieving its fundamental goals. The larger the corporation, the greater its responsibilities. Carroll (1983) states that CSR involves conducting an economically profitable, law-abiding, ethical, and socially supportive business. The author adds that profitability and legality represent fundamental conditions of business ethics and are the starting point to determine to what extent organizations support society with money, time, and talent.

In addition, Castellanos et al. (2007) incorporate environmental, labor, and human rights factors. Agarwal (2013) who identifies the impact of CSR on consumer behavior. Jeon et al. (2020) relate CSR to the attitude, preference, and connection of consumers with brands. In Castro-González et al. (2019) the relationship between CSR and human emotions and moral virtues is presented. Furthermore, Nareeman and Hassan (2013) analyze consumer satisfaction and customer retention derived from CSR actions. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), however, identify that consumers seem increasingly interested in CSR activities and that this interest is forcing organizations to actively participate in problems that affect society (Abdeen et al., 2016): CSR initiatives implemented by organizations in order to provide a solution to social problems could have a positive effect on the purchase intention of consumers, facilitating trust between the consumer and the company, also promoting customers loyalty to the business and strengthening customer-brand relationships (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003).

There is evidence to affirm that consumers support, through their purchases and based on their beliefs, the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimension of their context. These dimensions make up the CSR of organizations (Maignan, 2001; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009). Abdeen et al. (2016), confirm in their research that the ethical and philanthropic dimensions are more relevant for consumers. However, in Abd Rahim et al. (2011) and in Kolkailah et al. (2012), assure that the aforementioned results only apply in countries with consolidated economies, since, in another context, consumers prioritize the economic responsibility of companies. Economic responsibility is the dimension with the greatest burden in developing countries, since it ensures the permanence of companies, which in turn provides the community with employment and economic growth in general (Carroll, 1998; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009).

Continuing with this trend, Gjøberg (2009) assures that the concept of CSR cannot be separated from contextual factors and must capture the essence of the transformation and cooperation between the Government, market, and civil society, since it represents a signal for the new role of private actors in future national and global governance. The author emphasizes that the associated strategies with CSR cannot be successfully transferred from one company to another without taking in count the context, the nature of the company's institutional environment and the degree of exposure to global markets.

Jamali and Karam (2016) discuss the concept of CSR in developing nations and conclude that the nuances and complex forms of CSR are locally contextualized and shaped by multilevel factors, as well as the limits of company-society interaction can usually be conceived as malleable and potentially changing entities. Therefore, CSR is conceptualized in diverse ways between nations with consolidated economies and those in the process of development.

Therefore, this research aims to propose solutions that allow the use of CSR as a catalyst for purchase intention. Allowing to select relevant and congruent initiatives with the firm, social changes and thus more accurately impact potential customers who can identify with the ideals of the brand (Fraj-Andrés et al., 2012; Singh & Agarwal, 2013).

2. Method

This study is empirical, causal, cross-sectional, non-experimental, conducted under a quantitative approach, which included the application of a survey to restaurant customers in the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico (Hernandez & Mendoza, 2018). Based on the consulted literature that allows establishing the empirical relationship between CSR and purchase intention, the following hypothesis is proposed (Wongpitch, 2016; Mulaessa & Wang, 2017; Sharma et al., 2018; Bianchi et al., 2019):

H₁: The Corporate Social Responsibility of the restaurants in the city of Aguascalientes positively influences the purchase intention.

Based upon Carroll (1998), Ramasamy and Yeung (2009) and Kolkailah et al. (2012) a second hypothesis is established that positions the economic dimension of CSR as a determining factor for consumers who live in developing countries:

H₂: The economic dimension of CSR has a significant and positive effect on the purchase intention of restaurant consumers in the city of Aguascalientes

To guarantee the representativeness of the population of Aguascalientes, a probabilistic sampling stratified by age was chosen. Considering the population over 18 years of age in the town of Aguascalientes, a total of 626,333 inhabitants is obtained (INEGI, 2021). Calculating a 95% confidence and a 5% error. Following the sampling formula for finite populations, a sample size of 384 surveys is identified. The questionnaire was applied to consumers over 18 years of age and with the condition that they have visited a restaurant in the city of Aguascalientes at least once in the last month.

The application instrument is adapted from Tan and Komaran (2006), and Ramasamy and Yeung (2009). The reliability and validity of the instrument was determined by means of Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability Index (CFI) and the mean of the variance extracted (IVE) obtaining satisfactory values in all the indices (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Nunally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity

		Cronbach's alpha	CFI	IVE
CSR	Economic	0.73	0.83	0.56
	Legal	0.87	0.92	0.79
	Ethic	0.76	0.86	0.67
	Philanthropic	0.86	0.90	0.70
Purchase intention		0.88	0.91	0.63

Source: Own elaboration

3. Results

The calculations were made using the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software, following the steps indicated by the multiple linear regression analysis technique (Chatterjee & Simonoff, 2020; Rivera, 2020). The final number of surveys obtained is 411 respondents, being able to highlight the participation of the female gender with 52%, the most representative age range is between 25 and 40 years with 34%, finally, the educational level of the respondents is in higher education (see table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive analysis

sample characteristics	%
Masculine	47
Feminine	52
Other	0.5
18 - 24 years	14
25 - 40 years	34
41 - 56 years	32
Older than 57 years	20
No schooling	0.5
Elementary	2.7
Junior high	9.5
High School	18.7
College	54.3
Postgrad	14.4

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the results obtained for the linear regression, it is established that the CSR is positively and significantly related to the purchase intention ($r=0.731$), thus, the variations in the CSR explain the changes in the purchase intention by 53% ($r^2=0.534$; $p<0.05$). These results are consistent with Jeon et al. (2020), Sharma et al. (2018), Dumitrescu et al. (2018), Pine et al. (2016). So far, it is possible to accept the proposed hypothesis (H₁) since there is theoretical and empirical support to do so (see table 3).

Table 3. Investigation results

	R	R ²	R ² adjusted	Error	F	Sig.
CSR --> P int	0.731	0.534	0.529	0.65	116.202	0.000

Source: Own elaboration

Additionally, it is possible to accept H₂ because the economic dimension is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.094$, $p < 0.05$). Despite not being the preponderant dimension as stipulated in the literature, it is a valuable one (Carroll, 1998; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009; Kolkailah et al., 2012). Going deeper into the findings, in the work of Jeon et al. (2020), it is identified that the ethical dimension turns out to be the determining factor when choosing a product. In the case of the present investigation, it is observed that the legal dimension has the highest load ($\beta = 0.4$, $p < 0.05$). In Pine et al. (2016), the philanthropic and legal dimensions have the most predominant values, loads that differ from the present investigation since it was obtained that the two most influential dimensions are legal and ethical ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.05$). These differences can be attributed to the context in which this research was applied. Saleem and Gopinath (2015), attribute these differences between the dimensions of CSR to the economic situation of each country. The context influences the perception of consumers. Developed societies have a greater social awareness of CSR activities in general, while in developing countries this awareness is focused on a small sector of the population (see table 4).

Table 4. Model coefficients

		β standardized	t	Sig
Constant	0.745		5.061	
Economic (Eco)		0.094	2.154	0.032
Legal (Leg)		0.400	6.629	0.000
Ethic (Et)		0.189	3.453	0.001
Philanthropic (Phil)		0.138	2.590	0.010

Source: Own elaboration

The predictive equation that allows estimating the purchase intention of restaurant consumers in the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico, can be defined as follows:

$$\text{Purchase intention} = 0.745 + (0.094) \text{ Eco} + (0.400) \text{ Leg} + (0.189) \text{ Et} + (0.138) \text{ Phil} + e_i \quad (1)$$

4. Discussion

In a theoretical sense, it can be noted that the aforementioned results in this research are similar to the literature consulted, thus, empirically it is concluded that the variations in the activities of Corporate Social Responsibility explain the changes in the purchase intention in 53%. Similarly, it is interesting to note that in a Latin American context, the legal dimension resulted in the greatest burden, followed by ethics and philanthropy. These results can help to understand the changes in the attitudes of consumers in emerging markets, it is possible that consumers become aware of the impact that their consumption habits have at an economic, social, and environmental level.

These findings allow defining actions that prioritize CSR activities in the legal and ethical fields. It is important to mention that illegal activities and acts that violate the ethical standards that prevail in Aguascalientes society represent a decrease in the intention to purchase. That is, the customer rewards or punishes organizational behavior through the purchase. Therefore, the restaurant industry must be aware of complying with all the regulations that govern this sector and of maintaining its productive practices under the standards required by society.

It is evident that CSR activities are a valuable tool to increase consumption and accelerate the recovery of the sector. The information presented here can serve as a guide for restaurant managers and owners to implement a CSR program that highlights the most important dimensions for customers in the city of Aguascalientes. These tools can help overcome the difficulties that the pandemic has imposed on the sector.

It is important to clarify that there were some limitations in conducting this research. Since the surveys were conducted during a period of quarantine in the city, the number of clients available to be surveyed decreased considerably. The digital platforms for home delivery of food had an increase in demand, so consumption habits changed during this period. However, it was possible to collect a considerable number of surveys that allowed us to glimpse the local scene.

In the future, it is recommended to replicate this research in other national and international contexts, in order to be able to compare the results and enrich the discussion around the sector. Finally, the importance of continuing with the study of factors that can contribute to improving the restaurant sector should be pointed out, since it contributes substantially to the economy and well-being of society.

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