

Corporate social responsibility initiatives in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Inicijative korporativne društvene odgovornosti kao odgovor na Kovid-19 pandemiju

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Abstract: The paper explores the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) during the COVID -19 pandemic and its implications on customer relations. Methodological framework of the paper combined literature review and correlation as the most dominant methods that provided scientific insight regarding the social responsibility initiatives and business practice during the pandemic. The empirical research was conducted from May to August 2020, on the sample of 37 companies in Serbia. The aim of the study was to demonstrate CSR initiatives that the respondent companies undertaken in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The paper has particularly analysed external CSR practice that affected customers as important stakeholders, whose behaviour was directly involved in health procedures and measures during the pandemic. The findings indicated that all companies that participated in this survey have applied CSR initiatives in their customer relations in respect of health measures during the pandemic. The majority of respondents specified disinfection of spaces and products and online support as the main commercial measures that were applied in accordance to corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: Key words: COVID-19, corporate social responsibility, CSR initiatives, customer commitment.

Sažetak: Rad istražuje ulogu korporativne društvene odgovornosti (CSR) tokom kovid – 19 pandemije i njene implikacije na odnose sa potrošačima. Metodološki okvir rada zasniva se na pregledu literature i metodu korelacije, koji su obezbedili naučni uvid u inicijative društvene odgovornosti i poslovnu praksu tokom pandemije. Empirijsko istraživanje sprovedeno je od maja do avgusta 2020. godine, na uzorku od 37 kompanija u Srbiji. Cilj istraživanja je bio da se ukaže na inicijative korporativne društvene odgovornosti, koje su ispitane kompanije preduzele kao odgovor na kovid-19 pandemiju. U radu je posebno analizirana eksterna praksa društvene odgovornosti, koja je uticala na potrošače kao značajne stejkholdere, čije je ponašanje u direktnoj vezi sa zdravstvenim procedurama i merama tokom pandemije. Rezultati su pokazali da su sve kompanije, koje su učestvovalе u istraživanju primenile CSR inicijative u svojim relacijama sa potrošačima, a u cilju poštovanja zdravstvenih mera tokom pandemije. Većina ispitanika navela je dezinfekciju površina i proizvoda i onlajn podršku kao ključne komercijalne mere koje su primenjene u sklopu korporativne društvene odgovornosti.

Ključne reči: Kovid-19, korporativna društvena odgovornost, CSR inicijative, posvećenost potrošaču.

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility is a significant concept in contemporary business environment, whose application was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The basics of CSR concept were developed in works of Howard Bowen, who indicated that the private business success is judged regarding its contribution to the general welfare (Bowen, 1953). Later, in 1960 Keith Davis claimed that businessmen have to re-examine their role and the functions of business in society (Davis, 1960). Furthermore, William C. Frederick considered that businesses' resources should also be used for broad social goals (Frederick, 1960). One of the strongest proponents of the CSR concept was the well-known author of management Peter Drucker, who stated that leaders in every sector are responsible for the community (Knapp, 2007). In the recent theory of CSR Archie Carol has made significant contribution. He linked the concept with the idea of conscious capitalism (Carroll, 2015).

In literature there are many approaches to the concept, made by different organizations, researchers and other stakeholders, which resulted in different definitions of corporate social responsibility. According to Carrol, it is defined as 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). European Commission describes CSR as the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society (European Commission, 2011). Kotler and Lee offered the following definition "commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources". The authors also used the term CSR initiatives in order to describe major activities undertaken by a corporation to support social causes and to fulfil commitments to corporate social responsibility (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

The emergence of COVID -19 pandemic which has significantly affected business functions and relations with different stakeholders, has also brought new challenges in CSR programs. Therefore, during the past year the theory and business practice have been enhanced with new findings in the field of social responsibility that came as a result of company's efforts to find solutions for current social and health problems. Recent studies of CSR initiatives in response to the pandemic could be classified regarding their relations with stakeholders in two general categories: external or internal initiatives (Aguinis et al., 2020; García - Sánchez & García-

Sánchez, 2020; Liu, Meng et al., 2020). This research is focused on external CSR practice that affected customers as important stakeholders, whose behaviour was directly involved in health procedures and measures during the pandemic. In addition, the paper was based on previous studies, which demonstrated that CSR influences consumer behaviour (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Morrison & Bridwell, 2011; Marquina & Vasquez-Parraga, 2013) and provides positive effects on customer loyalty and satisfaction (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Riviera et al., 2016; van Doorn et al., 2017; Servera-Francés & Piqueras-Tomás, 2019). Furthermore, Kim and Woo (2019) have determined that CSR has significant role during crisis and affects consumers' crisis-related behavioural intentions.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological framework of the paper combined literature review and correlation as the most dominant methods that provided scientific insight regarding the social responsibility initiatives and business practice during the pandemic. The starting point in this study was the assumption that CSR initiatives have important role in fighting the covid-19 pandemic as well as solving the social, health and economic problems that emerged as a consequence (Bapuji et al., 2020; Kramer, 2020; Mahmud et al., 2021). However, the research focused on external CSR initiatives related to customers. In accordance to this, the following hypotheses have been defined:

H01: CSR initiatives related to commercial activities with customers have been significantly applied in business practice as a response to covid-19 pandemic.

H02: During the global coronavirus pandemic, digital marketing and online communication have been important segments of CSR initiatives related to customers.

The primary phase of data collection was a critical analysis of the existing literature and the results of relevant research on CSR practice conducted during the period 2020/2021. The empirical research was conducted from May to August 2020, on the sample of 37 companies in Serbia. The aim of the study was to demonstrate CSR initiatives that the respondent companies undertaken in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The survey was based on the study conducted originally in Spain (García - Sánchez & García-Sánchez, 2020), which demonstrated the main internal and external CSR initiatives applied in business practice during the pandemic. However, this paper focused only on external, commercial

CSR practice that affected customers as important stakeholders, whose behaviour was directly involved in health procedures and measures. Therefore, the study included the following CSR initiatives: Enhancing of online supply and access to services; Telephone and online communication and support; Zero contact services; Disinfection of spaces and products; Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers; Special services for the social groups most vulnerable to the virus; Special programs to facilitate non-digital users; Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation; Production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation. The survey contained questions about the implementation of stated CSR initiatives in business practice. Management from respondent companies

answered the questions by marking the following Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree). In interpreting the obtained data SPSS program was used, with its functions of descriptive statistics and correlation.

The research sample was structured according to industry type and number of employees. The majority of respondents came from trade sector (43,24%), followed by tourism and hospitality, information and communication sector, finance and transport (Figure 1).

Regarding the number of employees, the most dominant were the companies that have more than twenty employees, which is demonstrated in the Table 1.

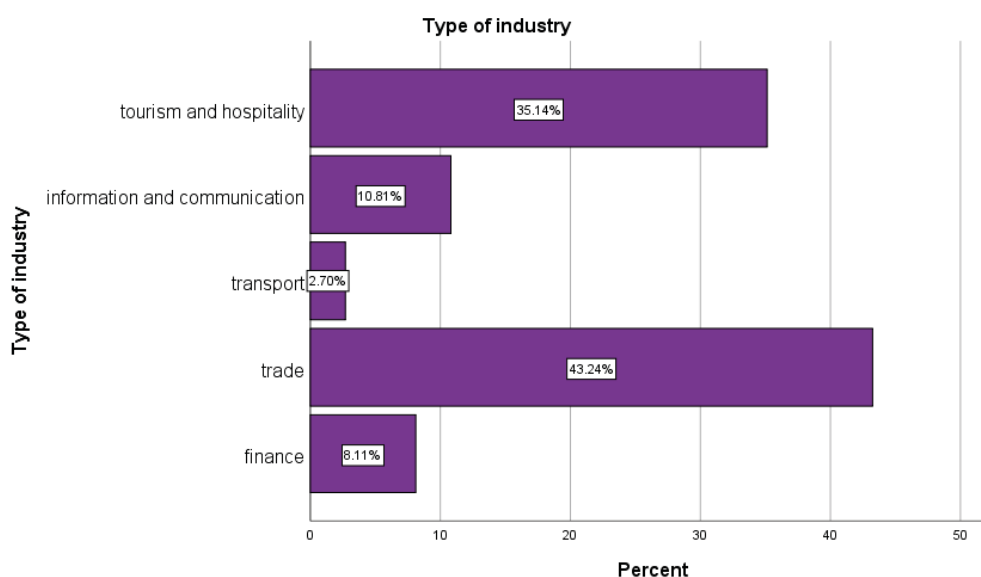


Figure 1 - The sample structure by industry type
Note: Calculated by the authors

Table 1 - Number of employees in respondent companies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	< 10	4	10.8	10.8	10.8
	10-20	5	13.5	13.5	24.3
	20-30	14	37.8	37.8	62.2
	30-40	7	18.9	18.9	81.1
	40-50	4	10.8	10.8	91.9
	>50	3	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Note: Calculated by the authors

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey indicated that all respondent companies applied some sort of CSR initiatives related to commercial activities with customers as a response to covid-19 pandemic. The majority of respondents noted disinfection of spaces and products (mean = 4.1081), mandatory use of protective equipment by customers (mean = 4.0811) and online support (mean = 4) as most dominant CSR initiatives used in business practice (Table 2). More than 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they apply disinfection of spaces and products as CSR initiative related to customers (Table 3). Furthermore around 92% of respondents agree or strongly agree that telephone and online communication and support present significant CSR

initiative that they undertake in response to covid-19 pandemic (Table 4). On the other hand, production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation (mean= 2.4595) is recognised as CSI initiative which is the least used in the business practice of companies in the sample. Only 18,9% respondents agree that they produced specific products related to pandemic as CSI initiative (Table 5).

The highest std. deviation (0.919) is recorded in answers related to providing special services for the social groups most vulnerable to the virus. It indicates that respondent's statements regarding this variable fluctuated between extreme values and varied more than in answers regarding other CSR initiatives involved in the survey.

Table 2 - CSR initiatives - descriptive statistics

		Enhancing of online supply and access to services	Telephone and online communication and support	Zero contact services	Disinfection of spaces and products	Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers	Special services for the social groups most vulnerable to the virus	Special programs to facilitate non-digital users	Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation	Production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation
N	Valid	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.7568	4.0000	3.0000	4.1081	4.0811	2.6486	3.1081	3.2432	2.4595
Std. Deviation		.89460	.52705	.91287	.73725	.59528	.91943	.90627	.76031	.80259
Minimum		2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Maximum		5.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

Note. Calculated by the authors

Table 3 - Implementation of CSR initiative: Disinfection of spaces and products

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	disagree	1	2.7	2.7	2.7
	neutral	5	13.5	16.2	16.2
	agree	20	54.1	70.3	70.3
	strongly agree	11	29.7	100.0	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Note. Calculated by the authors

Table 4 - Implementation of CSR initiative: Telephone and online communication and support

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	disagree	1	2.7	2.7	2.7
	neutral	2	5.4	5.4	8.1
	agree	30	81.1	81.1	89.2
	strongly agree	4	10.8	10.8	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Note. Calculated by the authors

Table 5 - Implementation of CSR initiative: Production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	disagree	27	73.0	73.0	73.0
	neutral	3	8.1	8.1	81.1
	agree	7	18.9	18.9	100.0
	Total	37	100.0	100.0	

Note: Calculated by the authors

In order to examine the relations between the respondent's answers regarding the implementation of CSR initiatives related to customers, we have analyzed the correlations among the variables, which are presented in Table 6. The results show that the highest Pearson Correlation ($r = 0.549$) exists between the variables "Disinfection of spaces and products" and "Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers". Furthermore, correlations are recorded between the variables "Disinfection of spaces and products" and "Zero contact services" ($r = -0.537$); "Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation" and "Special programs to facilitate non-digital users" ($r = 0.525$) as well as "Zero contact services" and "Enhancing of online supply and access to services" ($r = 0.510$).

Regarding the industry type of respondent companies, the findings indicated that this variable has negative correlations with the following CSR initiatives: "Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation" ($r = -0.434$) and "Enhancing of online supply and access to services" ($r = -0.412$). Considering this fact, we have closely analyzed the implementation of noted CSR initiatives in companies by industry type. Table 7

shows that transport companies from the sample paid special attention to continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation (mean=4), followed by the companies from trade sector (mean = 3.7). However, when interpreting this result, it should be careful due to the fact that only one transport company participated in the sample. On the other hand, companies from the trade sector were the most numerous in the sample (N=16), and consequently this result could be considered for further analysis and conclusions. The lowest mean (mean=2.75) in the report is calculated for the companies from information and communication sector, followed by the companies from tourism and hospitality (mean=2.8).

Another important CSR initiative correlated to industry type for respondent companies is "Enhancing of online supply and access to services". Report on calculated means regarding these variables is presented in Table 8. According to the calculation, the highest means are recorded in information and communication sector (mean=4.5) and trade sector (mean =4.12). On the other hand, the lowest mean (mean=2) is recorded in the case of transport company (N=1) from the sample.

Table 6 - Calculation of correlations between the variables

		Enhancing of online supply and access to services	Telephone and online communication and support	Zero contact services	Disinfection of spaces and products	Special services for the social groups most vulnerable to the virus	Type of industry	Number of employees	Production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation	Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation	Special programs to facilitate non-digital users	Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers
Enhancing of online supply and access to services	Pearson Cor.	1	.295	.510**	-.422**	.028	-.412*	.083	.121	.008	-.275	-.275
	Sig. (2-tail.)		.077	.001	.009	.868	.011	.624	.475	.964	.099	.100
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Telephone and online communication and support	Pearson Cor.	.295	1	.346*	-.071	.000	-.139	.231	.131	.208	.233	.000
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.077		.036	.674	1.000	.410	.170	.438	.217	.166	1.000
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Zero contact services	Pearson Cor.	.510**	.346*	1	-.537**	-.099	-.121	-.022	.114	-.200	-.168	-.204
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.001	.036		.001	.559	.476	.896	.503	.235	.321	.225
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Disinfection of spaces and products	Pearson Cor.	-.422**	-.071	-.537**	1	-.065	.103	-.088	-.180	.299	.315	.549**
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.009	.674	.001		.701	.544	.606	.286	.073	.058	.000
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Special services for the social groups most vulnerable to the virus	Pearson Cor.	.028	.000	-.099	-.065	1	-.144	.173	.225	-.153	-.020	-.048
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.868	1.000	.559	.701		.396	.305	.181	.368	.907	.778
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Type of industry	Pearson Cor.	-.412*	-.139	-.121	.103	-.144	1	-.206	-.267	-.434**	-.322	-.205
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.011	.410	.476	.544	.396		.221	.110	.007	.052	.223
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Number of employees	Pearson Cor.	.083	.231	-.022	-.088	.173	-.206	1	.125	.115	.152	.004
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.624	.170	.896	.606	.305	.221		.462	.497	.369	.983
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 situation	Pearson Cor.	.121	.131	.114	-.180	.225	-.267	.125	1	.176	.044	-.138
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.475	.438	.503	.286	.181	.110	.462		.298	.794	.414
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation	Pearson Cor.	.008	.208	-.200	.299	-.153	-.434**	.115	.176	1	.525**	.323
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.964	.217	.235	.073	.368	.007	.497	.298		.001	.051
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Special programs to facilitate non-digital users	Pearson Cor.	-.275	.233	-.168	.315	-.020	-.322	.152	.044	.525**	1	.395*
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.099	.166	.321	.058	.907	.052	.369	.794	.001		.015
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers	Pearson Cor.	-.275	.000	-.204	.549**	-.048	-.205	.004	-.138	.323	.395*	1
	Sig. (2-tail.)	.100	1.000	.225	.000	.778	.223	.983	.414	.051	.015	
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37	37

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: Calculated by the authors

Table 7 - Implementation of CSR initiative "Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation" by industry type

Continuous advice to clients on the risks associated with the COVID-19 situation			
Type of industry	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
finance	3.0000	3	1.00000
trade	3.6875	16	.47871
transport	4.0000	1	.
information and communication	2.7500	4	.50000
tourism and hospitality	2.8462	13	.80064
Total	3.2432	37	.76031

Note: Calculated by the authors

Table 8 - Implementation of CSR initiative "Enhancing of online supply and access to services" by industry type

Enhancing of online supply and access to services			
Type of industry	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
finance	4.0000	3	.00000
trade	4.1250	16	.50000
transport	2.0000	1	.
information and communication	4.5000	4	.57735
tourism and hospitality	3.1538	13	.98710
Total	3.7568	37	.89460

Note: Calculated by the authors

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to demonstrate CSR initiatives that involved customer commitment in response to covid -19 pandemic. The management from respondent companies in Serbia had to declare about the importance of nine different CSR initiatives that they applied in business practice. The majority of the respondents belonged to trade (N=16) and tourism and hospitality (N=13) sectors.

The findings revealed that all companies from the sample applied CSR initiatives that involved customer commitment in response to the pandemic. However, it was demonstrated that the most significant CSR initiatives in business practice were disinfection of spaces and products (mean = 4.1081), mandatory use of protective equipment by customers (mean = 4.0811) and online support (mean = 4). The survey also indicated that digital marketing and online communication have been important segments of CSR initiatives related to customers. Around 92% of respondents agree or strongly agree that telephone and online communication and support present significant CSR initiative that they undertake in response to covid-19 pandemic. On the other side, production of specific products associated with the demands during the COVID-19 was not recognised as important CSR initiative. In order to examine the relations between the variables the statistical method

of correlation was applied. The highest Pearson Correlation ($r=0.549$) was recorded between CSR initiatives "Disinfection of spaces and products" and "Mandatory use of protective equipment by customers".

The findings provided in this paper present original contribution to the research of corporate social responsibility, which faced many new challenges during the global coronavirus pandemic, but also offered many important solutions for different social, economic and health problems. Furthermore, the findings may be applied in the field of customer relationship management considering that the study involved external CSR initiatives that include customer commitment. When interpreting the results from this research, it is necessary to emphasize certain limitations. One of them is related to the conclusions that can be made about the relations between the application of CSR initiatives and the industry type. Therefore, it should be cautious when interpreting the results regarding companies from sectors such as transport, finance, information and communication, which had low share in the sample. The second limitation refers to the time dimension of the research, since the survey was conducted from May to August. This period presents the warmer part of the year, which is important fact when considering the possibilities of virus transmission.

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