

# Corporate social responsibility and millennial consumer loyalty: exploring their relationship regarding healthy eating in the fast food sector

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## Abstract

The food industry has made substantial investments in the promotion of healthy eating as part of an active lifestyle. These actions are usually part of companies' corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies that have a dual purpose: social and business. CSR is built on a network of mutually beneficial relationships between a company and its stakeholders. Therefore, the positive perception of CSR initiatives has an influence on the trust and loyalty of stakeholders. Based on evidence about the effects of the perception of CSR on stakeholder behaviour and on company evaluation, this study proposes and tests a conceptual model of the relationship between CSR perception and customer loyalty in the context of a very important and specific topic and group: healthy eating and millennial consumers. The study employs a quantitative method and structural equation modelling (SEM) with data collected from 500 online surveys. The study also evaluates the influence of other variables: consumers' interest in fast food companies' CSR initiatives related to healthy eating (INTEREST) and CSR communication on healthy eating via social media (COMMUNICATION), but unlike previous research, it focuses on variables that can be conditioned by companies. The results confirm the relationship with respect to CSR in general terms, but do not do so in relation to healthy eating. In this case, influence is conditioned by moderating variables, which suggests that COMMUNICATION influences company evaluation only when customers have a prior interest in such initiatives and when correct CSR communication exists on social media, which also affects this relationship, although in a negative direction. This research supports the academic current that promotes CSR as an investment that benefits both the company and society.

## Keywords

Communication; Corporate social responsibility; CSR; Consumer behaviour; Consumer Loyalty; Fast food; Food industry; Healthy eating; Millennials; Social media; Social networks; Structural equation modelling.



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**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## 1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is traditionally defined as the commitment of organizations to adopt measures to protect and promote the well-being of the society in which they operate, while fulfilling their own economic objectives (Carroll, 2016; McWilliams; Siegel, 2010; Reverte, 2016; Song; Wen, 2020). This relationship between CSR and the economic and financial objectives of companies is a controversial issue (Axjonow; Ernstberger; Pott, 2018; Gatti *et al.*, 2019; Song; Wen, 2020; Hsieh, 2017; Galbreath *et al.*, 2020). However, there is some consensus regarding the consideration of CSR as an intangible asset of companies that contributes to the achievement of their global strategic objectives by establishing and strengthening relationships with their main stakeholders due to their relevance for business development (Freeman; Dmytriiev; Phillips, 2021; Kotler; Kartajaya; Setiawan, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2021; Hsieh 2017).

CSR is built on a network of mutually beneficial relationships between a company and its stakeholders (Abid; Abid-Dupont; Moulins, 2020; Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021). Therefore, the positive perception of CSR initiatives has an influence on the trust and loyalty of stakeholders (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Ramesh *et al.*, 2019; Islam *et al.*, 2021), boosting, in the case of consumers, purchase intentions and actual purchases (Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; Harun; Prybutok; Prybutok, 2018; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Castro-González; Bande; Fernández-Ferrín, 2021).

In relation to this segment of stakeholders, the success and recent prominence of CSR is related to consumption patterns increasingly oriented towards social and emotional values and experiences (Özturan; Grinstein, 2021). These patterns are, in turn, the result of increasingly demanding consumers (Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; García-Jiménez; Ruiz-de-Maya; López-López, 2017; Kim, 2019), who constitute a highly competitive market that is full of very similar, almost identical, brands, products and services that can only be differentiated based on emotional values and experiences (Chae; Park, 2018; Overall, 2016; Pansari; Kumar, 2017). The subjective dimension of brands is largely developed through CSR policies and strategies (Abid; Abid-Dupont; Moulins, 2020; Ramesh *et al.*, 2019) that aim to influence consumer behaviour and loyalty (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; García-Jiménez; Ruiz-de-Maya; López-López, 2017). Hence the great academic and professional interest in the study of the effects of CSR and the ways to condition them (Abid; Abid-Dupont; Moulins, 2020; Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; Song; Wen, 2020).

The importance of CSR and the interest around it have led to the development of a significant number of research studies (Abid; Abid-Dupont; Moulins, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Vogler; Eisenegger, 2020). However, there is hardly any research on those variables that are managed or controlled by the company (Zhang; Chang, 2021) and may affect the relationship between CSR perception and stakeholders' company evaluation and, thus, consumer loyalty (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021). Other poorly researched areas are the heterogeneity that characterizes all stakeholders, including consumers, and its implications on the need to adapt CSR policies and strategies (Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; Pipatprapa; Huang; Huang, 2017). In this regard, members of the millennial generation are known for being strong defenders of CSR (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchí, 2021; Do; Sum, 2021) and for their relevance to the future of companies (Pangaribuan; Ravenia; Sijinjak, 2019; Purani; Kumar; Sahadev, 2019). These facts are precisely what justify the focus of this study on the effects of CSR on this generation.

Having delimited the object and population of study, and based on the proven effect of CSR perception on company evaluation and stakeholder loyalty (Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009), this research empirically analyses and compares this relationship, in general and with respect to such a transcendental topic as healthy eating (Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Riesmeyer; Hauswald; Mergen, 2019; World Health Organization, 2021; Yang; Weber; Grimm, 2022).

The study of the relationship between CSR, company evaluation and consumer loyalty is carried out independently, in the context of millennial consumers of fast food restaurants, to confirm the effects of CSR on consumer behaviour (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Islam *et al.*, 2021). The study also aims to evaluate the

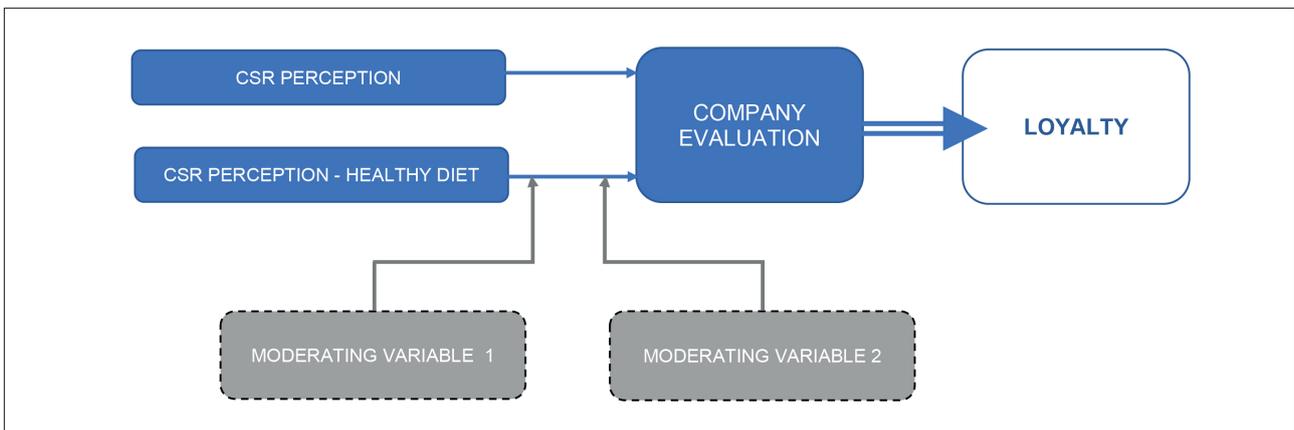


Figure 1. Initial conceptual model

influence of other variables in the aforementioned relationship (moderating variables 1 and 2) but, unlike previous research (Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009), it focuses on variables that can be conditioned and managed by companies (which is one of its main contributions) and on a very important and specific topic and public: healthy eating and millennial consumers. The initial conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Healthy eating in the field of CSR

The food industry has made substantial investments in the promotion of healthy eating as part of an active lifestyle (Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Potvin-Kent *et al.*, 2020; Souza-Monteiro; Hooker, 2017). These actions are usually part of the CSR strategies companies implement to reach two types of objectives: social and business (Abid; Abid-Dupont; Moulines, 2020; Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021).

From society's point of view, the social and economic cost of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) associated with food (Potvin-Kent *et al.*, 2020; Thamer, 2016; World Health Organization, 2021) justifies their consideration in the social dimension of CSR, regarding health (Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; McLennan; Banks, 2019), along with other types of initiatives related to other fully consolidated dimensions of CSR, such as environmental sustainability and a wide range of causes related to vulnerable groups and minorities (Børing, 2019; Lee, 2020; Sharma, 2019). In this regard, although several studies have found that stakeholders value social causes more than environmental or animal causes (Kim; Kim; Kim, 2019; Lafferty; Edmondson, 2014), more recent studies have concluded that, in the social area, health arouses less interest among companies and even consumers (Chae; Park, 2018; Saxton *et al.*, 2019).

In addition, studies on CSR policies and strategies developed around food confirm that they do not cause transcendental changes, since they focus on the food supply instead of other more necessary actions that promote a real social change through education and training, as well as structural change through the modification of the composition of food products to make them healthy (Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Potvin-Kent *et al.*, 2020). In particular, education and educommunication (Jiménez-Marín *et al.*, 2020) in healthy eating and the practice of physical activity are crucial and, although they are more frequent than product-level actions (Potvin-Kent *et al.*, 2020; Souza-Monteiro; Hooker, 2017), are still far from being socially desirable (Slater *et al.*, 2018; Teng; Chih, 2022). Hence the interest in studies on the effectiveness of CSR communication on healthy eating from a social point of view, in relation to consumers' education and training (Fatemi; Dube, 2021), and from a business point of view, focused on consumer loyalty (Homburg; Stierl; Bornemann, 2013; Islam *et al.*, 2021).

### 2.3. Consumers' interests

The relationship between consumers' interest in the cause promoted in a CSR campaign and the effectiveness of such CSR campaign to establish long-lasting relationships between organizations and consumers, is a proven fact (Barbeito-Caamaño; Chalmeta, 2020; Fatemi; Dube, 2021; Saxton *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, identifying the environmental or social issues arouse greater interest among consumers is necessary to design CSR policies and strategies (Chae; Park, 2018; Saxton *et al.*, 2019) capable of capturing consumers' attention and interests and laying the foundations for their loyalty and the achievement of strategic business objectives by complying with the inescapable CSR premise of mutual benefit (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Kwon; Mai; Peng, 2020). As Etter (2013) points out, when it comes to the design of CSR strategies, companies must identify stakeholders' needs and expectations and turn them into the axis of their CSR initiatives and communications. These actions improves the company's image, reputation and stakeholder engagement.

Regarding the identification of stakeholders' interests, specifically in the field of digital communication, authors such as Chae and Park (2018), Barbeito-Caamaño and Chalmeta (2020) and Steinberg (2020) highlight the im-

“ A relationship between CSR perception, company evaluation and consumer loyalty is confirmed ”

portance of big data and the creation of models and techniques to monitor and analyze them. This information is key to the development of CSR, a construct that due to its evolutionary nature (Carroll, 1999) requires constant research and feedback to guarantee the achievement of its business and social objectives (Chae; Park, 2018; Cortado; Chalmeta, 2016). In fact, big data analysis allows companies to collect relevant information about the interests of their stakeholders, including consumers, and use it to ensure strategic CSR decision-making (Farache; Tetchner; Kollat, 2018; Steinberg, 2020; Pansari; Kumar, 2017). Research in this area also confirms the key role of social media as a prior source of information for stakeholders (Chae; Park, 2018; Saxton *et al.*, 2019) and as a space to verify the effectiveness of CSR initiatives, through the analysis of related contents and user interaction (Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2021; Song; Wen, 2020). The role of social media as a source of information and feedback is added to that of other key CSR communication channels (Chae; Park, 2018; Overall, 2016). This literature review lays the foundation for this research, which, in line with Saxton *et al.* (2019) and based on Signalling Theory (Bergh *et al.*, 2014; Spence, 1973), considers that CSR initiatives that are focused on issues of interest for consumers, established according to counter signals, and the communication of such initiatives via social media communication, as signals, influence and promote consumer loyalty.

Consumer interest is thus established as a moderating variable in the relationship under study, which can be influenced by the company if it has the necessary tools to understand it (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Moderating variable 2

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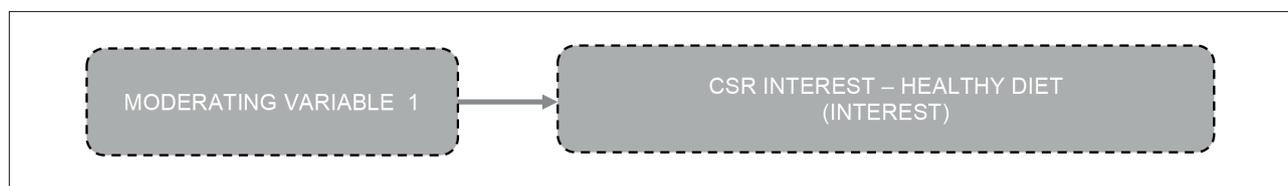


Figure 3. Moderating variable 1

## 2.4. Hypothesis development

Based on the previous statements regarding CSR, CSR communication and the leading role of social media in this area (Overall, 2016; Suárez-Rico; Gómez-Villegas; García-Benau, 2018), and the proven interest in healthy eating (Barata-Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2020; Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Lee, 2020) among the millennial population (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Riesmeyer; Hauswald; Mergen, 2019), this research aims to delve into the proven relationship between CSR perception, company evaluation and consumer loyalty (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021) in the context of millennial consumers and the fast food sector. The focus on this sector is due to its relevance in the food industry in regard to healthy eating (Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2016; Farah; Shahzad, 2020), especially among millennial consumers (Harun; Prybutok; Prybutok, 2018; Farah; Shahzad, 2020), and due to its relation to NCDs (Lin; Mou; Lagoe, 2011; Stender; Dyerberg; Astrup, 2007).

Consumers' prior interest in CSR initiatives on healthy eating is required for their perception of companies' CSR communication to influence their evaluation of such companies

In this sense, based on the literature review, this study assumes the influence of company evaluation on consumer loyalty (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009; Park; Kim, 2019) and raises new questions related to the field of study and the variables that may moderate the relationship between CSR perception and company evaluation, focusing on variables that can be controlled by companies:

- Moderating variable 1: millennial consumers' interest in fast food companies' CSR initiatives related to healthy eating (INTEREST).
- Moderating variable 2: CSR communication on healthy eating via social media (COMMUNICATION).

This approach has led to the formulation of the study's research hypotheses and proposed conceptual model (Figure 4):

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The greater the INTEREST, the greater the importance given to COMMUNICATION.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The better the perception of fast food companies' CSR (PERCEPTION1), in general terms, the better the evaluation of such companies (EVALUATION).

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The better the perception of fast food companies' CSR communication on healthy eating (PERCEPTION2), the better the EVALUATION of such companies.

This last hypothesis (H3), focused on the selected field of study, is divided into the following two sub-hypotheses about the role of two moderating variables:

Hypothesis 3.1 (H3.1). The greater the INTEREST, the greater the influence of PERCEPTION2 in EVALUATION.

Hypothesis 3.2 (H3.2). The greater the importance given to COMMUNICATION, the greater the influence of PERCEPTION2 in EVALUATION.

## 3. Method

The analytical and empirical part of this study relies on the use of quantitative analysis (Batthyány; Cabrera, 2011). The fieldwork was carried out in Spain between January and March 2021. Data were collected by means of a survey questionnaire, which was validated using Cronbach's Alpha and other reliability measures (Cronbach, 1947; 1951). The questionnaire was pilot tested on a sample of 50 customers of fast food restaurants. The results of these preliminary tests were used to improve the questionnaire. The final version of the questionnaire was completed online, on a voluntary basis, by a sample of 500 customers of fast food restaurants. The final results were used to test the research hypotheses by means of structural equation modelling (SEM) (Fornell; Larcker, 1981), using the *Lisrel* statistical software package (v8.80). The hypotheses focused on explaining the relationship between the study variables and on the influence of certain variables on the supposed relationships.

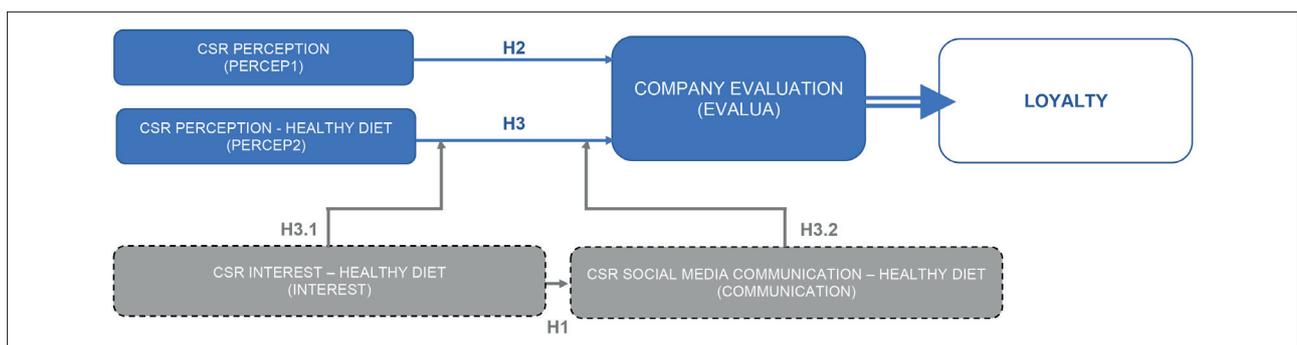


Figure 4. Proposed conceptual model

Note: The abbreviation summary has been included in the Annex.

The procedure and method employed in this study have been implemented and validated in other research works on CSR, with the same and other statistical programs (Pérez; García-de-los-Salmones; Liu, 2019; Schaefer; Terlutter; Diehl, 2019; Sipilä *et al.*, 2021; Ortiz-Martínez; Marín-Hernández; Santos-Jaén, 2023), due to the validity of the analytical model for non-observable variables (Fornell; Larcker, 1981; Huarng; Yu, 2019). Likewise, their suitability for hypothesis testing has also been verified (Baron; Kenny, 1986; Civelek, 2018; Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009; Huarng; Yu, 2019).

### 3.1. Sample

Regarding the sample, both in the preliminary and final stages, respondents had to be fast food restaurant customers and meet the following criteria: belong to the millennial generation and be an undergraduate student. The selection of people belonging to this generation is due to their relevance from the business point of view, given their purchasing power and because they also represent future consumers (Martínez-Sala; Segarra-Saavedra; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2018; Martínez-Sala; Monserrat-Gauchi; Quiles-Soler, 2019; Simonato; Mori, 2015); and also because they manifest greater social awareness than previous generations, which translates into a greater interest in CSR (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Waples; Brachle, 2020). With regard to their university education, these young people make up a segment that has been validated as an effective substitute for other profiles, like non-students and adults, in research on CSR (Sen; Bhattacharya; Korschun, 2006; Waples; Brachle, 2020). Regarding the business sector, the fast food sector has been chosen due to its social impact (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Bathurst; Sayers; Monin, 2008), as well as its relevance within the food industry in general, from the perspective of health (Heikkurinen; Forsman-Hugg, 2011; Maloni; Brown, 2006). Within the fast food sector, research has focused on franchise companies due to its relevance and importance within this business system (Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2021; Tormo Franquicias Consulting, 2020; Martínez-Sala; Peña-Acuña, 2018).

### 3.2. Measures and procedure

Once the sample was selected, the survey questionnaire was designed according to the research hypotheses, resulting in a total of 15 items, divided into five sections. The first one focuses on INTEREST. This concept is used to measure the functional or utilitarian value associated to CSR and refers to the degree of relevance respondents attach to healthy eating and CSR measures. The items that are evaluated to determine INTEREST have been established based on previous research in this area (Bhattacharya; Korschun; Sen, 2009; Chomvilailuk; Butcher, 2016; Sheth; Newman; Gross, 1991).

The following section of the survey focuses on COMMUNICATION, and considers aspects related to fast food brands' communications about food in social networks and to respondents' use of these channels and information. The questions are based on the key role that communication plays in the field of CSR (Kim; Ferguson, 2014; 2018) especially via social networks (Saxton *et al.*, 2019). The third section measures the perception of companies' CSR initiatives in general (PERCEPTION1). Following Marín, Ruiz and Rubio (2009), respondents' perception of the CSR actions of organizations was measured using a three-item scale developed by Sen, Bhattacharyay and Korschun (2006). Considering the focus of this research, this section also includes another scale to specifically measure the perception of CSR initiatives related to healthy eating (PERCEPTION2). The design of the latter scale, which also has three items, is based on the previous one (Sen; Bhattacharya; Korschun, 2006), and on other scales oriented to the food industry (Grunert; Hieke; Wills, 2014; Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Wei *et al.*, 2018). For its part, the fifth and final section centres on measuring company evaluation (EVALUATION), using a three-item scale developed by Mohr and Webb (2005).

In order to evaluate the last three sections, focused on company perception and evaluation, a specific company was chosen, following Marín, Ruiz and Rubio (2009). To this end, a list of the main companies in the fast food sector was extracted from the *Top 500 Franchises Ranking* published annually by the prestigious firm *Franchise Direct*. The pilot questionnaire asked respondents, young university students who are customers of fast food restaurants, to select from the list of franchises those they consumed and followed on social networks. These criteria were chosen based on one of the main themes of this research related to the influence of CSR social media communication on company evaluation and consumer loyalty (Aguinis; Glavas, 2012; Chomvilailuk; Butcher, 2016; Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Mohr; Webb, 2005).

The results concluded that the fast food brand with the highest number of customers and followers was *Domino's Pizza*. Accordingly, the questions included in the final survey measured company perception and evaluation in relation to this franchise.

The set of questions included in the CSR survey are evaluated individually using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 (*strongly disagree*) is the lowest score, and 5 (*strongly agree*) is the highest score. This scale was selected because it was used in the research studies that served as starting points to develop this questionnaire: the research on CSR perception carried out by Sen, Bhattacharyay and Korschun (2006) and the research on company evaluation developed by Mohr and Webb (2005). In addition, the 5-point Likert scale has also been used by Bae and Cameron (2006), Lerro *et al.*, (2019) and Rifon *et al.*, (2004) for the study of CSR. All variables and corresponding response scales are included in the Annex.

Companies can influence consumer loyalty by generating interest in a specific topic or issue of their choice. The recommendation for companies in this regard is: respect the pursuit of mutual benefit as a fundamental premise of CSR

Prior to the hypothesis testing process, to verify and validate the questionnaire, an initial version was administered to a convenience sample of 50 respondents who met the requirements established for the final sample.

The *PSYCH* package of the *R* program (version 3.4.3) was used to process the collected data and determine the Cronbach's Alpha and other reliability measures of the five sections of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Questionnaire reliability measures

	Alpha	St. Alpha	Lambda6	R. Mean	LSL	USL
INTEREST	0.70	0.70	0.65	0.43	0.55	0.84
COMMUNICATION	0.73	0.75	0.75	0.50	0.62	0.83
PERCEPTION1	0.56	0.52	0.69	0.27	0.35	0.77
PERCEPTION2	0.71	0.71	0.63	0.45	0.57	0.85
COMMUNICATION	0.77	0.76	0.75	0.52	0.65	0.88

Table 1 shows Cronbach's Alpha (Alpha) and Cronbach's alpha based on standardized items (St. Alpha) (Cronbach, 1947; 1951); Guttman's Lambda6 estimate of reliability (Lambda6); the mean correlations between questions (R. Mean); and the lower specification limits (LSL) and upper specification limits (USL) of the confidence intervals for Cronbach's Alpha.

Some of the items in the questionnaire were reformulated to reach an acceptable level of reliability in the Cronbach alpha test, which is above 0.7 (Frías-Navarro, 2022; George; Mallery, 2011). To be precise, two questions were adjusted: one related to PERCEPTION1 (Sen; Bhattacharya; Korschun, 2006) and one related to EVALUATION (Mohr; Webb, 2005). Table 1 shows the results achieved after the adjustments. In general terms, and following George and Mallery (2011) and Frías-Navarro (2022), the achieved levels guarantee the reliability of the questionnaire items to address the CSR dimensions under study. However, in the case of PERCEPTION1, the final Cronbach's Alpha, even after the reformulation of one of its questions, remained at 0.56, but it was deemed acceptable because these questions had been validated in previous research (Sen; Bhattacharya; Korschun, 2006; Sipilä *et al.*, 2021) and because, as Nunnally (1977) points out, it is logical and admissible to accept Cronbach's Alpha values below 0.7 (but greater than 0.5) in the first phases of the research. Based on the previous, it was concluded that overall reliability was acceptable.

Cronbach's Alpha was complemented with Lambda6, which is a more impartial measure, since it is less sensitive to the number of items. The results in this area corroborate the results obtained with Cronbach's Alpha (Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009; Pérez; García-de-los-Salmones; Liu, 2019). Likewise, the resulting R. Mean indicates that the correlation between the questions included in each section is considerable, which confirms its acceptance.

The final survey was created using *Google Forms* and was distributed through a group of randomly chosen university professors who agreed to collaborate in the research. These professors invited their students to participate in the research project through a brief face-to-face presentation and then sent them the link to the online survey via university email platforms. Once the age and education-level participation requirements were assured, the collaborating professors made sure survey participants were customers of one or more fast food restaurant chains. The voluntary survey was answered by 500 students from different degree programs offered by different Spanish public universities. So the final sample was selected using convenience sampling methods that have also been implemented and validated in studies with similar scope and purpose which supports and guarantees the results and conclusions of this study (Lim, Sung; Lee, 2018; Sen; Bhattacharya; Korschun, 2006; Waples; Brachle, 2020).

### 3.3. Hypothesis testing

The results of the survey questionnaire completed by 500 customers of fast food franchise companies were analysed using a SEM (Fornell; Larcker, 1981) created with the *Lisrel* statistical software package (v8.80) for hypothesis testing. Table 2 presents the proposed equations to test each of the research hypotheses.

Hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 analyze the relationship between the selected variables. Hypotheses H3.1 and H3.2 evaluate the mediating role of specific research variables (INTEREST and COMMUNICATION) in the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION (H3), which is the specific hypothesis about the sector under analysis. The testing of this type of hypotheses in which the moderating role of a variable on a relationship is evaluated by means of SEM is based on the research carried out by Civelek (2018) and Baron and Kenny (1986).

Since the items corresponding to each of the parameters under analysis (INTEREST, COMMUNICATION, PERCEPTION1, PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION) are evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, estimations were made with the ordinal variable option and the Weighted Least Squares (WLS) technique, which it is the most suitable for this type of measures (Becker; Ismail, 2016; Civelek, 2018).

Table 2. Hypothesis equations

Hypothesis	Equation
H1	COMMUNICATION = INTEREST
H2	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION1
H3	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2
H3.1	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2 + INTEREST
H3.2	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2 + COMMUNICATION

Figure 5 illustrates the relationships between the latent variables considered in the study (INTEREST, PERCEPTION1, etc.) and their relationship with the questionnaire items (Annex), as well as the hypotheses considered in table 2.

Table 3 shows the main goodness-of-fit measures of the model, generated with the *Lisrel* statistical software package. The values obtained from the proposed model are considered acceptable based on the ranges established by *Civelek* (2018).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Structural equation model

Table 4 summarizes the results of SEM for hypothesis testing, identifying hypotheses, equations, and the resulting relationship between variables. The results, the standardized coefficient (*b*) and the statistical contrast (*t*-student) are shown in the fourth and fifth columns.

The results shown in Table 4 support all hypotheses, except for H3. With regard to H1, it has been confirmed that the INTEREST variable affects the COMMUNICATION variable in the positive direction, and consequently that the greater the interest of respondents in fast food companies' CSR initiatives related to healthy eating, the more attention they pay to CSR communication on healthy eating via social networks (H1; *b* 0.34).

Table 4. Structural equation modelling results for hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Equation	Path	Standardized coefficients ( <i>b</i> )	Statistic contrast ( <i>t</i> -student)	Contrast
H1	COMMUNICATION = INTEREST	CO -> INT	0.34	7.28	Supported
H2	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION1	PER1 -> EV	0.67	17.93	Supported
H3	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2	PER2 -> EV	0.09	0.76	Non Supported
H3.1	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2 + INTEREST	INT -> (PER2->EV)	0.37	7.11	Supported
H3.2	EVALUATION = PERCEPTION2 + COMMUNICATION	COM -> (PER2->EV)	-0.41	-6.55	Supported

The same happens, and to a greater extent, with H2 (*b* 0.67), providing statistical evidence that the PERCEPTION1 variable affects the EVALUATION variable in the positive direction. However, when it comes to the specific scope of this research, hypothesis H3 is not supported, i.e., the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION is not confirmed.

In this regard, however, it is observed how the inclusion of moderating variables in the equation alters the result described. In this way: the variables INTEREST and COMMUNICATION play a mediator role in the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION, although in a different way, as detailed below in relation to each of the sub-hypotheses.

- H3.1: INTEREST affects the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION in the positive direction (H3.1; *b* 0.37).
- H3.2: COMMUNICATION affects the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION in the negative direction (H3.2; *b* -0.41).

In this sense, it can be said that there is statistical evidence to affirm that when respondents are interested in fast food companies' CSR initiatives related to healthy eating (INTEREST), there is a relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION, and in the same way, that when respondents receive information about related issues from the social network accounts of the same companies (COMMUNICATION), the perception of fast food companies' CSR initiatives (PERCEPTION2) influences their evaluation (EVALUATION) in the negative direction.

In summary, the statistical data clearly indicates that consumers of fast food restaurants are interested in CSR initiatives related healthy eating. In this sense, it should be noted that the mean of the aspects related to the evaluation of INTEREST is 4 (Annex and Figure 6) and that this INTEREST influences both consumers' desire to seek information on this subject on social networks (COMMUNICATION) and the relationship between PERCEPTION2 and EVALUATION. For each of the elements through which INTEREST is evaluated (Annex: I1, I2, I3), the following figure shows the Me result.

Table 3. Goodness-of-fit measures

Goodness-of-fit measure	Value
Chi-square	141.76
Grado de libertad	49
RMSEA	0.062
SRMR	0.064
NNFI	0.93
CFI	0.94

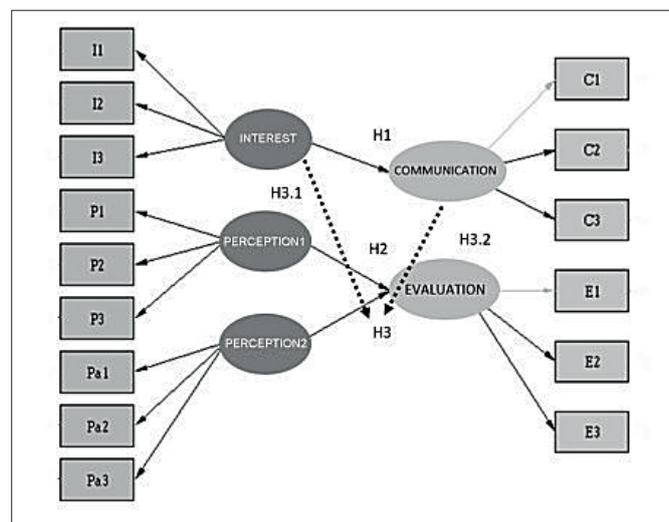


Figure 5. Conceptual diagram of the model.

Note: In the annex you can consult the questions associated to the variables under analysis I, P, Pa, C and E.

Figure 6 shows a strong concentration of responses at a rating of 4. This implies that, for a large number of the respondents, healthy eating is very important (item I1 of the questionnaire), as well as fast food companies developing CSR policies and strategies related to healthy eating (item I3 of the questionnaire). They also positively value that these types of companies carry out CSR actions of any kind (item I2 of the questionnaire).

It has also been found that respondents obtain information about CSR initiatives related to healthy eating from social networks (COMMUNICATION), with a mean between 3 and 4 (Annex and Figure 7), and that this negatively affects company evaluation through PERCEPTION2. Figure 7 shows the result of the Me for each of the elements by which the COMMUNICATION is evaluated (Annex: C1, C2 and C3).

Similar to what happened with INTEREST, regarding COMMUNICATION (Figure 7), we also observe a higher number of responses with a rating of 4 for the defined aspects in its measurement (C1, C2, and C3). However, it is worth noting that, while in the case of INTEREST, the majority of responses are distributed between scores 4 and 5, in the case of COMMUNICATION, the predominance is between scores 4 and 3.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The study has confirmed the relationship between CSR perception and company evaluation among millennials in the fast food sector (H2) and, consequently, and their impact on the loyalty of these consumers in line with previous research (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bandede, 2021; Marín; Ruiz; Rubio, 2009; Ogunmokun; Timur, 2022).

However, in relation to the influence of CSR initiatives related to healthy eating (H3), the results condition their impact on company evaluation to the intervention of, at least, the moderating variables considered in this research: INTEREST and COMMUNICATION. In this sense, it has been found that millennials' prior interest in CSR initiatives on healthy eating is required for their perception of fast food companies' CSR communication on healthy eating to influence their evaluation of such companies (H3.1). This entails great advantages for those companies that can analyze and monitor the interest of millennials, and of a large part of their stakeholders, in social media, to guarantee the effectiveness of their CSR strategies from the point of view of consumer loyalty and efficiently identify the issues on which to focus their CSR policies and strategies (Chae; Park, 2018; Saxton *et al.*, 2019; Do; Sum, 2021).

It is also worth noting the relevance of the results in relation to other marketing approaches that champion the use of the power of communication to generate interest in specific topics (Eisend; Tarrahi, 2022; Kotler; Kartajaya; Setiawan, 2019; Li; Peng, 2021), insofar as they confirm that companies can influence consumer loyalty by generating interest in a specific topic or issue of their choice. This raises important ethical questions that justify stakeholders' distrust in the true purpose of CSR (Hoque *et al.*, 2018; Lee, 2017; 2020). The only relevant recommendation for companies in this regard is for them to absolutely respect the pursuit of mutual benefit as a fundamental premise of CSR.

The results regarding INTEREST and its relationship with the other moderating variable, COMMUNICATION, point out that the more interested millennials are in fast food companies' CSR initiatives on healthy eating, the more attention they pay to their CSR social media communication on this topic (H1). In this sense, the role of social media as key channel for CSR communication has been verified (Reilly; Larya, 2018; Song; Wen, 2020; Vogler; Eisenegger, 2020), particularly in

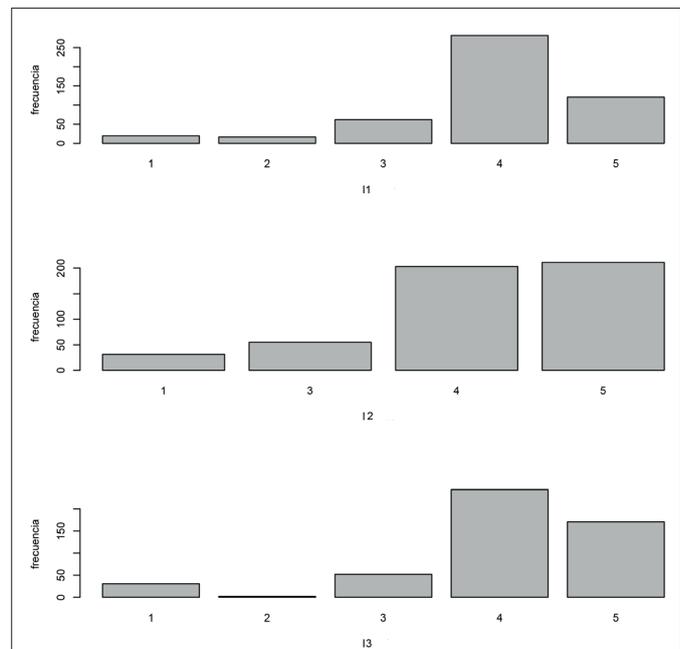


Figure 6. Graphic distribution of INTEREST-related questions

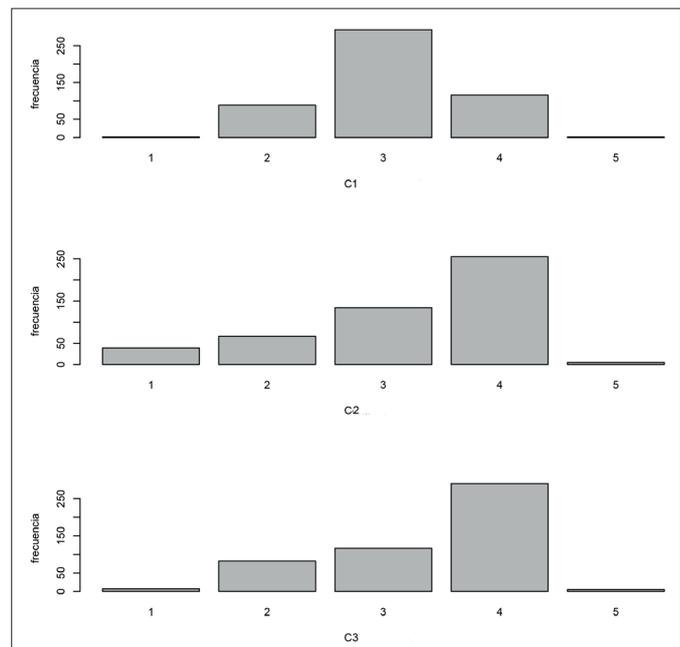


Figure 7. Graphic distribution of COMMUNICATION-related questions

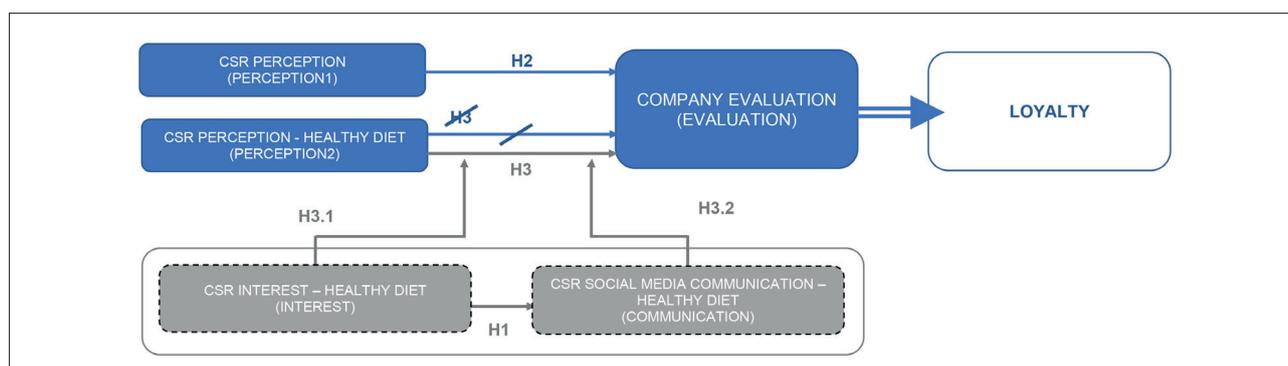


Figure 8. Verified conceptual model

the case of this generation of digital natives (Boccia; Covino; Sarnacchiaro, 2018; Ramos-Soler; Martínez-Sala; Campillo-Alhama, 2019), and in the context of food-related issues (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Riesmeyer; Hauswald; Mergen, 2019).

CSR communication influences the relationship between the perception of CSR regarding healthy eating and the evaluation of fast food companies

The close relationship between INTEREST and COMMUNICATION supports the last confirmed hypothesis regarding the influence of COMMUNICATION on the relationship between the perception of CSR regarding healthy eating and the evaluation of fast food companies (H3.2). The verified conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 8.

The results confirm the interest of millennials in CSR (Lerro *et al.*, 2019; Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2021) and the importance of CSR communication via social media (Chae; Park, 2018; Overall, 2016; Vogler; Eisenegger, 2020). Likewise, the results reveal that inadequate management is causing the perception of the company's CSR to negatively influence consumers' evaluation of the company.

In this sense, and depending on the CSR expectations of millennial consumers, and stakeholders in general, it should be noted that CSR communication is a great challenge for many companies from a business point of view, based on its impact on consumer loyalty (Lee, 2020; Hsieh, 2017; Castro-González; Bande; Fernández-Ferrín, 2021) as well as from a social perspective, based on its educommunicative dimension (Teng; Chih, 2022). Companies typically disseminate their CSR policies via their websites (Axjonow; Ernstberger; Pott, 2018; Chae; Park, 2018; Iazzi *et al.*, 2020; Arena; Azzone; Mapelli, 2019) and do not have a CSR communication strategy to coordinate all the channels included in their global communication strategy (Martínez-Sala; Quiles-Soler; Monserrat-Gauchi, 2021; Song; Wen, 2020) and to articulate informative objectives with educational objectives, which are fundamental in the field of CSR (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Potvin-Kent *et al.*, 2020; Saxton *et al.*, 2019; Hsieh, 2017). Informing and educating must be in themselves CSR actions that will help companies to awaken the interest of consumers for relevant issues such as healthy eating, the object of this research. The existing literature contains little knowledge about the use of CSR to arouse the interest of stakeholders on a specific issue, despite its relevance for the effectiveness of CSR communication, this being one of the contributions of this research.

Moreover, based on the theoretical frameworks of CSR communication strategies oriented to participation (Morsing; Schultz, 2006; Arena; Azzone; Mapelli, 2019) and the results (Du; Bhattacharya; Sen, 2010), this study is a relevant contribution to the academic and professional fields given the scarce and yet necessary knowledge about the interrelationship between CSR perception and consumer behaviour (Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; Galbreath *et al.*, 2020; Jin; He, 2018). In this regard, although the moderating variables of this relationship have been addressed in previous research (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2020; Fernández-Ferrín; Castro-González; Bande, 2021; Lee, 2020; Saxton *et al.*, 2019; Galbreath *et al.*, 2020), those variables whose management largely depends on the company itself, as proposed in this study, have not been specifically considered. This approach and consideration contribute to the understanding of practices that guarantee the effectiveness of CSR strategies, which in turn has an impact on business and social development. In fact, this research on the effects of CSR on consumer behaviour supports the academic current that promotes CSR as an investment that benefits both the company and society (Boccia; Malgeri; Covino, 2019; Prasad; Kumar, 2022; Epure, 2022).

Finally, despite the interesting conclusions that have been drawn from the results, this research is not without limitations, which constitute very interesting new lines of research, in light of the relevance and interest of the object of study. Regarding the sample of companies, although it was correctly selected and validated, it will be necessary and convenient to extend the study to other companies in the fast food sector, and even to other sectors of the restaurant and food service industry. Likewise, it is desirable to continue comparing the results regarding millen-

CSR communication is a great challenge for many companies from a business point of view, based on its impact on consumer loyalty

nial consumers with those of other generations of digital natives and even digital immigrants to achieve a wider view, which is required in sectors marked by globalization and a deep desire for individuation. Finally, qualitative research is required to delve into the responses of stakeholders and their CSR expectations (Reinecke; Arnold; Palazzo, 2016), since they are the basis for the success of strategies in this area (Barbeito-Caamaño; Chalmeta, 2020; Chae; Park, 2018; Saxton et al., 2019).

“The role of social media as key channel for CSR communication has been verified”

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## 7. Annex

**Table A.1. Summary of abbreviations**

Term	Abbreviation
CSR PERCEPTION	PERCEPTION1
CSR PERCEPTION - HEALTHY DIET	PERCEPTION2
COMPANY EVALUATION	EVALUATION
CSR INTEREST – HEALTHY DIET	INTEREST
CSR SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION – HEALTHY DIET	COMMUNICATION

**Table A.2. Measurement instruments**

Variables and corresponding response scales	$\alpha$	Me	Mo	SD
<b>A. INTEREST: CSR Interest (healthy eating)</b> (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	<b>0.70</b>			
Healthy eating is a very important aspect in my everyday life.		4	4	0.9133
As far as fast food companies are concerned, CSR is a very important aspect in my everyday life. Fast food companies and organizations must develop CSR policies and strategies.		4	4	1.0374
As far as fast food companies are concerned, CSR related to food issues is a very important aspect in my everyday life. Fast food companies should develop CSR policies and strategies that promote healthy eating.		4	4	1.0100
<b>B. COMMUNICATION: CSR Social Media Communication</b> (healthy eating) (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	<b>0.73</b>			
I am a social media user.		3	3	0.6494
I follow brands on social networks.		4	4	0.9697
I am interested in healthy eating and obtain information about it from the corporate social networks of the fast food sector.		4	4	0.8215
<b>C. PERCEPTION1: CSR Perception</b> (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	<b>0.56</b>			
This company treats its employees well		2	2	0.6648
This is a socially responsible company		2	2	0.6956
This company supports minorities and vulnerable groups (women, children, etc.).		2	2	0.6799
<b>D. PERCEPTION2: CSR PERCEPTION (Healthy eating)</b> (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	<b>0.71</b>			
X is socially responsible, from the point of view of sustainable production that protects the environment and people (healthy products)		2	2	0.5314
X performs, promotes, informs about healthy eating habits (educommunication)		2	2	0.5492
X performs actions related to healthy eating habits (nutritional composition of their food)		1	1	0.6088
<b>E. EVALUATION. Company evaluation</b> (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	<b>0.77</b>			
My opinion about company X is favourable		2	1	0.6745
My opinion about company X is good		3	2	0.7984
My opinion about company X is beneficial		3	1	0.6798