

A proposed scenario to characterize costumers' perceptions on social responsibility

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Abstract. Water and sewer companies face the challenge of improving customers' satisfaction, simultaneously with their awareness on environmental issues. Results provided by surveys are essential for environment management and to monitor customer perception on services quality of water companies. However, their activity is strongly linked with social responsibility because they provide vital services to communities. This study proposes an innovative approach based on a longitudinal study that makes possible to compare the customers' perception on the provided services that have been linked with social responsibility dimensions, in the case of a water company Aquatim, Timisoara, Romania. The proposed research scenario is useful for improving the communication strategy when developing social responsibility activities and actions that prompt services quality improvements.

1 Introduction

It is worth mentioning that water supply and sewerage services fall within the broader sphere of public services of general economic interest, whose unitary regulation in the European Union started in 2001, with the launch of the "Green Paper" [1]. The water sector is an economic area that provides vital services to communities, contributes to environmental protection, but can also be viewed from the perspective of income generation, employment and can easily make connections with other sectors. In recent years, the announced water crisis, as an estimated phenomenon due to global warming [2], reinforced the unanimously accepted view that this sector is a priority and of greatest interest to the economy [3]. The world's water sector is a decisive and critical one in the evolution of society, which guarantees food, sanitation, health, and well-being. According to a "WSSTP Water Vision 2030" report: "without this sector, anything else in the global economy would fail" [4].

Environmental management and sustainable development of water sector are of major concern [5]. Water utilities are facing challenges for providing high quality services while reducing the demand [6]. Implementation of new technologies and practices require experiments and frameworks to address the complexity and uncertainty of acceptance and

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social impacts of water conservation practices [7]. Population increase, economic growth and lifestyle changes can adversely impact the water demand [8]. Hence, environmentalists have been directing the water sectors toward sustainable management practices [9].

Decision makers must keep in mind that water services have an invaluable price for the public budget and society's welfare. However, due to the specific features of the water service, the related utilities are prone to inefficiency and these facts could generate customers' dissatisfaction. Currently, water and sewer companies face the challenge of improving customers' satisfaction, simultaneously with their awareness on environmental issues [10]. Results provided by surveys are essential for environment management and to monitor customer perception on services quality of water companies [10, 11]. At the same time, the implementation of a constant and professional communication strategy with customers and the community could support the efficiency of crisis management (water services problems, complains) and contribute to a good image of the water company on the market [10].

This study proposes an innovative approach based on a longitudinal study that makes possible to compare the customers' perception on the water sector that have been linked with social responsibility dimensions. The research context is related to the water company Aquatim, Timisoara, Romania (among locations and temporal periods).

2 The research background and context

2.1 Brief literature review on corporate social responsibility

In the literature, on the question "What is corporate social responsibility (CSR)?", are given answers that converge around the contribution that organisations make to the development of society. Supporting and respecting fundamental human rights, the right to free association, the elimination of all forms of forced labour, the fight against corruption, the promotion of environmental responsibility is just some of the principles covered by CSR initiatives, projects, or actions. Thus, the CSR concept remains an essential part of the language and business practice, as it constitutes support for numerous other management theories, being consistent with what the public expects of today's organisations.

Sheehy in 2015 has summarize in a very cited article the aspects regarding CSR definition by mention that "the ubiquity of the term CSR threatens its carrying any distinctive meaning. Despite its long history no consensus has been developed among the industry participants, academics or other interested parties. After a careful review of the complications and complexities of the CSR debate and distinct disciplinary definitions, the article turns to approach the problem of definition using the philosophy of science. It applies a scientific definitional approach of genus, differentia and species to arrive at a definition of CSR as international private business self-regulation" [12]. Further, as propagated by ISO 26000, when stated the definition of the approach or concept the standard compare and position it in report to other contemporary points of view; scientists and practitioners formulate critique ideas on the ISO 26000's CSR definition.

Most popular, even in the scientific community, have become the point of views of United Nations: "Corporate Social Responsibility is a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders. CSR is generally understood as being the way through which a company achieves a balance of economic, environmental, and social imperatives (so call, the Triple-Bottom-Line approach, TBL), while at the same time addressing the expectations of shareholders and stakeholders. In this sense it is important to draw a distinction between CSR, which can be a strategic business management concept, and

charity, sponsorships, or philanthropy. Even though the latter can also make a valuable contribution to poverty reduction, will directly enhance the reputation of a company, and strengthen its brand, the concept of CSR clearly goes beyond that” [13].

The most popular reporting standard that explicitly refers to CSR is the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Nowadays, almost every second non-financial data report published all over the world is a GRI type report. Global Reporting Initiative is an international non-profit organization based in Amsterdam, and “the GRI mission is to make sustainability reporting a standard practice for all companies and organizations” [14]. Ideas of connecting CSR with customers’ behaviour is not new but it is still not very present in the scientific literature. Wang (2020) has recognized that “the mechanisms underlying how CSR can affect the consumer behavioural intention have rarely been addressed in the literature”; this empirical study (developed in the bicycle manufacturing industry using 491 valid questionnaires from the consumers and by analysing them using the structural equation modelling) has shown that CSR has a positive effect on corporate image, customer satisfaction, and price premium. In addition, “CSR can affect the customer behavioural intention (purchase intention and price premium) through enhancing corporate image and customer satisfaction” [15].

The relation of CSR – customer behaviour seems to be of great interest for the banking sector. One of the first study being conducted by Perez and del Bosque in 2017 [16]. They showed that customer responses to CSR perceptions are consistently moderated by gender, age, and CSR support. Similar, an empirical study with a sample of 615 banking service customers in South Korea has been developed by [18]. The results of this study suggest that customers' perceptions of CSR are positively related to their customer citizenship behaviour; the relationship between customers' perceptions of CSR and customer citizenship behaviour is sequentially and partially mediated by customer - company identification and affective commitment” [18]. Another empirical study has been investigated the link of CSR to customer loyalty in the banking industry in Nigeria (435 retail bank customers) [19]. This research confirms the mechanism through which CSR beliefs may influence customer loyalty towards. Other studies were conducted in the hospitality and tourism industry. For example, the first paper that manage to integrate the literature of corporate social irresponsibility in this industry (economic sector) was published by Volgger and Huang in 2019 [20].

The novelty of the present research consists of its approach in the water industry. In the literature, there have been no identification of such applications or studies.

2.2 The water sector in Romania

Both “Romania’s Medium and Long-Term Sustainable Development Strategy” and the objectives of the Ministry of Environment highlight the importance of public water supply and sewerage services for the health of the population and its standard of living. Currently, at national level, there are 48 regional public operators providing water and sewerage services. In addition, Veolia Romania provides water and sewerage services in three cities across the country. Water operators are also obliged to develop, expand, and rehabilitate water infrastructure, investments made in recent years, largely from European grants [10].

Some relevant statistics of characterizing the water sector in Romania are presented in the following, related to the last complete report data (2018-2019-2020). According to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), which contains statistical data on public utility, in 2019, the length of the drinking water supply network was 76,945 km, which is 3.6 % higher than in 2018. The 76,945 km are assigned as follows: 28,778.70 km in municipalities and cities; 48,166.30 km in smaller localities. The quantity of drinking water distributed throughout the country was, at the end of 2015, 744,007 thousand of m³,

by 251,484 thousand of m³ less than in 2018. Of this quantity, drinking water distributed for household use was 561,322 thousand of m³, representing 75.40 % of the total. Analysing the situation for 2020, according to the NIS, the population served by the public water supply system was 12,853,110 persons, representing 65.20 % of Romania's resident population. In urban areas there were 10,040,392 persons connected to the public water supply system, which represents 94.90 % of the urban resident population, and 2,812,718 persons in rural areas, representing 30.80 % of the country's rural resident population.

As far as water supplies are concerned in rural areas, it is known that most of the inhabitants have drilled wells in the household yard. Although these sources may be a potential disease factor, most of them are polluted by nitrites, nitrates, ammonium due to misinformation, most of the population prefers these sources. In a study conducted in rural areas in the northern part of the country [10], it shows that out of 127 samples of water from wells, more than 70 cases, there were overruns of indicators, the water was not in line with: At 46 the maximum permitted limit for nitrates, 5 for ammonium and 22 for nitrites were exceeded. Regarding the result of microscopic examinations, it was found that the water did not conform to 88 wells, more than half of the wells analysed. The conclusions resulting from these analyses were brought to the attention of the inhabitants through the employees of a water operator. Thus, the situation reported for 2020 and at the level of the development regions shows that the largest share of the population served by the public water supply system, in total resident population, was registered in the Bucharest-Ilfov region (82.20 %), followed by the South-East Region (74.70 %).

According to the data provided by NIS, in 2020, the volume of water distributed was 1,030,646.50 thousand of m³, by 124,934.3 thousand of m³ lower than in 2019. The largest amount of water distributed was to the population, respectively 501,530.90 m³. Regarding the provenance and consumption of water, the largest quantities of distributed water were recorded in the Buzau-Ialomita hydrographic basins (22.30 %) and Arges-Vedea (20.90 %).

In conclusion, the statistics presented above reflect a relative development of the water sector in Romania, with development discrepancies between regions (water distribution and sewage networks). Investments made in recent years have failed to meet the needs of the population and economic activity. The situation is serious because of the negative impact that the lack of public wastewater treatment services has on the environment.

According to NIS data relative to 2020, the population of Romania connected to sewerage systems represents less than half of the total number of inhabitants of the country. Thus, NIS data show that 47.70 % of the population had access to sewerage networks and 45.70% to sewage treatment systems (public sewage systems connected to sewage treatment plants).

In 2019, the activity of evacuating sewage from households and economic and social units, as well as treatment in sewage plants, took place in 313 municipalities and towns and 809 communes. Official statistics show large differences between regions of the country in terms of sewage infrastructure, as follows [10]: one of the highest being in the West Region of country (54.00%) and in the Bucharest-Ilfov Region (81.30 %). Compared to 2018, the number of inhabitants of Romania with access to sewerage networks increased in 2019 by 80,000 to 9.47 million, out of an estimated total population of 19.871 million people. At the same time, at the end of 2020, 9.09 million Romanians had access to sewage treatment systems, with 92,000 more than at the end of the previous year.

In conclusion, based on the data provided by the NIS at the level of 2019, it can be said that of the total network lengths (water and sewage), 71.00% represent the length of water supply networks and 29.00% of the sewerage networks.

CSR reporting activity in Romania is still weak despite the efforts in the last five years. The major actors in this field are the multinational companies that have bring their experience and culture related to social work and policies in Romania [10].

From the practical perspective in the water industry, there is still an increase demand for CSR procedures and application in different industries. Companies has lack report their CSR activities, as can be seen in Figure. 1.

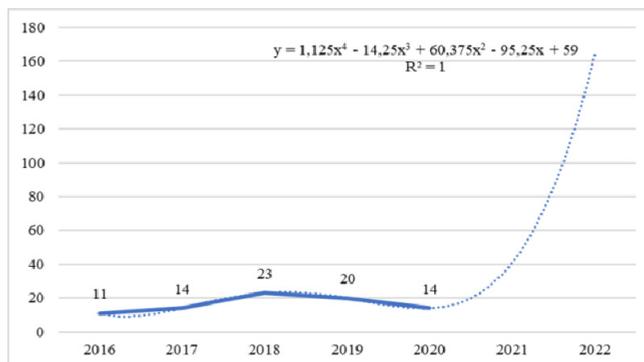


Fig. 1. Published reports, Romania. Last five years. (data process based to the available information on: <https://www.corporateregister.com/map/region/?r=Romania>).

2.3 The research context: Aquatim Water Company

The research context is related to the water company: Aquatim, which is a public water supply and sewerage operator located in the Timis county, in the western part of Romania (holding a monopoly on the market of these services, in the Timis county). The operation area of the company comprises water supply and sewerage systems in 81 localities, including Timisoara, eight towns, 41 communes and 58 villages. At the end of 2020, the company had 900 employees. The company's commitment for quality, environmental management and safety is certified by ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001 implemented since 2005. Since 2003, Aquatim has an operating license class 1, for the public service of water supply and sewerage, issued by the National Regulatory Authority for Community Utilities Services (ANRSC).

The organisation has clarified its concepts of social responsibility, which is highlighted in public documents posted on the site or displayed in areas with visibility for employees and customers. There is also external pressure from the donors on information on performance and reporting of non-financial indicators, but also on the achievement of social responsibility objectives. Apart from the three dimensions generically named 3P (People-Profit-Planet) or TBL, for Aquatim can be added another, namely, professional development. The dimensions of social responsibility at Aquatim will be defined and described below.

The *environmental dimension* is characterised by all actions taken to reduce pollution, make water and energy consumption more efficient and protect natural resources. Aquatim is a company that has been responsible, through environmental policy and objectives, protecting the environment “by refurbishment where possible, by preventing and controlling pollution, managing resources, materials and waste, in the spirit of sustainable development”. In this context, the company regularly organises information and awareness of the population on the rational use of water resources, ecological education actions, educational-fun competitions aimed at children (including employees’ children), volunteering, sponsorships, partnerships with other institutions etc. The actions “Open Gates”, organised on various occasions, especially on the World Water Day, which make known to the public issues related to investments made, future projects, protection of natural resources, and water saving, are regularly organised.

The actions taken by Aquatim, relative to this dimension of *social responsibility*, consisted of: Involvement in the community (in projects related to the community), promoting, and supporting local producers, protecting cultural heritage, promoting local personalities. Thus, the company supports and encourages employee volunteering and regularly organises their actions and offers, as far as possible, sponsorships, donations or engages in partnerships with NGOs and authorities.

The recognition of the results of Aquatim, in terms of the *economic dimension* of social responsibility, was appreciated in 2017 by the Romanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry which awarded the company the first prize at the National Top of Companies, in its field of activity (industry, water capture, treatment and distribution) in the category of large enterprises. It is worth noting that Aquatim has maintained the first place in this competition since 2018. It is worth noting that Aquatim engaged in creating a sustainable business model, being an example, not only in the local community, as proof being the prizes of excellence obtained; As a public society, the company is constantly concerned with improving its relationship with customers and suppliers.

Assessing customers' perceptions on social responsibility activities and actions is an important milestone in developing social responsibility strategies of the water company. To this end, qualitative and quantitative longitudinal analysis of the results of four opinion polls conducted between 2005 and 2019 were carried out, establishing correlations between the observed variables within the Aquatim company in Timisoara, Romania. The common scope of the previous surveys was to evaluate relevant aspects regarding the perception of the company's customers about the provided services and the way they interact with the company's employees (communication in different contexts), the studies being part of two big projects that have been financial supported by European funds and that have been carried out between 2005 – 2019.

According to European requirements, opinion surveys were attributed to management consultancy firms in both projects. The databases were delivered to Aquatim company in electronic format (SPSS database and as an Excel database). The databases (containing the subjects' answers) have been delivered for each target group, making them available for the present research.

3 The propose research scenario

The research premises considered the advantages of implementing methods of sociological investigation. The “public opinion poll” aims at knowing the “complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of people on an issue of general importance” [10]. This method of sociological research is based on interrogative information collection and sampling techniques, being considered the most adequate for gathering information relatively to an extended area and from a large population (formed by the sample respondents), in a relatively short time. Whether it is a public opinion poll, a sociological survey, or an in-situ survey, the questionnaire proves to be the most used tool of sociological investigation.

Measurement evaluation is a complex and important subject for such researches and involves the objectives achieving, validating the measurement of phenomena, obtaining reliable results. It is also important to clarify whether the created tool is representative for the content of the phenomenon it measures. To address these issues, there have been set out a series of framework questions that can be applied to any sociological analysis and have been pursued in the present case to define the research scenario (Figure. 2) [10].

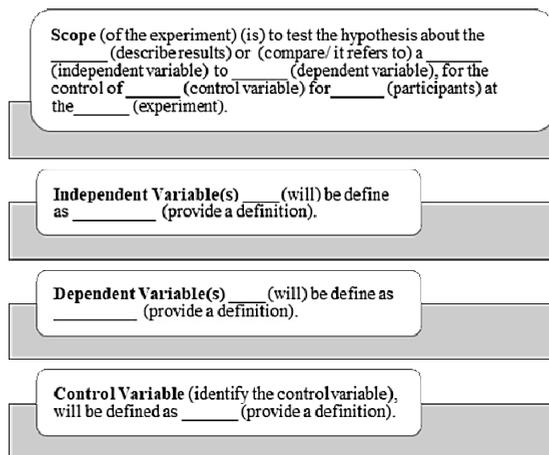


Fig. 2. Key elements in defining the research scenario.

The specific research objectives are: OS1 - Comparison of opinion poll results in different years, to highlight the trends of the analyzed indicators; OS2 - Statistical interpretation of results and highlighting covariates (interdependencies); OS3 - Construction of the theoretical model for assessing customer perception on social responsibility; OS4 - To identify ways for the communication process optimization to improve company relationship with its customers.

4 Description of the methodological approach

In relation to the opinion surveys conducted from 2005 to 2019, all project partners and stakeholders were interested in customer perception (company representatives, consultants, subcontractors) and took part in the process of setting objectives, develop questionnaires and publication of results. The interest of the Financial Authority of the projects was the evaluation of the awareness and information about the origin of the investment funds and the comparative analysis of these indicators at the beginning and the end of the projects. These requirements were NOT limitative for the research, offering the opportunity to evaluate several aspects by specific indicators. Thus, besides inquiries about investment processes, the questionnaires also included questions about customers' satisfaction assessment, organization image, customers' confidence in the services offered etc., some of them reflecting the relation between customers' perception on the company's effort in the field of corporate social responsibility activities.

Initially, the questions of the designed questionnaires and that were used in the research were developed in focus group meetings, attended by stakeholders, thus providing a basic framework for evaluating some relevant indicators for the projects. Over time, the questionnaires have been improved, but the basic structure is retained to allow for comparison of indicators (just for the answers given for the same questions included in both questionnaires).

The questionnaires have been personalized and distributed to a large target audience: house-based clients, blocks of flats administrators, clients from other locations (commonly referred to as branch clients), employees, local media representatives, potentially polluting companies etc. The reason that the tenants living in the blocks of flats were not directly surveyed is because Aquatim company has service contracts only at the level of the lessee / owner associations due to the limit of competence stipulated in the Romanian legislation and in the operating regulations. Basically, although they benefit from water and sewerage

services but inhabitants that are living in the blocks of flats are not signatories to service contracts. As a public company, Aquatim has the competence limit to the last component of the public water network. This is, in the case of water supply, the chimney outlet and, for the sewerage network, the connection shaft. In conclusion, from a procedural point of view, experimental research has four phases as depicted in Figure. 3.

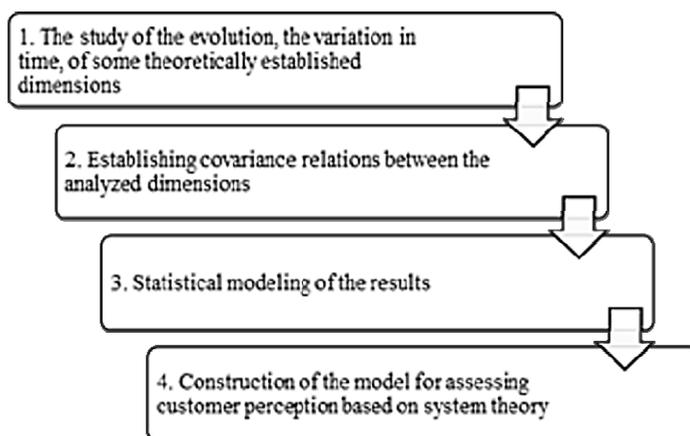


Fig. 3. The experimental research scenario.

4.1 The Research Sample and Available Research Data

Of the surveyed client categories, only “home-based customers” have a temporal constancy in the four surveys, which is why in the present research, only the responses of households generically named were extracted from the databases household customers.

All four surveys, in 2009, 2015, 2016 and 2019, correspond to the phases of initiation and conclusion of the two major investment projects carried out by the water company. Considering the projects’ geographic areas of implementation and the increase of the company's operational area over the years, the surveys in 2009 and 2015 were developed only for Timisoara municipality and the surveys in 2016 and 2019 were extended to the other 10 neighbouring commune.

The results of the surveys developed from 2009 to 2019, showed that a total of 1743 subjects answered the questionnaires’ questions. A synthesis of the analysed sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of the research sample.

The investigated universe	Domestic customers in Timisoara	Residential customers
	Residential customers	Customers from 10 branches
Sample size	Total household customers	1743 persons
Sample Household Structure by Year	2009	451 persons
	2015	384 persons
	2016	419 persons
	2019	489 persons
Number of valid questionnaires processed	Timisoara (2009 ... 2019)	1326 persons
	Branches (2016, 2019)	417 persons

4.2 The Analysed Dimensions of customers behaviour and their links with social responsibility

To understand customers’ opinions and perception about the social responsibility activities and actions of Aquatim company, that are reflected in direct relation with the provided services and the communication and information processes between company’s employees and the community, based on the selected questions from the questionnaires’ grouping, five indicators or dimensions were identified, compared, and analysed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of the established dimensions for the analysis.

Dimensions	Description	Question in both questionnaires
Ecological awareness	Perception of wastewater treatment issues prior to discharge into the landfill and acceptance, assumption of these technological costs that are included in service tariffs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to the rules in force, before discharging wastewater into nature, they should be treated. Do you think it is fair for every consumer to pay for proper wastewater treatment?
Customers’ Satisfaction	Perception of the services provided, to solve the claims, complaints, problems, and the perception of the interaction with Aquatim employees (promptness, respect and efficiency).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering your level of satisfaction, what note (from 1 to 10) would you give to the services offered by Aquatim? • Has your request been resolved? • How long did it take for the complaint problem of yours to be solved? • If you were to give a note (1 to 10) of how the problem was solved, what would this note be? • In the past year, have you been in contact with Aquatim employees (evaluation of their promptness, respect, efficiency)? • On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the improvement and/or extension of the drinking water system in your locality?

From the perspective of the present research there has been considered that “Customer Perception” function depends on two variables or the considered dimensions, as it is shown by (1) relation.

$$Customer\ Perception = f(Environmental\ Awareness + Service\ Satisfaction) \quad (1)$$

Table 3. Linking the investigated dimensions (from Table 2) with dimensions of social responsibility.

Investigated dimensions in the surveys (dependent and independent variables)	Social responsibility dimensions
<i>Environmental awareness = f(Wastewater treatment + payment for wastewater treatment services)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social dimension • Ecological dimension • Economic size • Cultural dimension
<i>Satisfaction with services = f(satisfaction with services + solving requests / complaints / problems + interaction with company employees)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social dimension • Ethical dimension • Economic size • Values system dimension • Cultural dimension

The dimensions considered and described in Table 2 have been correlated with the following social responsibility dimensions (details given in Table 3 as results of the research team discussions with company’s management):

1. Ethical dimension refers to aspects of compliance with the norms, national legislation on water quality and by aspects of ethical behaviour (mainly of the employees of the Aquatim company towards the clients and customers);

2. The value systems dimension is associated with the investigated dimensions related to the customers' informing and trust that aim at ethical issues and the identification of a set of values of Aquatim company perceived by the public as compared to integrity, loyalty, responsibility, respect of the law, equity, transparency, professionalism, openness to new ideas and approaches, dialogue, consensus, and confidentiality;

3. Economic dimension is linked to the customers' acceptance to pay for water treatment;

4. Ecological dimension is liked with customers' perception of the investments for the treatment of wastewater as well as the quality of the water supplied;

5. The social dimension is diffused in all other dimensions because the research context has a strong social dominance: the company provides water services, and its object of activity is associated with its behaviour that proves that people's life counts and cannot be conceived outside the water and action affecting the community;

6. Cultural dimension is considered by including in the sample two different categories of respondents, namely respondents / customers in Timisoara and those in branches (rural areas).

5 Conclusions and final remarks

The presented research focused on the argumentation of a study based on a longitudinal analysis research scenario designed to investigate and characterize the consumers' perception about the services offered by a water company (Aquatim located in Timisoara, Romania), which were linked to the dimensions of social responsibility (defined to characterize the company's effort in the field of CSR). The presented research approach described:

- A brief literature review on CSR and the implication of it on customers' behaviour (identifying a knowledge gap);
- The state of the water sector in Romania and the case of the Aquatim company's activity;
- How were defined and described the dimensions of CSR that were considered for the analysis;
- The operationalization of the model dimensions by linking them with appropriate questions from the questionnaires initially used in the four surveys from 2009, 2015, 2016 and 2019 and the association with dimensions of social responsibility;
- The establishment of the methods and tools that will be used in the statistical data analysis.

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