

UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER NEEDS IN SHAPING SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ENTERPRISES IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS

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Purpose: The aim of the study is to understand the relationship between aligning with customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility for companies operating in inter-organizational networks and the benefits of improved access to market information, strengthening market position, and increasing the flexibility of business operations as advantages gained from mutual connections and relationships with market partners.

Design/methodology/approach: Based on literature studies and statistical analysis using the Kendall rank correlation and Kruskal-Wallis test, we analyze the relationship between adapting to customer needs and other benefits from mutual connections and relationships with market partners like improving access to market information, strengthening market position and increasing the flexibility of business activity.

Findings: The results suggest that in the case of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, better adaptation to customer needs is accompanied by strengthening the market position and providing better access to market information; however, it does not necessarily lead to greater flexibility of business activities.

Research limitations/implications: A clear implication of the theoretical assumptions and conducted research is that although it is believed that in the case of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, better adaptation to customer needs leads to greater flexibility of operations in exceptional situations, for example, in micro-entities, where the ability to current settlement of liabilities and obtaining funds is limited, there will not necessarily be an increase in the flexibility of their business, which, however, does not reduce the possibility of shaping their social responsibility.

Practical implications: This study supports the current view that understanding customer needs shapes socially responsible enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks in terms of strengthening market position and improving access to market information. Moreover, the multi-aspect nature of understanding customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility and the interdisciplinary nature of the considerations create grounds for further research and exploration in this area.

Originality/value: By focusing on the synergy of benefits generated by cooperation in inter-organizational networks, the article contributes to research on understanding how mutual connections and relationships with market partners allow for adaptation to customer needs that may shape corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, customer needs, enterprise management, enterprises in inter-organizational networks.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Strengthening market position requires entrepreneurs to have the ability to adapt to changes occurring in the endogenous and exogenous environment of enterprises. In this context, adaptive capabilities taking into account values, such as sustainable development and social responsibility, are becoming more and more important (Bocken et al., 2014), as accurate identification of key business conditions allows enterprises to find new paths for sustainable development (Porter, Kramer, 2006). One of the crucial elements of the adaptability of enterprises is understanding and adapting to customer needs, especially concerning the functioning of enterprises within inter-organizational networks (Parkhe, Dhanaraj, 2003). Inter-organizational networks, bringing together various enterprises, institutions and organizations, jointly combine knowledge, experience and resources, translating into a better understanding of customer needs and creating unique opportunities for sustainable development (Dhanaraj, Parkhe, 2006). This approach not only strengthens the market position of enterprises but also promotes activities consistent with the principles of social responsibility (McWilliams, Siegel, 2000). Enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks focus on identifying and satisfying customer needs, thereby increasing their opportunities to positively impact the environment and society without giving up their economic goals (Prahald, Krishnan, 2012). Therefore, a better understanding of customer needs in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks is crucial in strengthening market position (Ryall, 2013). Moreover, companies that effectively identify and meet customer needs are often perceived as more credible, thanks to which they can not only increase their market position but also stand out as leaders in the field of social responsibility (Robert et al., 2012).

However, there is still a cognitive gap in the literature on understanding customer needs, which may shape the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks (Park, Kom, 2019). Moreover, there is a lack of research on better adaptation to customer needs, which will be accompanied by strengthening the market position, better access to market information and increasing the flexibility of business activities to, on the one hand, eliminate the negative consequences of unsustainable activities of enterprises and, on the other hand, to shape social responsibility of network enterprises positively. Therefore, the study poses

a research question: how does understanding customer needs shape socially responsible companies operating in inter-organizational networks? As a consequence of the question asked, the study aims to understand the relationship between adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks and improving access to market information, strengthening market position and increasing the flexibility of business as a benefit from mutual connections and relationships with market partners. To achieve the aim of the article, literature studies and statistical analysis of survey data based on the Kendall rank correlation coefficient and the Kruskal-Wallis test were used, which made it possible to explain the research problem. Understanding customer needs is important and topical because it allows for shaping the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks.

The role of inter-organizational networks in sustainable adjustment to the needs of the customer and the enterprise

Inter-organizational networks are defined in management sciences as a system of two or more enterprises engaged in long-term interconnections and relationships (Thorelli, 1986). The essence of inter-organizational networks is a relatively permanent grouping of autonomous, specialized enterprises participating in a mutual system based on market cooperation (Kotler, Caslione, 2009). The influence of inter-organizational networks (Parkhe et al., 2006) allows the achievement of the synergy effect (Hamel, 2002), which involves sharing resources and integrating the activities of many economic partners in order to build a joint market position (Niemczyk et al., 2021).

The network approach highlights inter-organizational cooperation and competition relationships, which makes the customer a value driver, not only for a single company (Shafer et al., 2005). Therefore, one of the reasons for the emergence of inter-organizational networks is the ability to better recognize customer needs and priorities, adapt distribution channels that enable meeting customer needs and obtain key resources and unique competencies (West, 2007). Participants in inter-organizational networks engage in both competitive and cooperative behaviors simultaneously. This dual approach helps them build and enhance their market position (Amit, Zott, 2012) while also enabling them to adapt to the dynamic and uncertain conditions of the network environment (Regans, Zuckerman, 2008).

Inter-organizational networks are a source of resources, both tangible and intangible, enabling their value-creating structuring. The resource approach emphasizes that resources are a source of competitive advantage and building market position (Zott, Amit, 2011). The criterion for separating tangible and intangible resources of an enterprise is managerial decisions, which, in the case of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, become factors shaping value creation processes (Coff, 2010). In this context, it is worth noting that in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, managerial information is an important intangible resource (Demil, Lacocq, 2010), enabling making accurate decisions. This means

that the effectiveness of decision-making must consider the process of obtaining information over a given time horizon, which is associated with the risk of not achieving the intended goals (Chan Kim, Mauborgne, 2005). Therefore, the main advantage resulting from participation in inter-organizational networks is the synergy of resources, which is gradual and flexible (Dyduch, 2016). It is worth noting that resources require expenditure because they are rare and difficult to access, but they can also be in excess, are subject to consumption and express different levels of innovation, which means that, according to the assumptions of the resource-based school, they constitute the basis of the value creation process (Foss, 2005). Resources acquired by enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks enable building of a flexible enterprise architecture (Janssen, Feenstra, 2010). Enterprises that operate in inter-organizational networks respond flexibly to changing market conditions (Parkhe et al., 2006), can build a strong market position and gain customer loyalty by providing unique value (Lostakova, Pecinova, 2014) that meets their needs and expectations. Considerations related to the conceptual framework and the definition of the research goal created the possibility of adopting three hypotheses, assuming that:

H1: In enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, understanding customer needs in the context of shaping social responsibility is accompanied by better access to market information.

H2: In enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping social responsibility entails strengthening the market position.

H3: In enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping social responsibility increases the flexibility of business activities.

The current state of knowledge in this field is characterized by methodological diversity, and the lack of in-depth theoretical research results in few attempts to examine the adjustment to customer needs that shape socially responsible enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks in the context of the relationship with other benefits resulting from interconnections with market partners. The above arguments led to the article attempting theoretical analysis and conducting empirical research to fill the noticed gap.

To sum up, one can expect that creating inter-organizational networks offers enterprises benefits, which should lead to better adaptation of the offer to customer needs. The synergy of benefits generated in the inter-organizational network creates network potential that combines the needs of customers and the expectations of enterprises, co-creating the inter-organizational network to strengthen their market position. Moreover, one can expect that the cooperation of inter-organizational network participants allows them to adapt to the customers' needs and, on the other hand, strengthen the market position, provide better access to market information, and increase the business's flexibility.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research dataset

In order to answer the research questions, we collected survey data using the CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) method, which allowed us to conduct the research in an organized and effective way. One of the main advantages of CATI is the ability to get a large number of interviews in a relatively short period. In our research, this allowed for quick data collection and processing on almost 400 enterprises. The CATI method ensured uniformity of the data collection process and enabled the integration of the collected information directly into the database, which improved the entire research process. Despite many advantages, the CATI method also has its limitations. In the current study, the authors encountered difficulties due to the need to eliminate complex questions that are difficult to discuss in a telephone format and require additional attention from respondents when completing the questionnaire (Vogel et al., 2020).

This study analyzes four of the 22 questions included in the survey questionnaire. Respondents answered to what extent they agree that interconnections and relationships with market partners in inter-organizational networks allow for:

- adaptation to customer needs (*A1*),
- better access to market information (*A2*),
- strengthening market position (*A3*),
- greater flexibility of business activity (*A4*).

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from '1' – 'strongly disagree' to '5' – 'strongly agree'. Respondents were asked to indicate the answer that best described the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. They were also informed that answers were not graded as correct or incorrect.

Ultimately, the analyzed dataset included surveys completed by respondents holding managerial positions in 349 enterprises operating in Poland. Micro-enterprises constituted 68.5% of the surveyed entities in the dataset. Small enterprises also participated in the study, accounting for 12%, medium-sized enterprises 8.6% and large enterprises 10.9%. The dominant activity profile in the group of surveyed enterprises was service activity (72.8%), while production activity accounted for 21.2% and commercial activity for 6%. The structure of the studied dataset is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The vast majority of the surveyed entities were national enterprises (45.8%). Enterprises that declared their operations to be global were approximately 14.1%, while 10.3% of respondents declared their operations to be European. The remaining part of the surveyed enterprises declared local operations (29.8%).

Table 1.
Dataset structure

Features of enterprises	Category description	Share of respondents
Enterprise size	Micro-enterprise (up to 10 employees on average per year)	68.5%
	Small enterprise (from 10 to 49 employees on average per year)	12.0%
	Medium-sized enterprise (from 50 to 250 employees on average per year)	8.6%
	Large enterprise (over 250 employees per on average per year)	10.9%
Dominant business profile	Service activities	72.8%
	Production activities	21.2%
	Commercial activities	6.0%
Scope of the business	A global enterprise	14.1%
	A European company	10.3%
	A national company	45.8%
	A local company	29.8%

Source: Own study based on conducted research.

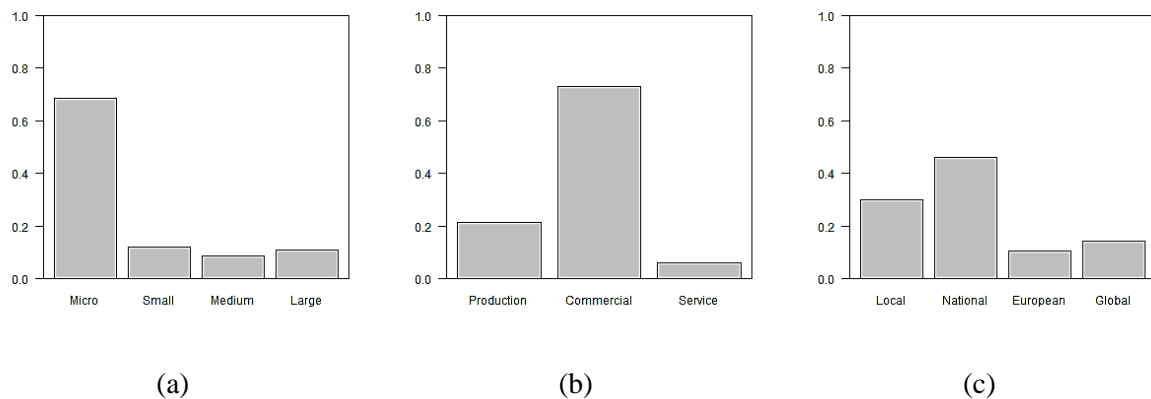


Figure 1. Structure of the surveyed enterprises according to the size of the enterprise (a), dominant business profile (b) and scope of the business (c).

Source: Own study based on conducted research.

2.2. Research procedure

The research procedure consisted of two parts. First, in order to identify trends in adapting to customer needs, strengthening market position, improving access to information and increasing the flexibility of business in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, we carried out an analysis of the frequency of positive answers (agree, strongly agree) of respondents to these questions. Then, we conducted a correlation analysis and applied the Kruskal-Wallis test to examine the relationship between adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks and other benefits arising from interconnections and relationships with market partners. The Kendall rank correlation coefficient assesses the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables measured on an ordinal scale. A positive value of the Kendall rank correlation coefficient indicates the consistency of the respondents' assessments in the two considered questionnaire questions, while a negative value indicates the contradiction

of the respondents' assessments. In order to test the statistical significance of the results, we used the *t*-test, assuming a significance level of 0.05. The null hypothesis states no relationship between the variables, while the alternative hypothesis states a similar (positive correlation) or dissimilar rank (inverse correlation) between the variables.

In the dataset, respondents' answers to the individual questionnaire questions do not come from a normal distribution, which we verified by the Shapiro-Wilk test at any low significance level. For this reason and due to the ordinal nature of the studied variables, in further analysis, we used the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test to compare at least two independent samples (Corder, Foreman, 2009). In this test, in considered case, the null hypothesis states that the respondents' answers to a given question (dependent variable) in each of the groups described by the factor (independent variable, grouping variable) are the same. However, the alternative hypothesis states that respondents from at least one group designated by the factor systematically tend to give higher (or lower) ratings (dependent variable values) than those in other groups of respondents. In order to identify this group (or groups) of respondents, in the next step, we compared the distributions of pairwise answers using the Dunn test with the Bonferroni correction.

In the article, we used the answers to the question regarding adaptation to customer needs (*A1*) as a grouping variable (factor). Thus, the *G1* group consists of companies in which respondents disagreed or had no opinion (responses from '1' to '3' on the Likert scale) regarding this question. In group *G2*, respondents agreed (response '4'), while respondents in group *G3* strongly agreed with this statement (response '5'). Using the Kruskal-Wallis test, we compared the distribution of ratings given by respondents in these groups in the context of statements regarding better access to information (*A2*), strengthening the market position (*A3*) and greater flexibility (*A4*). These variables sequentially served as the dependent variable. Then, using the Dunn test, we checked whether there was a group(s) of enterprises in which higher ratings on the Likert scale were more common in the distribution of the dependent variable (answers to questions *A2*, *A3* or *A4*, respectively). A significance level is set at 0.05.

3. Results

First of all, we analyzed what part of the respondents agreed (responses '4' or '5' on a five-point Likert scale) with the statements that interconnections and relationships with market partners allow for adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility, improving access to information, strengthening the market position and greater flexibility of the conducted business.

The research shows that most surveyed enterprises (88.3%) agreed that inter-organizational relations allow for adaptation to customer needs (A1), affecting social responsibility development. There are several reasons why this view is widely accepted. Inter-organizational relations enable the exchange of knowledge, experiences and best practices between various entities operating in the inter-organizational network. Thanks to this, companies can better understand the needs and expectations of their customers. Cooperation with market partners allows enterprises to respond faster to changes in customer preferences, which enables them to adapt products to customer expectations and increase competitiveness. Inter-organizational relationships allow enterprises to better understand their place and role in society and their impact on the environment and local communities. Moreover, by cooperating in an inter-organizational network, companies can better contribute to achieving sustainable development goals, which is crucial for building corporate social responsibility.

In the research, most of the surveyed enterprises (92%) agree that inter-organizational relations provide better access to market information (A2), which is essential both for business strategy and for shaping corporate social responsibility. Relationships with various market partners, such as suppliers, distributors, customers and other industry partners, create an extensive knowledge network. Each entity brings unique information about the market, trends, customer preferences and changing market conditions. Thanks to inter-organizational relationships, enterprises can more quickly identify new trends and consumer behaviour changes, allowing them to adapt their business strategies accordingly. Cooperation with market partners enables the exchange of experiences and best practices, particularly valuable in market uncertainty and rapid changes. Access to a broader market information database allows enterprises to better understand social expectations and the needs of the communities in which they operate. Comprehensive market knowledge enables enterprises operating in an inter-organizational network to make more conscious and responsible decisions that consider business goals and the impact on society and the environment. Moreover, companies that are well-informed about societal needs and challenges are more likely to engage in social and environmental initiatives that contribute to sustainable development.

According to most of the surveyed respondents (84.5%), inter-organizational relations allow them to strengthen their market position (A3), indirectly affecting their social responsibility development. This is because cooperation with market partners can increase the negotiating power of enterprises and provide access to new markets, strengthening their market position. Inter-organizational relationships enable the sharing knowledge, experience, technologies and resources, contributing to increased efficiency and innovation. Enterprises operating in networks are better informed about market trends and adapt to changes faster, which strengthens their competitiveness. Within the network, companies can learn from each other how to more effectively implement sustainable development and social responsibility practices. Inter-organizational relations often lead to joint social or ecological initiatives, which positively affect the image of enterprises and their relations with local communities. Enterprises

that actively participate in social initiatives demonstrate social responsibility and build trust and loyalty among customers and employees.

According to most of the surveyed enterprises (87.1%), inter-organizational relations, i.e. mutual connections and relationships with market partners, increase the flexibility of business activities (A4), which also affects the development of corporate social responsibility, because inter-organizational relations enable companies to use the resources, knowledge and skills of partners. Thanks to this, they can quickly adapt to changing market conditions and new challenges without having all the necessary resources internally. By collaborating with other organizations, companies can share the risks associated with new business initiatives, allowing them to have a more flexible approach to innovation and development. Thanks to networks of contacts and cooperation, enterprises are better informed and can respond faster to changes in demand, consumer trends and new technologies. Inter-organizational collaboration often drives companies to implement more sustainable business practices. By exchanging knowledge and experience with partners, enterprises can better understand how their activities affect the environment and society. Businesses can collaborate with partners on social and environmental initiatives, which increases their ability to shape corporate social responsibility. Thus, companies that are flexible and can quickly adapt to the needs of the community gain the trust and loyalty of customers and other stakeholders, which positively affects their reputation.

In the second part, the study examined whether enterprises in which mutual connections and relationships with market partners allow them to adapt to customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility also notice their impact on better access to information, strengthening their market position and greater flexibility of their business activities. For this purpose, we used the Kendall rank correlation analysis and the Kruskal-Wallis test. Such an in-depth analysis, in particular, allowed us to look at whether the way of answering questions was the same in the three groups of companies specified above, G1-G3, distinguished due to the answers provided in terms of adapting to customer needs. We verified the tested relationships at a significance level of 0.05. Tables 2 and 3 present the results.

Table 2.

The results of the Kendall rank correlation coefficient

In enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, mutual connections and relationships with market partners allow for:	Adaptation to the customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility (A1)
better access to market information (A2)	0.65***
strengthening market position (A3)	0.49***
greater flexibility of business activity (A4)	-0.11**

Note: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own study based on conducted research.

Based on the results presented in Table 2, we can conclude that in the surveyed enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, matching customer needs (A1) is generally accompanied by better access to market information (A2) (positive, statistically significant

Kendall rank correlation coefficient of 0.65), which influences the development of their social responsibility. For a more detailed analysis, we also examined whether the distribution of respondents' answers to the question about better access to information is the same in each of the groups of enterprises in terms of the answers to the question about adapting to customer needs as a consequence of mutual connections and relationships with market partners.

Table 3.

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis and Dunn tests in groups according to respondents' assessment of benefits from mutual connections and relationships with market partners in terms of adaptation to customer needs (A1) in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility

Dependent variable:		Better access to market information (A2)	Strengthening market position (A3)	Greater flexibility of business activity (A4)
Kruskal-Wallis:		176.60***	101.07***	5.72
Dunn:	G1 vs. G2	-1.36	-1.83	X
	G1 vs. G3	-9.26***	-7.56***	X
	G2 vs. G3	-11.72***	-8.46***	X

Note: *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own study based on conducted research.

The result of the Kruskal-Wallis test (176.60, see Table 3) indicates that the distribution of respondents' ratings (on a five-point Likert scale) is statistically significantly different in at least two groups out of G1–G3. However, in the Dunn test, we recorded negative and statistically significant values of the test statistics comparing groups G1 and G3 (-9.26) and G2 and G3 (-11.72) with no statistically significant difference between groups G1 and G2 (see Table 3). In particular, that means that respondents from the G3 group (i.e. who strongly agreed that functioning in inter-organizational networks allows their company to adapt to customer needs) more often agreed that it also entails better access to information (A2). The above results, including those regarding the correlation analysis, are statistically significant, which confirms the H1 hypothesis. It is worth noting that inter-organizational networks consist of various entities with extensive knowledge and experience in their operations. Thus, these companies have better access to a wide range of information about the needs and preferences of customers from various market segments. Therefore, through collaboration with partners, these companies can share information resources, enabling them to better understand the market and more quickly adapt their offer to customers' changing needs. Thus, networking enables companies to jointly innovate and develop solutions that better meet customer needs, allowing companies to offer more attractive products.

Moreover, greater access to market information allows companies to better understand social and environmental challenges. Enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks can use their cooperation networks to implement social and environmental projects, contributing to community development and sustainable development. It should be emphasized that a better understanding of customer needs and active participation in activities for the benefit of society builds trust, which positively affects relations with stakeholders, creating the basis for corporate social responsibility.

The Kendall rank correlation coefficient (0.49 – Table 2), in the case of the surveyed enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between adapting to customer needs (*A1*) in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility and strengthening market position (*A3*). The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test (101.07, see Table 3), and then the test comparing pairs, indicated that in particular – as before – respondents who strongly agreed (group *G3*) with the statement that mutual connections and relationships with partners market relationships allow for adaptation to customer needs (*A1*), they more often agreed that these relationships also allow for strengthening the market position, i.e. they indicated higher ratings on the Likert scale in the questionnaire. As before, this is indicated by negative test statistics values indicating statistically significant differences between the distributions of groups *G1* and *G3* (-7.56) and *G2* and *G3* (-8.46) with no differences between groups *G1* and *G2* (see Table 3). The results are statistically significant, which confirms hypothesis *H2* that functioning in inter-organizational networks allows for adjustment to customers' needs and expectations, which entails strengthening enterprises' market position. In this way, functioning in inter-organizational networks may contribute to shaping corporate social responsibility because inter-organizational networks favor cooperation and exchanging ideas and innovations. Therefore, enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks can combine their resources and competencies, leading to the creation of unique value for customers. Moreover, these companies can effectively shape social responsibility by building stronger relationships with customers, suppliers, local communities and employees.

What is surprising is the statistically significant Kendall rank correlation coefficient, but with a negative sign (-0.11, see Table 2), suggesting that enterprises that agree to a greater extent that interconnections and relationships with market partners allow for adaptation to customer needs (*A1*), at the same time, they generally disagree to a greater extent that it may result in greater flexibility of their business (*A4*). It should be noted, however, that the obtained relationship is weak. In this case, an additional analysis of the examined questions using the Kruskal-Wallis test is useful. The results show that in the three groups of enterprises studied (*G1-G3*), there are no statistically significant differences between the distributions of respondents' answers regarding greater flexibility (5.72, $p = 0.06$, see Table 3). Therefore, we cannot link the impact of the company's operation in inter-organizational networks to adapting to customer needs and increasing the flexibility of business operations. Thus, we cannot confirm hypothesis *H3*.

It is assumed in the literature on the subject that better adjustment to customer needs in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks usually contributes to increasing the flexibility of their operations (Osbert-Pociecha et al., 2008). Enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks can respond more effectively to changing market needs thanks to cooperation and exchange of information and resources with other entities in the network (Luangsakdapich et al., 2015). However, our research shows that adapting to customer needs

does not necessarily have a clear impact on greater flexibility of business activity. This may be because the surveyed companies are mostly micro-entities (68.5%), which are narrowly specialized and focused on particular niche needs of their clients. In this case, their activities may be less flexible because they are embedded in a specific market segment.

Moreover, some companies surveyed may engage in long-term strategies that limit their immediate flexibility. Additionally, liabilities arising from long-term contracts or industry regulations may be another factor limiting the flexibility and liquidity of the business. However, limited flexibility is not an obstacle to understanding customer needs and can foster more responsible business decisions that consider the long-term well-being of customers and communities. The consequence of meeting customer expectations may be building trust and credibility, which is an essential aspect of the social responsibility of the surveyed enterprises.

4. Discussion

This study is based on the assumption of complex relationships between understanding and adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks and improving access to market information, strengthening market position and increasing the flexibility of business operations. The study sought an answer to the question: How does adaptation to customer needs shape socially responsible enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks? The results of the conducted research suggest that in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, mutual connections and relationships with market partners allow for adaptation to customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility, which is accompanied by better access to market information and strengthening the market position.

The perspective of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks contributed to a better understanding of customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility, which, however, may not result in greater flexibility in business activities. This means that operating in inter-organizational networks provides enterprises with better access to market information and allows for better adaptation of the offer to customer needs, but does not necessarily lead to greater flexibility of business operations. Therefore, by understanding and responding to market needs and engaging in social activities, enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks can build their image as responsible and committed entities, which should contribute to both economic and social benefits. Therefore, inter-organizational relations are not only a tool for strengthening market position through better adaptation to customer needs, but also a way to achieve social and sustainable development goals.

A clear implication of the theoretical assumptions and conducted research is that although it is believed that in the case of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, better adaptation to customer needs leads to greater flexibility of operations in exceptional situations, for example, in micro-entities, where the ability to current settlement of liabilities and obtaining funds is limited, there will not necessarily be an increase in the flexibility of their business, which, however, does not reduce the possibility of shaping their social responsibility. This is possible by building deep relationships with customers, as well as stability and commitment to their communities.

5. Conclusions and summary

Summarizing the considerations presented in this study, it is worth emphasizing that understanding and adapting to customer needs within inter-organizational networks allows enterprises to be socially responsible and ecologically conscious. Cooperation in networks enables more efficient use of resources, promotes innovation and enables the creation of products that respond to real social and environmental needs. In this way, companies not only increase their market value, but also contribute to building a better future for society.

The considerations presented in this study make it possible to confirm the implementation of the adopted research goal related to understanding the relationship between adapting to customer needs in the context of shaping the social responsibility of enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks and strengthening the market position, improving access to market information and increasing the flexibility of business activities as benefits from mutual connections and relationships with market partners. The literature studies and the results of empirical research allowed us to formulate the following conclusions:

- In enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks, a better understanding of customer needs in the context of shaping social responsibility is accompanied by better access to market information and strengthening the market position.
- Understanding customer needs in the context of shaping social responsibility in enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks will not always increase the flexibility of business operations.

This study supports the current view that understanding customer needs shapes socially responsible enterprises operating in inter-organizational networks in terms of strengthening market position and improving access to market information. The main contribution of the article is empirical evidence confirming that better adaptation to customer needs is not always accompanied by increased flexibility in business operations. Moreover, the multi-aspect nature of understanding customer needs in the context of shaping corporate social responsibility and the interdisciplinary nature of the considerations create grounds for further research and exploration in this area.

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