

THE CUSTOMERS LOYALTY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN THE PHARMACEUTICAL RETAIL SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

All market studies agree that loyalty is an extremely complex phenomenon, dependent on numerous internal and external factors, which, in turn, are influenced by other variables such as age, gender, income level, area of residence, and more. Consumers are faced with the unexpected task of choosing between multiple retailers simultaneously and forming a relatively short-term relationship with them called loyalty. The importance of retailing in the pharmaceutical sector needs to be understood from a managerial perspective, as it shares common characteristics with any commercial activity (demographic data, competitive advantage, service quality, pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain reputation), but also has specific peculiarities related to the pharmaceutical retail area, such as specific regulations regarding drug pricing policies, contracts with Health Insurance Houses, specific legislation regarding online commerce, pharmaceutical product delivery, and returns. All these variables uniquely influence the loyalty process within the pharmaceutical market. This study aims to provide a quantitative analysis based on a questionnaire of the main factors that can impact, to a greater or lesser extent, loyalty to a pharmacy. The questionnaire was completed by 387 people from both urban and rural areas. To efficiently analyze the data, internal consistency of the measurement scale for each variable was initially evaluated checking whether the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is greater or less than 0.7 for each variable, then the independent variables on gender, age, background, and income were analyzed. Subsequently, several tests were used to establish the relationship between loyalty and other variables: Pearson Chi-Square, T-test for independent samples, regression analysis, bivariate analysis, etc. The results showed that to increase pharmacy satisfaction and customers, senior management needs to focus more on improving service quality and diversification and not so much on promoting pricing strategies or pharmacy reputation. At conceptual level, the results of this research can allow building a new management model based on loyalty strategies customized according to the gender or age of customers, but also through a focus on pricing policy and aspects of differentiation, quality of service or reputation of the pharmacy.

KEYWORDS: *loyalty, pharmaceutical chain, pharmaceutical market, pharmacy customers, strategic management.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented development of the market economy based on the permanent correlation of supply and demand has directly generated an increase in the complexity of economic life, but especially an

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intensification of relations between bidder and buyer. Every retail business is characterized by common elements of organization and management of commercial activities, which need to be properly perceived by consumers when choosing where to shop, considering the hierarchy of factors motivating their demand.

Thus, the success of an enterprise is dependent on the connection with the consumer and loyalty, as a managerial strategy, aims at a certain development and stabilization of this relationship with the client in order to achieve a sustainable interaction with him, based on meeting needs and constantly adapting to his behavioral evolution. For many companies, a certain obsession with loyalty as a marketing strategy can be noticed, defending many approaches to the concept of fidelity depending on the permanent evolution of consumer behavior, but also the specifics of each activity.

There are certain studies that show that pricing strategy or focusing on a price-friendly offer compared to other commercial agents is an important factor in attracting and customer loyalty, according to M. Porter's theory. Porter who stipulates that the competitive advantage by obtaining a low cost of products or services is the basis of the cost domination strategy (Porter, 2007). On the other hand, some studies show that if the competitive advantage through costs is to the detriment of quality, it „becomes not only inoperative, but is also non-fast” (Deac, 2009, p. 63). Therefore, decision-makers or senior management of a pharmacy must focus insistently on these issues by developing empirical analyzes or investigations into customer behavior and combining them with values and strategies pharmacy based on comparative analyzes of the values of their satisfaction and loyalty.

A market research study within the Romanian pharmaceutical retail sector regarding the intensity of the correlation between loyalty and other variables is currently lacking. Therefore, this paper starts with the following questions:

1. Is there a correlation between loyalty to a particular pharmacy/pharmaceutical chain and other factors: competitive advantage through costs or differentiation, service quality, reputation of a pharmacy/pharmaceutical chain?
2. What is the intensity of the correlation between loyalty and the other variables?
3. Which of the aforementioned variables can fundamentally influence the loyalty of pharmacy customers?

The main purpose of this research is to develop a business management model that can help a specific pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain increase its commercial profitability by implementing appropriate loyalty strategies based on the study of the diversity of pharmacy customers and offering in full accordance with customer expectations as a concrete expression of customer orientation.

The objective is to demonstrate that customer loyalty to a pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain is a complex phenomenon that needs to take into account various variables, which will form the basis for the development of authentic loyalty strategies. Thus, through this market research based on a questionnaire, the goal is to identify suitable profiles for the diversity of consumers of pharmaceutical or parapharmaceutical products and the premises for offering by the upper management of a pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain, in full accordance with customer expectations as an eloquent expression of a customer-centric orientation.

Through an in-depth analysis of the relationship between loyalty and other variables based on a questionnaire and the processing of data obtained through specific statistical programs such as SPSS, a hierarchy of factors influencing a customer's attachment to a particular pharmacy can be established, as well as a strategy for retaining existing customers. The importance of a pragmatic analysis of the relationship between customer loyalty to a pharmacy and its correlation with the main internal or external factors is all the more evident and crucial in the face of increased competition within the pharmaceutical retail sector.

2. TECHORETICAL AND PRAGMATIC APPROACHES ON CLIENT LOYALTY

Recent studies, based on pragmatic observations and analyzes of various companies, show that through an authentic loyalty program based, not just on attracting new customers, but especially on the development of an attachment to a certain company or brand, it directly influences proportionally the success of that enterprise (Gârdan, 2004). Thus, loyalty, as a managerial strategy, aims at a certain development and stabilization of this relationship with the client in order to achieve a sustainable interaction with him, based on meeting needs and constantly adapting to its behavioral evolution. The most common meanings of the term loyalty, in the economic field, refer to that set of measures of an undertaking which, starting from a positive orientation of a client's behavioral intentions towards his current or future offer, they can generate a certain stabilization or intensification of relations with him (Diller, 1996). It is also proven that the genuine loyalty of a large number of customers can significantly reduce the company's costs. In this respect, certain market studies in 2016 show, pragmatically, how, by a five percent reduction in the total share of lost customers, you can get a 25-85% increase in a company's profits, but also six times higher costs for winning a customer than keeping another customer already won (Baker et al., 2016). However, loyalty to a particular pharmacy is difficult to measure, being determined by a number of qualitative and quantitative aspects, but also by many variables involved in the subjective assessment of value. It should be specified that the retail pharmaceutical market benefits from a special legislative and economic framework, which requires a specific approach to customer loyalty techniques and tools. Thus, the strategies used in a customer loyalty program of a pharmacy must take into account the fact that there are certain variables that can decisively impact the attachment of customers to a particular pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain. Therefore, items were used to measure these variables such as: the existence of compensated or free medicines, based on a prescription, the importance of pharmaceutical staff, specific policy on drug return, delivery services, online orders. Also, no classic variables of any loyalty strategy regarding the price of medicines, differentiation issues, quality of pharmaceutical services and reputation of the pharmacy frequented were neglected. The questionnaire also took into account the differences in the loyalty process, depending on the market configuration: independent pharmacies and pharmaceutical chains.

Thus, specific items have been formulated to independent pharmacies that address mainly loyalty strategies by capitalizing on the competitive advantage related to the proximity of the pharmacy, but also on a more consolidated relationship with the patient. Regarding the strategies of pharmaceutical chains, items related to the impact of frequency and image marketing programs, price reductions, loyalty programs, their loyalty policy were conceived. Overall, the distributed questionnaire sought to identify both the impact of pharmacy loyalty actions and their behavioral reactions according to certain dependent or independent variables.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE PHARMACEUTICAL MARKET IN ROMANIA

The retail market for pharmaceutical products in Romania is very open to various customer loyalty programs and strategies, employing a variety of methods and specific techniques to retain customers. The activity regarding the trade with pharmaceutical and parapharmaceutical products takes place within the Romanian economic system – social, being characterized by a dynamism and a very high competition in the urban environment, but slightly blurred in rural areas. However, this market benefits from a special legislative and economic framework, which requires a specific approach to customer loyalty techniques and tools. Thus, the strategies used in a customer loyalty program of a pharmacy must take into account the fact that there are certain variables that can decisively impact the attachment of customers to a particular pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain.

One of the peculiarities that influences the loyalty of certain customers in the pharmaceutical market refers to the existence of those compensated or free medicines, based on a prescription. It should be specified that for this category of customers requesting compensated or free medicines, the main

decision-making center is the doctor prescribing the prescription and not the direct beneficiary of the medicine. This acquires a special importance given that they represent 59,5% of the total pharmaceutical products sold on the Romanian market, while the other products sold by pharmacies, without a prescription (OTC-over the counter) amounts to only 25.8 % of the total Romanian pharmaceutical market, and 14.7% of the total volume of drugs were distributed through hospital pharmacies. From this point of view, Romania is well below the European average regarding the marketing of OTCs, where they amount to approximately 45% (European Commission, 2021). The main causes of this gap with other European countries are both limited access to alternative treatment offers and fairly evasive information on innovative medicines, as well as the very low purchasing power of the Romanian customer. Another feature of the pharmaceutical sector is that prices are most often the result of a regulated decision-making process, which nevertheless involves certain negotiations between stakeholders. Thus, the pharmaceutical industry has seen considerable growth in all its segments over the last decade, contributing more than 1% to the formation of GDP (2010). According to the Pharma & Hospital Report study (apud Univers farmaceutic, 2023), Cegedim Customer Information estimates that between July 2022 – June 2023, the volume of medicines released to patients in Romania was 719.2 million boxes, increasing by 3.6% compared to July 2021 – June 2022, increasing is also the total number of days of treatment (3.9%). The value of medicines released to patients in Romania, in the same period, was 27.8 billion lei (5.7 billion euros) at distribution price, increasing by 18.5% compared to the period July 2021 – June 2022. Recipe medicines (Rx) from pharmacies increased by 21.1% (16.56 billion lei), while over-the-counter products from pharmacies had a lower increase, with only 14.5% (7.18 billion lei) and the hospital segment increased by 15.7%, (4.07 billion lei).

However, European Commission statistics (European Commission, 2021) place Romania below the European average in terms of health and drug spending, ranking 34th out of 35 European countries (549 points), surpassing only Albania and with a very large gap in chapters such as: waiting times for patients to access innovative medicines, the general level of information among patients, patients' rights, as well as the general health of the population.

Regarding the distribution of medicines and food supplements, Romania is on the fifth place in Europe, each local pharmacy serves on average 2350 people, being overtaken only by Greece (1140 inhabitants/pharmacy), Bulgaria, Spain and Belgium (Kisded, 2016).

By successfully implementing marketing strategies aimed at acquiring new customers and retaining them, there has been significant growth in both major pharmaceutical chains and the sector as a whole. However, there is a noticeable disparity between these types of pharmaceutical retail businesses in terms of turnover and the number of pharmacies they own. The top 5 competitors in the pharmaceutical retail market, are as follows: Catena Hygeia (turnover of 6.3 billion lei, increase 23% compared to the previous year, by pharmacies 900), DR Max SRL, with a turnover of approximately 3.19 billion lei (34.5% more than in 2021 and 850 pharmacies), Helpnet Farma SRL with a business of 1.51 billion lei, (increase by 17.5% and approx. 400 pharmacies), Farmacia Tei SRL with a business of 1.53 billion lei (5 pharmacies and an increase of 17%), S.I.E.P.C.O.F.A.R SA /Dona with sales of 1.26 billion lei (approx. 300 pharmacies) and an increase of 11.74% compared to the previous year (Șomănescu, 2023).

Compared to 2010, the pharmacies' business increased almost 3 times, from 8.7 billion lei to 25.7 billion lei in 2022, and the net profit doubled, from 464.4 million lei to 1.18 billion lei. In 2023, all pharmaceutical chain companies owned around 57% of the Romanian pharmaceutical market, with a cumulative turnover of approximately 16.1 billion lei. This unequal distribution of the Romanian pharmaceutical market is explained by the fact that most of these chains have adopted an extensive strategy, focusing on advertising campaigns and subsequently on customer loyalty through various means. However, there are pharmacies that have implemented intensive strategies, especially neighborhood pharmacies, as was the case with Farmacia Tei, which initially had limited sales but later, by focusing on customer loyalty through competitive pricing compared to competitors, achieved

the highest unit turnover, with sales of approximately 450 million lei in its 5 pharmaceutical points (Mihalache, 2019). Effective customer loyalty actions have also generated significant profitability growth. If in 2012, retail companies in the pharmaceutical industry reported a total profit of 1.65 billion lei, in 2022 a profit of approximately 2 billion lei was registered, increasing by 800 million lei compared to the level of 2021 (Frames, 2023).

Pharmacy managers have recognized the importance of the customer loyalty process, as Dorin Catană, the General Director of Centrofarm, pointed out as early as 2009, highlighting the fact that there are multiple ways of portfolio differentiation, loyalty, and individualization in pharmacies, with the aim of attracting and retaining customers (Anon, 2009).

It should be noted that within pharmacies in Romania, two directions can be identified regarding the customer loyalty process, depending on the configuration of the mentioned pharmaceutical market: independent pharmacies and pharmaceutical chains. Therefore, it can be observed that every pharmacy in the Romanian market has successfully implemented loyalty programs, based either on imitating well-known marketing strategies (loyalty cards, promotions, gift products) or on creativity and adaptation to the evolution of consumer behavior and the specifics of the external environment, as suggested as early as 2000 by Hermand Diller (2000).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Establishing Research Objectives and Hypotheses

This objective of increasing company profitability through loyalty is based on certain studies (Reichheld/Sasser 1991, cited in Bruhn, 2001, p.109) and market research conducted by various companies or firms, demonstrating that developing customer attachment to a particular company or brand directly influences the company's success with up to a 75% increase in profit from a single customer (Gârdan, 2004).

The secondary objective of the research is to identify and examine correlations between loyalty and the following variables: competitive advantage through differentiation, competitive advantage through cost, perceived service quality, and the reputation of a pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain. In this regard, pharmacy managers have emphasized the importance of portfolio differentiation strategies both in attracting new customers and in retaining existing customers (Anon, 2009).

Other managers in the pharmaceutical retail sector have successfully retained many customers through lower prices compared to competitors or by building stronger relationships with patients by focusing on improving service quality and ensuring friendly, courteous, and well-informed staff (Buicu et al., 2017, p.22).

Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is an association between the gender, income and age of respondents and their loyalty.

Independent variables (gender, age and income) directly influence any commercial relationship between seller and buyer in any field of activity, and the pharmaceutical market is no exception to this principle. Regarding the type of pharmacy customers, it can be noted the existence of two types of loyalty strategies, some dedicated exclusively to female people (gift cosmetics, diversified offer) and some mixed, addressed to both genres, by focusing on the competitive advantage through costs. Regarding the age of customers, there is some market research that identifies a very high percentage of buyers of medicines (67%) among people over the age of 50, and loyalty strategies should take this into account (Frames, 2023). It is also known that the purchasing power of pharmacy customers determines their behavior, because, depending on income levels, there is an attachment to pharmacies that have a more diverse offer or are better supplied.

H2: There is a significant difference in customer loyalty depending on the type of pharmacy frequented.

Within pharmacies in Romania, two types of commercial units can be identified: independent pharmacies and pharmaceutical chains. This configuration of the pharmaceutical market prints two specific directions in the loyalty process, and the hypothesis aims to highlight whether loyalty follows this distribution by the existence of a significant difference between the customers of the two types of pharmacies. Thus, independent pharmacies do not attach particular importance to marketing strategies and implicitly to loyalty techniques, focusing on capitalizing on the competitive advantage by differentiation, trying to provide good quality services, pharmacists dedicated to the needs of the client they get to know very well, their own laboratories for preparing personalized prescriptions and focusing on that type of client who frequently buys RX drugs, recipe-based, ie compensated or free (Ethica, 2022). With regard to pharmaceutical chains, coherent loyalty strategies can be observed, based on both differentiation and image campaigns, as well as on capitalizing on the competitive advantage through costs, by implementing discount systems through loyalty cards, reward programs, gift products.

H3: There is a correlation between loyalty to a particular pharmacy / pharmaceutical chain and other variables (competitive advantage through price, competitive advantage through differentiation, quality of services, reputation of the pharmacy);

Although the way prices are set in the pharmaceutical sector is based on a regulated decision-making process and there are certain upper ceilings on the prices of some medicines, however, there are differences in sensitivity from one pharmacy to another in terms of the price of medicines. Therefore, verifying this hypothesis will identify how important the pricing policy of each pharmacy is in attracting or retaining customers. With regard to the competitive advantage by differentiation, it should be specified that many pharmacies use a combined presentation of products sold according to certain criteria that could help the customer to choose more easily what he wants, but at the same time to stimulate the cross-buying process. The existence of a diversified offer is a very important variable on the pharmaceutical market in terms of choosing a certain pharmacy according to the most varied products offered.

From the point of view of the quality of services, the pharmaceutical trade is strongly influenced by the degree of professionalism and involvement of the specialized staff. The pharmacist is not seen by the client only as a simple pharmaceutical trader, but especially as an accredited health specialist, having the role of educating, informing, and advise the patient on prescribed or alternative treatment medications. The information provided by the pharmaceutical staff occupies an important place in the interaction with the client seen as the patient, and the non-verbal expressions (mime, gestures, eye contact, voice quality) contributes decisively to gaining attachment to a particular pharmacy.

Currently, the activity of a pharmacist involves more than certain traditional functions (preparation and release of drugs), most pharmacies trying to implement strategies based on the patient and his needs, in order to increase its satisfaction (Vlădescu et al., 2008, p. 97). Thus, communication with the patient, the pharmacist-patient relationship makes this variable much more visible in gaining customer loyalty to a particular pharmacy

One of the secondary objectives of this study is to measure the intensity of the correlation between loyalty and the reputation of a pharmacy, by analyzing how image marketing can decisively influence the attachment to a particular pharmacy. Image marketing programs or image campaigns of pharmacies, through various media channels are another method widely used by both independent pharmacies, but especially by large pharmaceutical chains. Thus, promoting one's own image has a major impact both in attracting new customers and especially in the loyalty of existing ones.

4.2 Survey Design and Questionnaire Development

The research was based on the creation of a questionnaire with 28 questions, aimed at conducting research on the loyalty of consumers in the Romanian pharmaceutical retail market.

The collected data were used strictly for scientific purposes, with responses being anonymous, and participation was voluntary. The estimated average time required to complete the questionnaire was a maximum of 10 minutes.

The scale measuring each identified variable is a Likert scale, with the following 5 items ranked by the intensity of agreement with a particular statement: 1. Strongly Disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree (Willott, 2019).

Thus, according to specialized studies, several variables that can influence customer loyalty to a pharmacy were identified and structured into 4 sections as follows (Noyan & Simsek, 2011):

Section 1 includes 6 general questions: age, place of residence, gender, income level, expectations from a specific pharmacy, and specifying the pharmacy to be referred to in the following questions.

Section 2 is based on a set of 20 items structured into 5 scales, with each scale composed of 4 items. The 5 scales are as follows:

1. Information related to drug prices,
2. Information related to differentiation aspects,
3. Information related to the quality of pharmaceutical services,
4. Information related to the reputation of the visited pharmacy,
5. Loyalty to a specific pharmacy.

At the end of this section, two additional requirements were introduced, concerning aspects that could increase the frequency of purchasing pharmaceutical products from a specific pharmacy/pharmacy chain and suggestions for improving the activity of the visited pharmacy.

Within each scale, 4 items were formulated using a Likert-type scale and were inspired by various sources, as indicated in the table 1.

Table 1. Bibliographic sources regarding the composition of the scales

Variable identification	Inspiration Sources	Measurement scale
Information related to drug prices: (Competitive cost advantage)	Willott, 2019	Likert
Information related to differentiation aspects: (Competitive advantage by differentiation)	Noyan & Simsek, 2011	Likert
Information related to the quality of pharmaceutical services	Stancu & Meghișan, 2012	Likert
Loyalty to a specific pharmacy	Bloemer & Schroder, 2002	Likert

Source: own analysis

4.3 Population and Sample Representativeness

Since the research addresses all potential pharmacy customers in Romania, it follows that the population for which the results of this research are intended to be generalized will be equivalent to the adult population of Romania. Therefore, the results of the research will reflect on the resident population of Romania aged 18 and older, which is approximately 16,286,000 individuals.

$N = 19,186,000$ (resident population in Romania) – $2,900,000$ (minors 0-18 years old) = $16,286,000$ (INSSE, 2021)

N (population) = $16,286,000$ resident population over 18 years old

t (the theoretical value corresponding to the probability guaranteeing the result) = 1.96

E (sampling error) = +/- 5%

p (since the standard deviation is unknown, the maximum possible standard deviation is chosen) = 50%

Following the centralization of both online (181) and physical (206) completed questionnaires, a "n" sample was established, comprising 387 respondents. This sample was obtained through non-probabilistic ad-hoc sampling based on volunteering, as the survey was conducted not only through online questionnaires but also in the premises of 10 pharmacies in Bucharest and Ilfov.

Additionally, the sample size of 387 individuals is sufficiently large to ensure a reasonable margin of error (5%) for the results at the level of the entire population, as well as the condition of representativeness. Since the sample does not represent more than 5% of the total population, there is no need to calculate "n'" (the corrected sample size). To ensure the representativeness of the sample, a statistical test based on the t-Student distribution will be used to highlight the differences between the population weights regarding age, gender, and the respondents' place of origin, and the weights identified at the sample level.

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

The questionnaire is a self-administered type, created in Google Forms, and was distributed through various online sources (WhatsApp, email, Facebook), as well as by printing 206 questionnaires that were distributed in 10 pharmacies in Bucharest and Ilfov. The responses were centralized in an Excel file, totaling 387 respondents. Out of these, 181 responses were collected online, and 206 questionnaires came from physical completion at the 10 pharmacies. The data collected in the Excel spreadsheet were later imported into SPSS and processed according to the statistical instructions in SPSS.

Regarding the pharmacy chosen as a reference for respondents, a number of 359 responses were recorded with the explicit name of a pharmacy and a number of 28 responses where inaccurate mentions appear, of the type: „ any ", „ that of the village ", „ closest ", „ the first to see it". Of the 42 pharmaceutical companies explicitly mentioned in questionnaire, most customers are loyal to the pharmaceutical chain Dr. Max -70 replies (18.09%), followed by Pharmacy Tei- 51 responses (13.18%) and Catena- 48 responses (12.40%).

We mention that data interpeering through the SPSS program will not focus on the sequential analysis of responses based on the name of a pharmacy and identifying relationships between the loyalty campaigns of that pharmacy and the responses of loyal customers to that pharmacy. Instead, the data analysis will focus on the general data analysis based on the identified variables, attempting to determine if there are significant differences between loyal customers of pharmacy chains and those loyal to neighborhood pharmacies.

5. RESULTS ANALYSIS

5.1 Data Analysis by Respondents' Gender

It can be observed that the number of female respondents is much higher, approximately 65.37%, which is 253 individuals, compared to 34.63%, which is 134 male individuals. This difference may affect the statistical consistency of the sample since the national distribution by gender is 51% - female and 49% – male.

Based on the information from SPSS, the following aspects are highlighted:

- the majority of female individuals (53.8%) frequent pharmaceutical chains, while male individuals predominantly use local pharmacies (66.4%), according to Table 2, compiled from information processed according to the statistical instructions in SPSS.

Table 2. Type of Pharmacy Frequented

Criteria/Gender	Female	Male
Distribution of Respondents	65.37%	34.63%
Preference for Pharmaceutical Chains	53.8%	33.6%
Preference for Local Pharmacies	46.2%	66.4%

Source: Own analysis based on SPSS

- female respondents appreciate the presence of a professional pharmacist most (24.9%), while male respondents rate proximity or quick delivery more highly (28.4%), according to Table 3.

Table 3. Information on the aspects appreciated and the increase of the frequency of purchases from a pharmacy according to the type of respondents.

Appreciated Aspects in a Pharmacy	F	M
Proximity of location	17.8%	28.4%
Diversified and up-to-date offerings	15.8%	11.2%
Availability of hard-to-access medicines	9.9%	9%
Presence of a professional pharmacist	24.9%	17.2%
Final price	11.5%	20.1%
Attractive loyalty policy	9.1%	3%
Return/replacement options for products	11.1%	11.2%
Aspects related to increased frequency of purchases from a pharmacy		
Practicing lower prices compared to other pharmacies	34%	44%
Discount policies through reimbursed prescriptions, cards	13.4%	12.7%
Continuous diversification and updating	19%	11.9%
Optimizing online activities	11.1%	17.9%
Professional pharmaceutical staff	2.8%	2.2%
Attractive commercial space and environment	7.9%	6%
Return/replacement options for products	11.9%	5.2%

Source: own analysis based on SPSS

Based on the data presented in the previous table, it can be seen that the frequency of purchases within a pharmacy depends very much on the lower price of medicines, for both categories of respondents, but especially for men (44% of men, 34% of women).

Also, according to table 4, it is observed that women are satisfied or very satisfied (averages between 4-5), in relation to aspects related to the quality of services (51.3%), but the percentage of satisfaction is lower in aspects related to differentiation (36.3%).

Table 4. Percentage of Averages Ranging from 4-5 for the Following Variables

Variables Analyzed	F	M
Information regarding medicine prices	44%	28.3%
Information regarding differentiation aspects	36.3%	34.8%
Information regarding service quality	51.3 %	40.3%
Information regarding the pharmacy's reputation	43.5%	29.9 %
Your loyalty to a specific pharmacy	56.9%	53.7 %

Source: Own analysis

Concerning the satisfaction level, the percentage of men (Table 5.3) is much lower than that of women concerning the satisfaction level, with averages between 4-5 being much lower for aspects related to medicine prices (28.3%), differentiation (34.8%), service quality (40.3%), or the pharmacy's reputation (29.9%).

Referring exclusively to the fidelity variable, female individuals exhibit a higher degree of attachment to a particular pharmacy, with a large number having average scores above 4, which is 56.9% of all female individuals, compared to male individuals, where only 53.7% express a high degree of loyalty in terms of time spent in the respective pharmacy, purchase frequency, and quantity (Table 5.3). The same uneven distribution can also be observed based on age since most respondents (27.9%) fall within the age range of 41-50 years, while the smallest percentage (11.6%) belongs to those over 60 years.

Since a significant number of respondents (181 individuals) completed the online questionnaire, individuals under 50 years old have a majority percentage (73%), while those aged over 60 have very low representation (only 11.6%). This is because either they did not have access to the online form or had certain difficulties or reservations in completing it. Thus, among individuals under 30 years old, representing 24.8% of all respondents, according to Annex 3, we can observe a preference for pharmaceutical chains (60.4%), with the highest percentage of them (30.2%) choosing the nearest pharmacy points (Table 5).

Table 5. Information regarding the distribution of respondents by their age

Criteria/age	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	>60
Distribution of respondents	24.8%	20.4%	27.9%	15.2%	11.6%
Preference for pharmaceutical chains	60.4%	38%	52.8%	39%	28.9%
Preference for neighborhood pharmacies	39.6%	62%	47.2%	61%	71.1%
Aspects appreciated in a pharmacy					
Proximity	30.2%	13.9%	24.1%	16.9%	15.6%
Diversified and updated offerings	10.4%	19.0%	17.6%	13.6%	6.7%
Availability of hard-to-access medicines	5.2%	7.6%	9.3%	10.2%	22.2%
Presence of a professional pharmacist	24.0%	24.1%	23.1%	28.8%	4.4%
Final price	14.6%	17.7%	18.5%	8.5%	6.7%
Attractive loyalty policy	10.4%	8.9%	2.8%	8.5%	4.4%
Options for product return/replacement	5.2%	8.9%	4.6%	13.6%	40.0%
Aspects regarding increased pharmacy purchase frequency					
Practicing lower prices compared to other pharmacies	42.7%	35.4%	48.1%	23.7%	22.2%
Discount policies through compensated prescriptions, cards	17.7%	5.1%	8.3%	16.9%	24.4%
Diversification and continuous updating	16.7%	15.2%	16.7%	11.9%	24.4%
Optimizing online activities	2.1%	12.7%	8.3%	10.2%	2.2%
Professional pharmaceutical staff	5.2%	19.0%	14.8%	20.3%	8.9%
Attractive commercial space and environmental factors	0.0%	1.3%	1.9%	3.4%	11.1%
Options for product return/replacement	15.6%	11.4%	1.9%	13.6%	6.7%
Percentage of scores between 4-5 for the following variables					
Information regarding medicine prices	50%	50.7%	35.1%	20.8%	44.4%
Information regarding differentiation aspects	31.2%	52.2%	22.3%	45.8%	35.5%
Information regarding service quality	44.8%	43.1%	50%	56%	46.7%
Information regarding the reputation of the frequented pharmacy	41.7%	44.6%	32.4%	37.2 %	41%
Loyalty to a specific pharmacy	48.9%	63.4%	50.9%	54.6%	71%

Source: Own analysis based on SPSS

A very high percentage of those **aged 18-30 years** (42.7%) specified that lower prices would increase the frequency of purchases. At the same time, 50% of these respondents have an average of grades awarded above 4 at the average of items related to the variable „information on the price of medicines”. This is also confirmed by the correlation with the other variables, where the percentage of averages greater than 4 is much lower: only 31.2% for items related to differentiation, 44.8% in terms of quality of services, and 41.7% of them appreciated with averages between 4-5 in terms of pharmacy reputation (table 5). Regarding the items related to the variable „loyalty” a higher share (48.9%) of those who appreciated with an average of more than 4 aspects related to this variable, so a very large number of attachments for almost half of respondents to this age group. For people **aged 31-40 years**, there is a reversal of percentages in terms of type of pharmacy, 62% of whom choose neighborhood pharmacies, and in the chapter on „what you appreciate most in a pharmacy”, the highest percentage for this age group (24.1%) went to the option of the presence of a professional pharmacist (table 5). Note, in this age group the very high percentage of those who appreciated with an average of grades greater than 4 aspects on both the price (50.7%), differentiation (52.2%), as well as loyalty to a particular pharmacy (63.4%), but are less satisfied with the quality of services (43.1%) and factors related to the reputation of a pharmacy (44.6%). Thus, it can be concluded that those aged 31-40 appreciate in large numbers the loyalty strategies of the frequented pharmacies, being so satisfied with the price, but especially due to the aspects related to differentiation, due to the fact that 82.3% of them have incomes higher than 3000 lei, compared to those under 30 years old where there is a very high percentage (70.8%) with incomes less than 3000 RON. Most people **aged 41-50 years** (24.1%) appreciate the proximity or speed of the location, but almost half of them (48.1%) want lower prices for an increase in fidelity to a particular pharmacy. At this age range, the difference between the attendance of neighborhood pharmacies (47.2%) and the pharmaceutical chains (52.8%) is very small (table no. 5). Also, the sum of the percentages of those who appreciated with averages between 4-5 shows a high degree of satisfaction in terms of price and differentiation, as only 35.1% and 22.3% respectively of the respondents in this age group have averages between grades 4-5 (table 5.4). However, around 50% of respondents in this age range have a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of services, only 32.4% of them particularly appreciate the reputation of the pharmacy, instead the level of loyalty is high or very high (notes between 4-5) for 50.9% of those falling within the age range 41-50 years (table no. 1).

Regarding the **age group 51-60 years**, 61% of them are supplied from neighborhood pharmacies and most (28.8%) appreciate the presence of the pharmacist at a high level. In the chapter on increasing the frequency of purchases in the first place are the assessments regarding the practice of lower prices (23.7%), a fact also highlighted by the very small number (20.8%) of those satisfied with the price, as a fairly high percentage of respondents (45.8%) gave grades with an average of 3-4 for the variable price advantage. In contrast, a high percentage in this age group are satisfied with the differentiated offer (45.8%) and the quality of services (56%). Although the reputation of the pharmacy matters particularly only for 37.2% of these respondents, there is still a high degree of loyalty for 54.6% of them comprising notes between 4-5 in this chapter (table no. 5).

For persons **over 60 years of age**, there is a major predisposition for neighborhood pharmacies (71%) and the same assessment (24.4%) both the offset or discounted recipe policy and the updated bids, given that many of them have a high consumption of pharmaceuticals due to the health complications generated by old age, but also specific needs for certain drugs that are more difficult to access or even unavailable on the market. The sum of the averages of items from the variable competitive price advantage is between 4-5 for 22.2% of respondents, most of them (44.4%) giving averages in this respect between 3-4, which corresponds to a degree of indifference or low satisfaction with the pricing policy of the respective pharmacy. In contrast, satisfaction is higher in 35.5% of respondents over the age of 60 in terms of differentiation, an even higher number (46.7 %) are satisfied with the quality of services and the reputation of the pharmacy (41%). Specific to this age group is the attachment to a

certain pharmacy manifested in 71.1% of respondents who gave grades between 4-5 in items related to the frequency and quantity of purchases, the time spent in the respective pharmacy and the seniority of the relationship with a certain pharmacy (table no. 5). This very high percentage of people loyal to a pharmacy in this age group can be understood by the fact that, already having a more intense experience and activity in interacting with pharmacies, have already formed certain habits of buying and structuring the preference for a certain pharmacy very well outlined.

5.4 Data analysis by revenue

As in any commercial field, and in the pharmaceutical retail market, revenues influence to a very large degree the choice of a certain pharmacy and its attachment to it, although the vast majority of products marketed have a very low degree of price elasticity, being considered vital or indispensable products. However, as this is a very varied market for the supply of pharmaceutical products, both for traders and for products marketed, the act of purchases is directly dependent on the level of income, especially in the case of those products frequently purchased by a certain person and which can be purchased from several pharmaceutical traders, from a certain area, but at significantly different prices.

Table 6. Information on the distribution of respondents according to their income

Criteria/income level	<3000 Ron	3000 - 5000 Ron	>5000 Ron
Distribution of respondents	30.75%	40.83%	28.42%
Preference for pharmaceutical chains	40.3%	48.1%	51.8%
Preference for neighborhood pharmacies	59.7%	51.9%	48.2%
Aspects appreciated in a pharmacy			
Proximity	27.7%	18.4%	19.1%
Diversified and updated offerings	10.9%	10.8%	22.7%
Availability of hard-to-access medicines	5.0%	12.7%	10.0%
Presence of a professional pharmacist	16.0%	28.5%	20.0%
Final price	16.8%	13.3%	13.6%
Attractive loyalty policy	8.4%	2.5%	11.8%
Options for product return/replacement	15.1%	13.9%	2.7%
Aspects regarding increased pharmacy purchase frequency			
Practicing lower prices compared to other pharmacies	42.0%	24.7%	50.9%
Discount policies through compensated prescriptions, cards	12.6%	19.0%	5.5%
Diversification and continuous updating	20.2%	15.8%	13.6%
Optimizing online activities	3.4%	7.6%	10.9%
Professional pharmaceutical staff	4.2%	23.4%	9.1%
Attractive commercial space and environmental factors	0.8%	3.2%	3.6%
Options for product return/replacement	16.8%	6.3%	6.4%
Percentage of scores between 4-5 for the following variables			
Information regarding medicine prices	40.2%	37.2%	38.1%
Information regarding differentiation aspects	30.2%	41.7%	33.6%
Information regarding service quality	47.1%	46.8%	50.1 %
Information regarding the reputation of the frequented pharmacy	39.3%	38%	39.1 %
Loyalty to a specific pharmacy	51.2%	59 %	56.4%

Source: Own analysis from SPSS

It should be specified that, according to the data in Table 6, the distribution of respondents on the level of income is a balanced one, as the percentages for each category of income are very close, both in terms of the minimum level of income, ie less than 3000 lei, where 30.7% of respondents fall, as

well as for those who have incomes higher than 5000 lei (28.4%), the highest percentage (40.8%) being represented by persons with incomes between 3000-5000 RON.

However, we note some specific differences based on income. For example, concerning the type of pharmacy frequented, individuals with average incomes prefer pharmacy chains (51.8%), while those with incomes less than 3000 lei or higher than 5000 lei prefer neighborhood pharmacies at a rate of 59.7% and 53.2%, respectively (annex no. 21). In terms of preferences for a particular pharmacy, from annex no. 20, we observe that those with incomes under 3000 lei (27.7%) prioritize proximity to their location, those with average incomes (28.5%) value the presence of a professional pharmacist, and those with incomes over 5000 lei (22.7%) appreciate a diversified offering of innovative medicines.

Regarding the variable related to increasing the frequency of purchases (table 5.5), respondents in all income categories have opted for practicing lower prices, but with different percentages, as follows: 42% for those with incomes under 3000 lei, 24.7% for those with incomes between 3000-5000 lei, and 50.9% for those with incomes over 5000 lei.

Regarding the correlation between income and the other variables, it's observed that a significant portion of those with incomes under 3000 lei (40.2%) are satisfied or very satisfied with the pricing and discount policies of the pharmacy they frequent. Those with average incomes exhibit a high level of satisfaction with diversified and regularly updated offerings, with 41.7% of them giving ratings greater than 4 in terms of competitive advantage through differentiation. Individuals with incomes exceeding 5000 lei highly appreciate service quality (50.1%) and the reputation of a pharmacy (39.1%).

The degree of attachment or loyalty to the mentioned pharmacy is very high for the vast majority of respondents, regardless of their income levels, albeit with minor differences, as seen in the structuring of percentages based on the average ratings within this variable in table 6.

Thus, 51.2% of those with incomes below 3000 lei exhibit a high or very high attachment to a specific pharmacy, and the percentage is even higher for those with incomes between 3000-5000 lei (59%) and for those with incomes exceeding 5000 lei (56.4%).

5.5 Testing Hypotheses

Customer loyalty in pharmacies is a puzzle composed of many diverse components: price and discounts received through prescriptions or offers, constant diversification of pharmaceutical offerings, service quality, and the importance of specialized staff, pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain brand. Price and pricing strategies play a very important role in the pharmaceutical retail market, but market research based on carefully constructed questionnaires and an efficient, thoughtful distribution of these questionnaires is needed to identify suitable profiles among diverse buyers. To ensure the effectiveness of this approach, we formulated several hypotheses regarding the association and correlation between loyalty and other variables included in the questionnaire. The first hypothesis concerns identifying a relationship between the gender of pharmacy customers and their loyalty.

H1: There is an association between the gender, the age and the income of the respondents and their loyalty.

To test this hypothesis, we used the Pearson chi-square test by applying the crosstabs function in SPSS.

Null hypothesis: $H_0 = 0$ (no association)

Alternative hypothesis (one of the two variants): either $H_1 > 0$ (there is an association), or $H_1: < 0$ (there is an association).

Since Sig is 0.013, there is an association between loyalty to a particular pharmacy/pharmaceutical chain and the gender of the respondents, and the Cramer's V coefficient identifies the intensity of the relationship between the two variables as low: 0.277 (Table 7).

The results obtained also showed that there are no significant differences between the average score of variables that measure customer loyalty to a pharmacy (Male average = 3.72, Female average = 3.89). Regarding the association between the age of respondents and their loyalty, we note that the Sig coefficient is 0.000 (Table 7), indicating an association, but the intensity of this relationship according to the Cramer's V coefficient (0.281) shows a low effect.

Table 7. Testing hypotheses regarding the association between gender, age, and respondent income and their loyalty.

Criteria	Association between the gender of respondents and their loyalty	Association between the age of respondents and their loyalty	Association between the income of respondents and their loyalty
Sig	0.013	0.000	0.000
Pearson Chi square	29.625	121.984	90.013
Cramer's V coefficient	0.277	0.281	0.341
Assumed hypothesis	Alternative hypothesis (H1): there is an association	Alternative hypothesis (H2): there is an association	Alternative hypothesis (H3): there is an association

Source: Own analysis from SPSS\

The association between the income of respondents and their loyalty has a Sig of 0.000 (Table 7), which means we accept the alternative hypothesis, but the intensity of this relationship, according to the Cramer's V coefficient (0.341), is slightly higher than that of the correlation between loyalty and the gender or age of respondents, but it is still considered an association with a medium effect.

H2: There is a significant difference in customer loyalty based on the type of pharmacy they frequent.

To test these hypotheses, we used the independent samples t-test, based on responses to the following questions in the questionnaire: 3 (independent variable: respondents' gender), 6 (what type of pharmacies they frequent), and 12 (dependent variable: the average score of loyalty-related items). In the first phase, we evaluated the internal consistency of the measurement scale for items related to loyalty, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.875, indicating that the measurement scales are efficiently chosen and can contribute to internal consistency of this variable.

Table 8. Cronbach's alpha coefficient and t-test results for loyalty and gender

Criteria for hypotheses is testing	Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha on standard items	Levene test for equality of variances	t	df	t-test for equality of means Sig	Difference in means
Type of pharmacy	0.875	0.881	0.994	-0.75	385	0.454	-0.068
Null hypothesis: there is no significant difference between the two groups							

Source: own analysis from SPSS

Regarding the t-test for differences in loyalty between those who frequent pharmacy chains and those who frequent neighborhood pharmacies, we observe a similar very high significance coefficient (0.454), which means $p > 0.05$, leading us to accept the null hypothesis. We also notice that there are

no significant differences between the loyalty scores of the two customer types (average loyalty for those who frequent pharmacy chains = 3.79, while the average loyalty for those who frequent neighborhood pharmacies = 3.86).

H3: There is a correlation between loyalty to a specific pharmacy/pharmaceutical chain and other variables (competitive advantage through price, competitive advantage through differentiation, quality of service, pharmacy reputation).

For a clearer understanding of the relationship between loyalty and other variables, we conducted a simple regression analysis. In this analysis, the dependent variable is the average loyalty, and the independent or predictor variables are the averages for the following factors: competitive advantage through price, competitive advantage through differentiation, service quality, and pharmacy reputation. For each regression analysis, we highlighted the significance level of the relationship, the R-square coefficient, the B coefficient, and the standardized Beta coefficient.

Table 9. Regression analysis between loyalty to a pharmacy and other variables

Predictor	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Anova F	Sig	Coefficient B	Beta Coefficient
Price mean	0.419	0.176	0.173	82.000	0.000	0.390	0.419
Differentiation mean	0.523	0.274	0.272	83.98	0.000	0.577	0.523
Service mean	0.535	0.286	0.284	154.020	0.000	0.577	0.535
Reputation mean	0.468	0.219	0.217	108.106	0.000	0.465	0.468

Source: own analysis from SPSS

The results obtained using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) show that Sig = 0.000 for all four regression analyses, meaning $p < 0.05$. Therefore, each of the four independent variables can be considered a predictor for the loyalty variable. However, we observe that the variance of each independent variable explains a different percentage of the loyalty variance. Specifically, changes in the perception of service quality and the impact of differentiation strategies can explain 28.4% and 27.2% of the variance in loyalty, respectively. Additionally, analyzing the non-standardized B coefficient, we find that an increase of one unit in the service quality mean can lead to a 0.57-point increase in the loyalty mean, which holds true for the increase in the differentiation mean. In the case of the other variables, factors related to competitive advantage through price and pharmacy reputation explain only 17.6% and 21.9% of the loyalty variance, respectively. An increase of one point in the means of these predictors results in a smaller increase in loyalty, only 0.39 points for the advantage through price mean and 0.46 points for the reputation mean. This conclusion is also confirmed by the ranking of responses to question 5 in the questionnaire, regarding the most appreciated aspect of a pharmacy. The top choice is "the presence of a professional pharmacist" (22.22%), directly related to service quality (Figure 1).

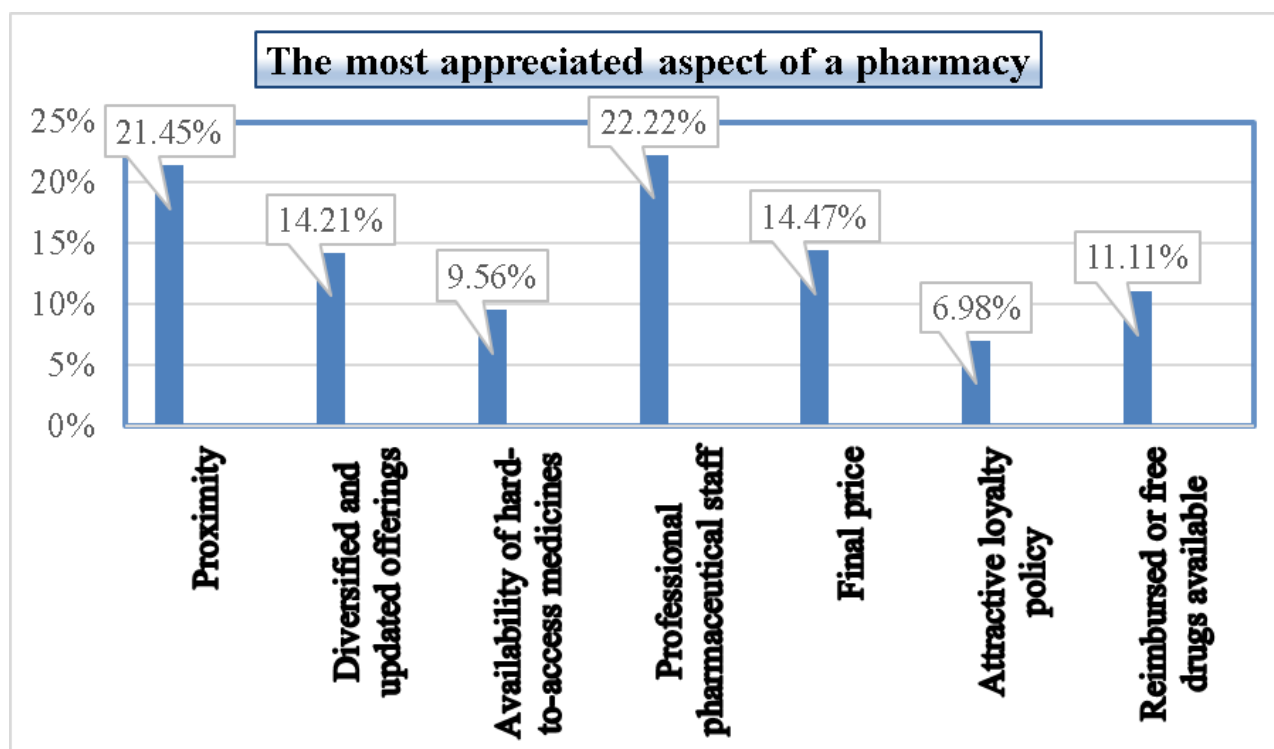


Figure 1. What do you value most in a pharmacy?

Source: SPSS, out-put no. 1

Therefore, it is confirmed that the loyalty of pharmacy customers will need to consider all these variables because each pharmacy will have to satisfy a very diverse range of customers with varied expectations and needs, making it very difficult to create a unique consumer profile specific to a particular pharmacy.

1. CONCLUSIONS

Studying the diversity of pharmacy customers and the variables involved in the loyalty process led to the fulfillment of the research purpose regarding the implementation of a management model of a pharmacy or pharmaceutical chain through a customer orientation. This was done by using a methodology that was based on the verification of the 3 stated hypotheses, using information collected through the questionnaire and statistically processed through the SPSS program.

The statistical tests used have shown that there is an association between loyalty and the gender, age, and income of the respondents, but the correlation with these variables has a low effect. It has also been proven that there is no significant difference in the loyalty of pharmacy customers based on their gender or the type of pharmacy frequented, as the averages are very close (male average = 3.72, female average = 3.89). Therefore, further analysis will identify those extreme response values or offline values that generated low correlation indices and will reanalyze the relationship between these variables and loyalty, excluding values that are outside the cloud of points.

The most important aspect was generated by the correlation between loyalty to a particular pharmacy/pharmaceutical chain and the other variables (competitive advantage through price, competitive advantage through differentiation, service quality, pharmacy reputation).

An increase in the averages of these variables by one unit will have an impact on loyalty between 0.39 points (to the competitive advantage by price) and 0.57 points (in the case of service quality). Thus, a positive correlation was identified with all the variables involved in the analysis, the strongest correlation being between loyalty and quality of services (Pearson coefficient = 0.535), and not

between loyalty and competitive advantage through the price (0.419), as seen in other commercial areas. This finding is also explained by the specifics of the pharmaceutical commercial activity, which is based on products considered urgent or capital, with high price elasticity, but also the need for guidance or advice on the administration / use of these medicinal products. Consequently, any increase in the customer satisfaction of a pharmacy by improving the quality of services or the degree of diversification may positively and decisively impact their attachment to that pharmacy, more than other actions based on improving the price strategy or on customers' perceptions of the pharmacy's reputation.

Nevertheless, the limitations of linear regression highlight the need for data scaled over intervals and, especially, that these data should be approximately normally distributed to ensure measurement accuracy for each variable involved in the loyalty analysis. Any regression equation cannot be used to establish certain values outside the obtained data. Future research will specifically focus on the correct distribution of respondents by income, gender, and region.

Although the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (0.875) for the "loyalty" variable indicates that the measurement scales were efficiently chosen and there is internal consistency for this variable, it is still recommended to either reformulate certain questions or choose more extensive agreement/disagreement measurement scales.

Research highlights the fact that, in the pharmaceutical field, pharmacy managers should not neglect the importance of internal factors such as motivation, preferences or personal needs, which in turn, are determined by other external variables such as pricing or differentiation issues, quality of services or reputation of the pharmacy.

We also note the existence of important issues that any loyalty strategy should take into account, relating to customers' buying habits depending on the type, their age or income (young people are very dissatisfied with the price of medicines, others particularly appreciate the diversified offer or quality of services for men, as well as for those with low incomes, price-based strategies can be used mainly, and for the other categories it will insist on services and differentiation.

The conclusions previously announced based on the interpretation of statistical tests thus correspond to most studies, indicating that customer loyalty is a multi-piece puzzle (price, differentiation, quality of services, promotions and discounts, the) brand, but the relationships between them can only be supported by market research based on very rigorous questionnaires composed in terms of measuring scales, but also an efficient and careful distribution of them to identify profiles appropriate to the diversity of pharmacy customers.

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