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RESEARCH ARTICLE



University Social Responsibility and performance: the role of service quality, reputation, student satisfaction and trust.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the impact of University Social Responsibility (USR) on University Performance (UP) through mediating role of service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust. Data were collected from a sample of 586 university students from Pakistan and 311 university students from China. Universities in Pakistan revealed that USR has a significant and positive impact on UP. However, this relationship was found to be insignificant in China. The findings from the overall sample revealed a significant and positive influence of USR on the intervening variables. Except for student trust in Pakistan, and student satisfaction in China, all the other constructs in the sample from Pakistan, China, and the overall sample were found to have a significant intervening role in the relationship between USR and UP. There is little research on the relationship and mechanism of impact of USR on UP.

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University Social Responsibility; service quality; student satisfaction; university reputation; student trust; University Performance

Introduction

The role of Social Responsibility (SR) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is not only restricted to the provision of education but also to attain a certain standard of performance that satisfies the emerging needs of the social setup (Vázquez et al., 2014). Hence, concerning the higher education perspective, the term University Social Responsibility (USR) was coined. It is derived from the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is the voluntary assumption by organizations of responsibilities that go beyond economic and legal responsibilities (Piacentini et al., 2000). Thus, USR refers to the 'university's commitment in recognizing the interests of society and performing in a way that improves the well-being of its members through the provision of quality educational services' (Latif, 2018, p. 516). To date, only a few studies have examined how USR can work as an instrument to boost student-related outcomes, like student satisfaction (Vázquez et al., 2015), social intrapreneurship culture (Sánchez-Hernández & Mainardes, 2016). With existing research on SR focused on its linkage with individual and organizational performance, it can be postulated that a socially responsible university can help

improve University Performance (UP). Approaching Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) using stakeholder and socially responsible marketing is critical to the very survival of universities (Huempfer & Kopf, 2017).

Existing literature exhibits that research on the USR and performance has been conducted in the USA and European countries whereas there is limited research in developing economies. Also, there is limited research on the cross-cultural analysis between emerging and developing economies. Furthermore, USR has never been significantly addressed in Pakistani and Chinese HEIs (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017; Malik & Kanwal, 2018). In addition to existing research on USR, student loyalty, and satisfaction in HEIs, there have been calls for cross-cultural analysis based on the student population to replicate the outcomes to further generalize the results (Sánchez-Hernández & Mainardes, 2016).

Considering the research gaps, the study opted for the developing economy (Pakistan) and emerging economy (China), as per the similarities in their below average and static USR activities as the policymakers in both countries sought to increase USR activities. Pakistan is less economically developed with low income (Bruton et al., 2021) and a low human development index (Wang et al., 2018). Organizations have gradually shifted towards SR in Pakistan but only a few have appropriately disclosed their practices. Similarly, in comparison to western countries, SR in China is at an early stage of development (Deng & Xu, 2017). In comparison to Pakistan, China is significantly more developed and economically sound. China is regarded extensively as a strong emerging economy (Zhou et al., 2021a). In this regard, there may be contrasting results when the two countries are compared.

Pakistan has a total of 218 universities with 58,000 teachers in public and private sectors in 2019–20. Student enrollment in universities rose to 1.91 million in 2019–20 from 1.86 million in 2018–19 (Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, 2022). Keeping in view the economic crisis and competition in attracting new students, universities in Pakistan are becoming more market-driven (Shahnaz, 2022). As for China, in 2019, there were 2,956 HEIs (including 257 independent colleges). The enrollment in HEIs went up quickly to 3.022 million, an increase of 10.6% or 289,000 students (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China). China's elite universities have now earned recognition in global rankings while making substantial efforts to internationalize, with an increasing number of local and international students, there is also an increasing race to admit the students (Hartley & Jarvis, 2022).

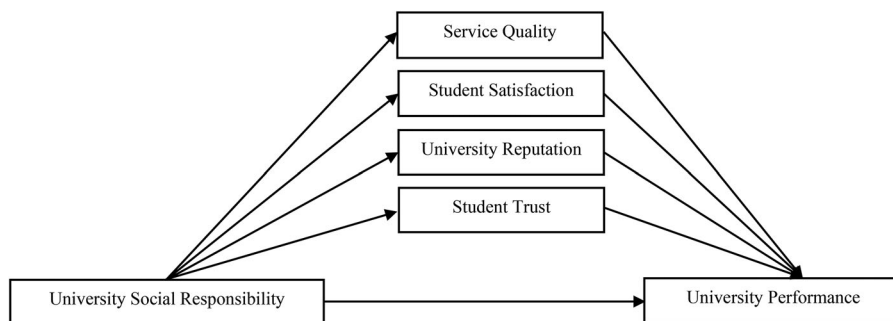


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Pressures on CSR from various stakeholder groups are projected to have a significant impact on organizations based in emerging economies like China (Zhou et al., 2021a). Furthermore, the situation is particularly prevalent in China, where the Chinese government has been promoting a green credit strategy to combat pollution since 2012 (Zhou et al., 2021b). Although most businesses in Pakistan lack a formal CSR policy, some businesses, particularly multinationals, engage in CSR activities that they highlight in their annual reports.

Contemporary research has argued against assessing the direct impact of SR on organizational performance (Saeidi et al., 2015). Research has highlighted that merely testing the direct relationship between SR and organizational performance conceals several significant factors, and a mediating mechanism that connects SR with outcomes is needed to ensure reliable findings (Latif et al., 2020; Saeidi et al., 2015). At present, the main focus of research in higher education is to assess the factors that impact UP (Sahibzada et al., 2020) and also to examine the prevailing role of SR practices in shaping organizational performance. Therefore, adding the intervening variables to explain the impact of USR on UP will highlight mechanisms through which USR can influence UP.

The existing research on SR in management and marketing domains has predicted the significant relationship of SR with various variables such as service quality (Kim & Kim, 2016), satisfaction (De Roeck et al., 2014), reputation (Fernández Sánchez et al., 2015), and trust (Yu & Choi, 2014). Furthermore, the current research on organizational performance also concludes that performance is positively affected by service quality (Ramayah et al., 2011), satisfaction (Saeidi et al., 2015), reputation (Miotto et al., 2020), and trust (Wang et al., 2014). Hence, four intervening variables, viz. service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust, are studied in the current research to ascertain if the proposed mediators help in explaining the mechanism of impact of USR on UP. Research on the SR and performance in HEIs has been scarce and since these variables have been extensively investigated in the context of corporations, therefore, they also hold vital significance in the context of HEIs. A similar proposition has been made by scholars like Vázquez et al. (2016) to examine relevant variables such as quality of service and trust with USR. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) recommended studying other possible antecedents that would influence student satisfaction. Also, El-Kassar et al. (2019) recommended further investigation into USR to ascertain its influence on the quality of services and student satisfaction.

Different cultures can lead to different behaviors (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2013). Kang et al. (2016) assessed the impact of national culture on SR in 63 different countries and found that national culture carries a significant impact on SR. However, Woo and Jin (2016) in their study of the apparel industry found no effect of culture on SR. Further, Hofstede's national culture also proposes differences in the attitudes and behaviors of people in different cultures. Hofstede (1980, p. 25), defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another.' According to Hofstede (2001), cultural values can explain the differences in the individual's behavior. In the context of the services, research demonstrates that Hofstede's cultural typology is supportive in understanding cross-cultural differences. Based on the above literature, there exist some studies exploring the effects of national culture on SR, but few studies did a cross-cultural analysis on the outcomes of SR.

The study is based on the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman 1994) and Resource-Based View (RBV). Stakeholder theory refers to value creation for different stakeholders other than the shareholders (Freeman, 1984). A stakeholder is 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by, the achievement of the organization's objectives' (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Stakeholders include shareholders, suppliers, employees, unions, customers, community members, media, or other groups that may be affected by organizational actions. These entities not only include the stockholder but also the stakeholders i.e. customers, government, community, and suppliers. Among them, the customers are the most important stakeholders (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Moreover, based on the previous research it is observed that stakeholder theory explains the value of each stakeholder. Therefore, leaders must take stakeholders' interests into account before organizational planning, as meeting stakeholders' expectations consequently lead to improved organizational performance (Freeman, 1984). Further RBV is utilized to elucidate the inter-relationship between the mediators and the criterion variable. RBV examines differences in performance based on organizational resources (Peteraf & Barney, 2003). A resource is anything that serves as a strength and includes both intangible and tangible assets that are semi-permanently tied to the organization (Miles, 2012).

Based on the identified gaps, the study makes several contributions. First, several models are tested on the relationship between SR and organizational performance, this study is one of the first to assess the impact of USR on UP. Second, with limited research on the outcomes of USR, the study seeks to find the relationship of USR with service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust. Third, previous studies on CSR and Organizational Performance have continuously emphasized the role of mediators, the study further helps in explaining the mechanism of impact of USR on UP. Hence, the study will add to the understanding of how USR can help improve UP. Fourth, this paper demonstrates the role of USR through cross-cultural analysis between two diverse economies, since there have been significantly limited studies on USR and its outcomes in a cross-cultural setting. Finally, the research contributes to USR in HEIs and further understanding the stakeholder theory and RBV. The present study integrates stakeholder theory and RBV to assess the relationship between USR and how it influences the proposed mediators (service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust) that lead to improved UP. The theories are widely used in marketing contexts, the current study extends their use in HEIs research.

Literature review and hypotheses development

University Social Responsibility (USR)

Organizations do not operate in isolation and have a significant impact on society. Similarly, universities as organizations shall take responsibility for the effects of their strategies and policies. HEIs cannot stay away from the current position prevalent on SR, this is because universities are responsible for educating people and promoting SR. Parsons (2014) claimed that USR is one of the strategies adopted by the management to supervise the university (internally) and to improve its reputation (externally). According to Vallaeys et al. (2009), USR is the employment and dissemination of principles and values through social participation, responsible campus, professional education, and social knowledge.

The focus of USR is on how well the universities concentrate on the ethical dimension, research/development responsibilities, and philanthropic responsibilities.

University Performance (UP)

The ultimate variable of interest for an organization is its performance (Richard et al., 2009). University as an organization is also focused on improving its performance. The pursuit and the transmission of knowledge have traditionally been the primary objective of universities. The rising emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness has naturally led to a need for a thorough understanding and examination of UP. Universities form part of those organizations where non-financial measures are primarily utilized in determining the levels of their performance. UP can be measured in several ways (e.g. financial, teaching performance) (Uluskan et al., 2017). In this paper, UP measurement is grounded in the instrument by Tseng (2010) that is based on the indexes proposed by Maltz et al. (2003). The focus is on measuring UP through the improvements made in the administrative operations, university students, effectiveness & efficiency, resource development, and preparation for the future. There are no standard measures for organizational performance, and researchers use measures that are compatible with their organization. UP can be referred to as HEIs improvements in Operational/administration, market/students, process (new programs and quality), people/resource development, and future readiness. Assessing UP can be a significant process for HEIs and their stakeholders. Institutions with high performance get more admissions and revenue than the lesser performing ones (Herbst, 2007), providing a competitive edge that would probably stimulate the institutions with low performance.

University social responsibility and university performance

SR research has primarily focused on establishing its link with business performance (Saeidi et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). With increasing importance of SR, universities shall endeavor to take a leading position, by undertaking initiatives that are sustainable and educating graduates in a manner that they can support a sustainable society (Glavič & Lukman, 2007). Furthermore, there is an increasing demand from the society that universities should improve their operational efficiency and performance by incorporating SR initiatives (Forrant & Silka, 2006).

Since Freeman's (1984) important work, stakeholder theory has grown and evolved as the central premise in SR research. According to stakeholder theory, a company's performance is determined by its capacity to effectively manage stakeholder (Yuen et al., 2018). Managing connections with significant stakeholders (students), is one of the critical vehicles (Jain et al., 2022). As a result, understanding and drawing any inferences regarding any probable link between SR and organizational performance requires interpreting the stakeholder theory (Perrini et al., 2011). In light of stakeholder theory, social practices are considered an instrument for amplifying stakeholder value. According to Jensen (2001), the enlightened value maximization concept based on stakeholders' theory proposes that firms must focus on long-term value maximization (such as services, high returns, low risk, low price, etc.) to achieve superior performance.

By implementing USR, universities can improve their performance in several ways, which can lead to numerous positive outcomes (Gomez, 2014), such as (a) Organizational (improved relationships with stakeholders like students, associations, and unions, an ethical and transparent management system, etc.); (b) Educational (responsible professional and citizenship training, excellent educational policies, and programs, etc.); (c) Cognitive impacts (incorporation of students to research projects relevant to social problems, promotion of inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary strategies, etc.); and (d) Social impacts (integration of social networks and local community programs, communication of socially responsible practices, etc.). USR initiatives that include a focus on ethics, improving research and development, and philanthropic practices can aid universities in improving their performance. Hence, it is proposed that

H1: There is a significantly positive impact of USR on UP.

Social responsibility and service quality, satisfaction, reputation, and trust

There is little research on the impact of SR on service quality. Recently, Santos et al. (2020) found a significant impact of USR on service quality in HEIs. Literature, in general, support the idea of the relationship of SR with different quality variables. In this context, USR has been identified as the 'university's commitment to recognizing the interests of society and performing in a way that improves the well-being of its members through the provision of quality educational services' (Latif, 2018, p. 516). The application of SR in HEIs points toward the identification of the university stakeholders and their responsibility towards them, this can aid in enhancing the service quality (Vázquez et al., 2014). USR focuses on good quality services, to attract students who desire quality education (Plungpongpan et al., 2016). Considering stakeholder theory, Maignan et al. (1999) identified SR to be critical in how well organizations fulfill their responsibilities towards the stakeholders. With an increased focus on the fulfillment of responsibilities towards the students through increased socially responsible initiatives, the service quality within the organization will improve (Yuen et al., 2018). Hence, it is proposed that

H2: There is a significantly positive impact of USR on service quality.

There is a significant impact of CSR on satisfaction (Pérez & Bosque, 2015), but there is little research on how USR affects student satisfaction. Vázquez et al. (2014) study revealed a significantly positive impact of USR on student satisfaction. A socially responsible institution is linked to improved service quality, resulting in heightened student satisfaction (Latif et al., 2021). SR is concerned with the stakeholders, It can be assumed that students' satisfaction is influenced by their perception of the institution's SR because a university aligns its activities with the needs of society through actively engaging with its communities ethically and transparently, and meets stakeholder requirements (Esfijani et al., 2012). Based on the stakeholder theory, since students are the primary stakeholders to whom universities are responsible. Consequently, HEIs know that their methods have an impact on students, and this recognition could considerably aid in improving student satisfaction (Su & Swanson, 2017). Hence, it is proposed that

H3: There is a significantly positive impact of USR on student satisfaction.

Awareness concerning HEIs is expressed in the form of an institution's reputation and rankings (Manzoor et al., 2021). Universities project their socially responsible initiatives to garner appreciation from the stakeholders, this appreciation can help the universities to improve their reputation. Additionally, since reputation is referred to as total opinion, it is highly likely that in universities it will be shaped by ethical practices, research & development initiatives, and philanthropy. Grounded in stakeholder theory, CSR initiatives may yield more favorable perceptions of firms, this is because when industries carry out CSR activities, the execution will promote a reputation of the institution (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). This was also partly evident in the study by Khoi (2021) who found that university reputation was influenced by research and development, funding, social contributions, leadership, and student guidance. Hence, it is proposed that:

H4: There is a significantly positive impact of USR on the university's reputation.

According to Rojas-Méndez et al. (2009) students' trust can be understood as students' confidence in the integrity and reliability of the university. This can help in building long and enduring relationships (Abdelmaaboud et al., 2021). Organizations that actively engage in CSR activities and take into account the interests of all stakeholders may acquire key stakeholders' support and trust (Chang, 2015). The deliberation of the concept of trust in the education sector is relatively recent (Kwan, 2016). USR can be utilized to increase community perceptions of legitimacy, value, and trust, and universities must recognize that they have a responsibility to return to society (Latif, 2018). According to Freeman (1984), stakeholder theory postulates value creation for all the stakeholders and not just the shareholders. Value in higher education can be created based on the critical elements of USR that include ethical behavior, focus on research, and philanthropic initiatives that can help in the better positioning of the institution (Kumar & Singh, 2022). This leads to an improved level of trust in the HEI, as students carry a perception of fairness, accountability, and responsibility. Hence, it is proposed that

H5: There is a significantly positive impact of USR on student trust.

Service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, student trust, and UP

Service has been identified as a resource that can differentiate the organization (Julien et al., 1997). Based on the Resource Based View (RBV), this resource can help the universities to differentiate them from competitors who provide lower-quality services. Universities as service organizations rely on their distinctive service attributes to set themselves apart (Girard & Pinar, 2021). One of the critical consequences of this service differentiation in HEIs is the university's performance (Sultan & Wong, 2012). The poor services by the academicians, administrators, and other supporting staff cause student frustration, which leads to poor UP (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). While HEIs strive to expand the number of students each year, a university's service performance should be routinely monitored. This could increase enrollment, enhance performance, and increase the marketability of the university's curriculum (Sultan & Wong, 2012). Since empirical support on the linkage between service quality on UP is rare; support is available in the corporate sector (Abd-Elrahman & Kamal, 2020), that service quality is associated

with attracting customers which leads to increased profit and market share and ultimately enhanced organizational performance. Hence, it is proposed that

H6: There is a significantly positive impact of service quality on UP.

Student satisfaction is an attitude that develops through the assessment of students' experiences regarding educational services; it is continuously shaped by the series of experiences (Elliot & Shin, 2002). A student is referred to as a customer of the universities. Customer satisfaction is a strategic asset that should be optimized and not ignored (Fornell et al., 2020a). Fornell et al. (2020b) unequivocally conclude that the link between customer satisfaction and performance is very strong. The relationship can be further explained in light of the RBV since student satisfaction is an asset and according to RBV, resources are assets that are seen as strengths that help the organization to better compete and to accomplish its vision, mission, strategies, and goals (Miles, 2012). Student satisfaction is one of the most important elements of relative market success since it leads to higher market share in terms of student intake, lower switching costs, and enhanced perception (Sultan & Wong, 2012). Sultan and Wong (2012) focus group study revealed that UP is an important outcome of student satisfaction and has a critical role in acquiring market share. Hence, it is proposed that

H7: There is a significantly positive impact of student satisfaction on UP.

The reputation of the university is regarded as a vital asset for attracting potential students (Alves & Raposo, 2007). In light of RBV, reputation as a valuable resource can help shape the intentions of prospective students leading to improvement in university performance based on the higher student intake that is made possible due to improved reputation. Putting the corporate reputation in terms of university reputation, Baltaru (2019) investigated its impact on university's performance in hundred UK Universities and concluded that despite the other factors i.e. professional staff, good honors, degree completion, research quality, and graduate employability, reputation emerged as the strongest indicator of the university's performance. In this new educational landscape, an intangible asset such as reputation is a critical factor in gaining a sustained competitive advantage, and HEIs are evaluated based on several different factors that also include reputation (Miotto et al., 2020). Since the empirical study on the reputation–performance relationship in universities is not thoroughly explored. Therefore, it is proposed that

H8: There is a significantly positive impact of university reputation on UP.

Student trust summarizes student perceptions of the standing of the university in a market and determines the worth of the academic programs (Sultan & Wong, 2012). In light of the RBV, sustainable competitive advantage is derived primarily from its intangible capabilities, such as the ability of the organization to gain the trust of customers (Barney, 1997). Observing the trust–performance relationship, trust is considered vital for the performance and well-being of the members of the organization in a time of crisis (Mishra, 1996). Hence, it is proposed that

H9: There is a significantly positive impact of student trust on UP,

Service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust as mediators

Santos et al. (2020) in their study of HEIs found a direct impact of USR on service quality. As stated by Foote et al. (2010), SR being a vital element of modern organizations leads to quality and ultimately better performance. Stakeholder theory indicates that stakeholders must be satisfied with the service quality or SR for positive performance to be realized (Yuen et al., 2018). Moreover, satisfaction as studied by Saeidi et al. (2015) is a significant mediator in CSR and performance relationship. Likewise, in HEIs, the USR strongly impacts student satisfaction (Santos et al., 2020; Vázquez et al., 2016). Through social responsibility initiatives, the university can increasingly take care of its stakeholders, leading to improved quality and increased satisfaction (Severt et al., 2022).

University reputation is comparatively a novel concept in the SR and performance context. Drawing on stakeholder theory, organizations with good social performance are rewarded by the stakeholders and penalized for poor social performance (Jamali, 2008). Since SR as a strategic commitment is not only an emerging area of study in the management field (Gupta et al., 2017) but is also deployed by firms to enhance their reputation and organizational performance which reduces the potential conflicts with the stakeholders (Lvina & Sirsly, 2019). Moreover, an adaptation of SR initiatives creates a reputation and improves the overall competitive performance (Choi & Lee, 2018; Li et al., 2015). Finally, student trust, as the fourth mediating variable influences higher education; nonetheless, the increase in the trust level would ensure better learning and performance (Kwan, 2016). As investigated by Yu and Choi (2014), SR practices have a direct effect on organizational performance and are also partially mediated by trust. Furthermore, mediating effect of brand trust and loyalty has been observed between CSR initiative and a firm's performance by Thanh et al. (2021). According to Jones (1995), based on the stakeholder theory, organizations that have mutual trust and cooperation with their stakeholders will have a competitive advantage. Based on the literature and the chain of relationships proposed through different hypotheses (H2-H9), it is proposed that:

H10-H13: Service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust mediate the relationship between USR and UP.

Research methodology

Despite its economic and social significance, SR in Pakistan has received little attention (Sajjad & Eweje, 2014). On the other hand, China is one of the few countries that has introduced various policies and regulations for organizations to fulfill their social responsibilities (Zhou et al., 2021b). Although there is a discussion about USR, it is still a minor topic in China's higher education industry (Chen & Vanclay, 2020). SR studies exploring student (consumer) perceptions from a cross-country viewpoint are rare. To the best of the author's knowledge, and based on a thorough search of peer-reviewed sources, no study has yet been published that examines how students in the two cultures perceive university SR activities.

Measures

The questionnaire included scales modified from previous research. There were three sub-dimensions of USR (Ethical, Research & Development, and Philanthropic). Students marked their level of agreement with the statements on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). [Table 1](#) summarizes the sources for the instruments and items.

Data collection

Based on the convenience sampling technique, Data were collected from two public universities in China from students studying full-time in undergraduate and post-graduate programs. Eight HEIs in Pakistan were approached for data collection. Before approaching students, permission was obtained from the department heads. Students were provided the questionnaire in print and were not obligated to participate. Out of 800 questionnaires administered to the universities in Pakistan, 586 returned duly completed, thus, making a response rate of 73.25%. Similarly, out of 800 questionnaires administered to both universities in China, 311 returned duly completed, thus, making a response rate of 38.88%. The data from Pakistan consisted of 319 male (54.4%) and 267 female (45.6%) respondents, with an average age of 23.94 years. 229 (39.9%) respondents were enrolled in undergraduate programs while 267 (45.6%) were in postgraduate programs. The data from China consisted of 189 male (60.8%) and 122 female (39.2%) respondents, with an average age of 26.12 years. 109 (35.04%) students belonged to undergraduate programs while 202 (64.96%) students were in postgraduate programs. SmartPLS 4 was utilized to perform the analysis.

Data analysis and results

Measurement model

Structural equation modeling is divided into measurement and structural model assessment. Measurement model assessment includes establishing construct reliability and validity. Construct reliability was established through Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Construct reliability and convergent validity for the country-specific sample and the complete sample are presented in [table 2](#). The Cronbach alpha values and CR for all the constructs were higher than the recommended value of 0.700 for the sample from Pakistan and the overall sample. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the constructs was higher than 0.500 for the sample from Pakistan and the overall sample, which corroborates convergent validity. The dimensions for USR in China were found to have low reliability and lack convergent validity. However, the composite reliability for Research and Development Responsibilities and Philanthropic Responsibilities was found to be fairly reliable (> 0.50). Furthermore, the overall dataset has better quality characteristics than for either country separately. Discriminant validity was assessed through cross-loadings. The results show that the factor loading of the items on their underlying construct was greater than their cross-loadings on the other construct in each sample, thus establishing discriminant validity. In this study, the Goodness of Fit (GoF) for the overall hypothesized model was 0.641, while 0.572 and 0.457 for Pakistan

Table 1. Source of measurement and items.

Construct	Source	Items
University Social Responsibility	Latif et al. (2021)	<i>The University</i> has comprehensive code of conduct tries to perform in a manner consistent with expectations of societal and ethical norms. has reduced consumption of scarce resource like Electricity/Water. encourages it students/staff initiatives towards good environmental performance. encourages its members to follow professional standards. is committed to prevention of pollution on all major environmental aspects. behaves with honesty, transparency and fairness in all its activities and relationships with others arranges for links with industry to develop skills in students encourages and empowers students to undertake research that creates social and economic impact integrates values such as respecting individual and social rights when carrying out research encourages scientific research on social problems and knowledge generation consistently offers scholarships to those in need offers free education to support staff understands and offers more time for students to pay their fees if they are in financial difficulty offers financial support to employees/students for extra-curricular activities participates in voluntary charitable activities within their local community
Service Quality	Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001)	I am satisfied with the quality of academic staff at my university I have access to latest Infrastructure at my university I am satisfied with the teaching on offer at my university The university has procedures and policies in place for sufficient student care. The quality of Examinations/tests conducted at the university I am satisfied with the quality of administrative services at my university
Student Satisfaction	Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016)	I am satisfied with my decision to register at this university My choice to choose this university was a wise one I think I did the right thing when I chose to study at this university I feel that my experience with this university has been enjoyable Overall, I am satisfied with this university
Student Trust	Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001)	I am sure that the university staff were always acting in my best interest Integrity is a word I'd use when describing the university staff University staff always kept their promises to me I have great confidence in the faculty members I trust my university
University reputation	Ali et al. (2016)	<i>The University</i> has a good image has a professional image program run by the university is reputable graduates are employable

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Construct	Source	Items
University Performance	Tseng (2010)	<i>There has been an integral improvement in ...</i> the operations, administrations, services and overall university performance. the relationship between the university and its students (e.g. no of students, student retention rates) university effectiveness and efficiency (e.g. launching new programs, management procedures, or quality control) resource development (e.g. student skills and personnel development) preparing for the future (e.g. quality/depth of planning, partnerships and alliances, preparing for environmental changes)

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity.

Items	Pakistan			China			Complete		
	Alpha	CR	AVE	Alpha	CR	AVE	Alpha	CR	AVE
ER	0.867	0.898	0.557	0.607	0.711	0.305	0.898	0.920	0.621
RDR	0.848	0.898	0.687	0.308	0.554	0.291	0.872	0.912	0.723
PR	0.846	0.890	0.618	0.398	0.561	0.254	0.876	0.910	0.668
PQ	0.878	0.908	0.622	0.824	0.872	0.532	0.902	0.925	0.671
SS	0.907	0.931	0.729	0.824	0.877	0.588	0.918	0.939	0.754
UR	0.881	0.918	0.737	0.817	0.879	0.646	0.896	0.927	0.762
ST	0.892	0.921	0.699	0.768	0.844	0.522	0.908	0.932	0.732
UP	0.909	0.932	0.733	0.832	0.882	0.599	0.920	0.940	0.759

Note. ER: Ethical Responsibilities, PQ: Perceived Quality, PR: Philanthropic Responsibilities, RDR: Research and Development Responsibilities, SS: Student Satisfaction, ST: Student Trust, UP: University Performance, UR: University Reputation, CR: Composite Reliability, AVE: Average Variance Extracted.

and China respectively, indicating that the model satisfied the global criterion of 0.3 (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013).

Validating higher-order construct (USR)

USR is the higher-order formative construct based on three lower-order constructs (Ethical, Research & Development, and Philanthropic Responsibilities). To validate the higher order formative construct, first, multi-collinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). VIF values less than or equal to 5 (Hair et al., 2021) indicate no multi-collinearity issues. In the present study, collinearity did not pose any threat, as the VIF values were less than 5 (Table 3). Next, the statistical significance and relevance of outer weights were assessed (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Except for Philanthropic Responsibilities (PR) in China, the outer weights were found significant. Further, outer loadings were found significant for each indicator forming USR (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Hence, the higher-order construct was validated.

Structural model

As part of the structural model assessment, the first step is to assess the multicollinearity through VIF. VIF values were found less than the recommended threshold of 5 in the

sample countries and the overall sample (Hair et al., 2021) indicating no multi-collinearity issues. Following the results for the complete sample, results from each sample country are presented.

Next, the proposed hypotheses are tested. The results (Table 4) revealed that all hypotheses were supported in the complete sample. The results for each country-specific sample are essentially consistent with those for the total sample: Student Trust→UP ($\beta = 0.052$, $t = 1.052$, $p = 0.146$) was found insignificant in the sample from Pakistan. While H1: USR→UP ($\beta = .034$, $t = 0.669$, $p = .252$) was found insignificant in the sample from China, while it was significant in the sample from Pakistan and the overall sample. H7: SS→UP ($\beta = .005$, $t = 0.073$, $p = .471$) was found insignificant in the sample from China, while it was significant in the sample from Pakistan and the overall sample.

Next, model explanatory power is assessed. The R-Sq values for the endogenous variables ranged between 0.226–0.701 across the samples (Pakistan, China, and Complete) in the study. The R-sq values can be described as weak to substantial (Hair et al., 2013). Predictive relevance was assessed using Q-sq value. The Q-sq values of the endogenous constructs ranged from 0.209–0.621. The Q-sq values in the study can be described as weak to substantial (Hair et al., 2013).

Mediation analysis

For complete sample, the results revealed significant mediating role of service quality (H10: $\beta = .095$, $t = 2.638$, $p = .004$), student satisfaction (H11: $\beta = 0.061$, $t = 1.948$, $p = 0.026$), university reputation (H12: $\beta = .313$, $t = 10.292$, $p < .001$) and student trust (H13: $\beta = .058$, $t = 1.735$, $p = .041$). Therefore, hypotheses H10-H13 were supported.

Furthermore, in the Pakistani context, the analysis showed significant mediating role of service quality (H10: $\beta = .077$, $t = 2.069$, $p = .019$), student satisfaction (H11: $\beta = .057$, $t = 1.835$, $p = .033$), university reputation (H12: $\beta = .300$, $t = 9.116$, $p < .001$). However, student trust (H13: $\beta = .033$, $t = 1.045$, $p = .148$) was insignificant. Hence, H10-H12 were accepted while H13 was rejected.

In the Chinese context, the analysis showed significant mediating role of service quality (H10: $\beta = .105$, $t = 2.179$, $p = .015$), university reputation (H12: $\beta = .206$, $t = 4.310$, $p < 0.001$), and student trust (H13: $\beta = .140$, $t = 2.735$, $p = .003$). However, Student Satisfaction (H11: $\beta = .003$, $t = 0.073$, $p = 0.471$) was insignificant. Hence, H10, H12, and H13 were accepted while H11 was rejected. Mediation analysis results are summarized in table 6.

Multi-group analysis

In the final part of the research, we looked at the notable variations between Pakistan and China in terms of the effects of USR on service quality, student satisfaction, student trust, university reputation, and UP. The findings revealed that all the differences were found significant (the difference in the impact of USR on ST was partially significant). The differences in path coefficients revealed that the impact of USR on the outcomes was stronger in Pakistan in comparison to China. The results of the multi-group analysis are summarized in table 6.

Table 3. Higher order construct validation (university social responsibility).

	Pakistan						China						Complete					
	VIF	Outer Weights	T Statistics	P Values	Outer Loadings	P Values	VIF	Outer Weights	T Statistics	P Values	Outer Loadings	P Values	VIF	Outer Weights	T Statistics	P Values	Outer Loadings	P Values
ER	1.618	0.456	10.696	0.000	0.855	0.000	1.324	0.895	12.921	0.000	0.980	0.000	2.197	0.471	12.416	0.000	0.913	0.000
RDR	1.698	0.267	5.480	0.000	0.784	0.000	1.151	0.204	2.360	0.009	0.516	0.000	2.250	0.246	5.919	0.000	0.844	0.000
PR	1.678	0.464	9.016	0.000	0.865	0.000	1.261	0.036	0.378	0.353	0.482	0.000	2.249	0.405	9.070	0.000	0.894	0.000

Note: LOCs: Lower Order Constructs, VIF: Variance Inflation Factor

Table 4. Direct relationships.

Hypotheses	Pakistan				China				Complete			
	B	T	P	Results	B	T	P	Results	B	T	P	Results
H1:USR->UP	0.190	4.209	0.000	Supported*	0.034	0.669	0.252	Not Supported	0.205	5.107	0.000	Supported*
H2:USR->SQ	0.729	33.755	0.000	Supported*	0.637	14.016	0.000	Supported*	0.790	51.509	0.000	Supported*
H3:USR->SS	0.659	23.974	0.000	Supported*	0.533	8.731	0.000	Supported*	0.728	36.926	0.000	Supported*
H4:USR->UR	0.654	22.657	0.000	Supported*	0.475	7.799	0.000	Supported*	0.710	33.122	0.000	Supported*
H5:USR->ST	0.635	22.840	0.000	Supported*	0.536	9.437	0.000	Supported*	0.731	39.035	0.000	Supported*
H6:SQ->UP	0.106	2.072	0.019	Supported*	0.164	2.215	0.013	Supported*	0.120	2.636	0.004	Supported*
H7:SS->UP	0.087	1.833	0.033	Supported*	0.005	0.073	0.471	Not Supported	0.083	1.946	0.026	Supported*
H8:UR->UP	0.460	9.402	0.000	Supported*	0.434	4.865	0.000	Supported*	0.440	10.349	0.000	Supported*
H9:ST->UP	0.052	1.052	0.146	Not Supported	0.262	2.868	0.002	Supported*	0.079	1.744	0.041	Supported*
PQ	R-Sq	Q-Sq			R-Sq	Q-Sq			R-Sq	Q-Sq		
	0.531	0.527			0.405	0.387			0.623	0.621		
SS	0.435	0.430			0.284	0.266			0.529	0.526		
UR	0.427	0.423			0.226	0.209			0.504	0.501		
ST	0.404	0.399			0.287	0.266			0.535	0.532		
UP	0.627	0.430			0.608	0.221			0.701	0.531		

Note. *Relationships are significant at $P < 0.05$, B = Beta Coefficient, T = t – Statistics, P = Probability (P) value.

Discussion and conclusion

The research examines the impact of USR on UP, through the mediating role of service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust. Overall findings revealed a positive and significant influence of USR on UP. The outcome supports Forrant and Silka (2006) idea that through USR activities, universities can improve their performance as well as operational efficiency.

From the overall sample, the study found a significant impact of USR on the proposed mediators including service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust. Results support Vázquez et al. (2014) notion that focusing on the USR can improve service quality and student satisfaction. Stakeholder theory suggests that the findings could be explained by the fact that students are the primary stakeholders for whom the university is responsible. As a result, universities know that their activities have an impact on students, and this recognition could considerably aid universities in focusing on enhancing service quality and increasing customer satisfaction (Su & Swanson, 2017). Additionally, practicing USR in education, research, and internal and external management of the university can work as a marketing strategy and enhance the university's reputation. Furthermore, seeing the students as the important stakeholders, the organizations that efficiently engage in socially responsible activities while considering the interest of the stakeholders and gain their stakeholders' trust (Chang, 2015). Based on the managerial perspective of the stakeholder theory, the findings provide evidence that increasing the intensity of SR may improve reputation (Pérez et al., 2017) and trust (Jones, 1995).

The results from the overall sample revealed that the mediators in the study (service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust) had a significant impact on UP. The results corroborate the finding that service quality leads to improved performance in HEIs (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). The results of university reputation display a pleasant picture of UP, this shows that reputation leads to improved UP (Baltaru, 2019). The significant results of student satisfaction complement the findings of Sultan and Wong (2012) who found that university success is highly dependent on student satisfaction. Likewise, the significance of student trust is in line with the extant marketing and management literature that has found a highly significant impact of trust on performance (Mishra, 1996). The findings are in line with the RBV since existing research has identified service provision as a critical resource (Julien et al., 1997), student satisfaction and reputation as an asset (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Fornell et al., 2020a, 2020b), trust as a capability (Barney, 1997). In light of RBV, organizations that have such differentiating feature and resources has improved performance as the assets and resources help HEIs capitalize on the market and become the preferred choice among students. Although previous research on USR and UP in HEIs has ignored these mediators, the findings revealed that for HEIs to improve UP, their focus shall be on USR initiatives that will lead to improvement in service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and ultimately leading to improved UP.

Further to the assessment of the overall sample, the conceptual model was tested and reported in a country-specific setting. A significant finding that is different from the complete sample is the significant impact of USR on UP in Pakistan while it was found insignificant in China. This is contrary to the assertion of Li et al., (2010) who noted that due to

Table 5. Mediation analysis.

Hypotheses	Pakistan				China				Complete			
	B	T	P	Results	B	T	P	Results	B	T	P	Results
H10:USR->SQ->UP	0.077	2.069	0.019	Supported	0.105	2.179	0.015	Supported	0.095	2.638	0.004	Supported
H11:USR->SS->UP	0.057	1.835	0.033	Supported	0.003	0.073	0.471	Not Supported	0.061	1.948	0.026	Supported
H12:USR->UR->UP	0.300	9.116	0.000	Supported	0.206	4.310	0.000	Supported	0.313	10.292	0.000	Supported
H13:USR->ST->UP	0.033	1.045	0.148	Not Supported	0.140	2.735	0.003	Supported	0.058	1.735	0.041	Supported

*Relationships are significant at $P < 0.05$

Table 6. Multi-group analysis.

Relationships	Difference (China – Pakistan)	<i>P</i> -value
USR->SQ	–0.092	0.027*
USR->SS	–0.126	0.024*
USR->UR	–0.179	0.003*
USR->ST	–0.100	0.052*
USR->UP	–0.155	0.013*

Note: *The Differences are significant in the relationships between the two countries ($P < 0.05$).

increasing stakeholder pressure in China, organizations initiated SR practices over a decade ago. However, this could be true for business organizations and it can be noted that SR is yet to develop in HEIs. Additionally, USR is a relatively minor theme in the higher education sector in China (Chen & Vanclay, 2020). The results from Pakistan, as well as the overall sample, are consistent with the central notion of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), according to which SR is viewed as a tool that can help an organization make better use of its resources, resulting in superior organizational performance (Hasan et al. 2018). Hence, organizations that pursue strategic initiatives and practices that satisfy significant stakeholders, specifically according to their potential to influence organizational performance, gain a competitive edge (Freeman, 1984). With the aforementioned in mind, the conclusions of this study, in terms of the association between social responsibility and performance, are in general agreement with the findings of previous research (Latif et al., 2020). The insignificant results from China are contrary to the existing literature (Zhou et al., 2021b). This demonstrates that, while there is a discussion about USR, it is still a minor topic in China's higher education industry (Chen & Vanclay, 2020).

The significant impact of USR on OP in Pakistan and the insignificant impact of USR on OP in China can be further explained in light of the impact of culture on SR. For instance, The results complement the work of Thanetsunthorn (2015), who found that collectivist cultures (Pakistan) are more likely to promote shareholder interest and, as a result, are more focused on SR activities that foster values and improve performance. The high score on uncertainty avoidance is another factor for USR's strong influence on performance in Pakistan. Ho et al. (2012) noted that higher uncertainty avoidance has a positive effect on social responsibility.

Another difference in the significance of the relationship was found in the impact of trust on performance, the relationship was found significant in China, but was found insignificant in Pakistan. According to Wang and Juslin (2009), cultural orientation toward masculinity leads to a positive impact on trust. However, in the case of Pakistan, the results are contrary to the type of culture. Pakistan is low on individualism and has higher collectivism, but still, the results revealed an insignificant impact on trust.

Another difference in the significance of the relationship was found in the impact of student satisfaction on performance, the relationship was found insignificant in China, but was found significant in Pakistan. Chinese people try hard to be neutral and avoid extreme attitudes as a way to protect themselves in society (Qi et al., 2012). Hence, it is likely that the Chinese do not consider satisfaction as a necessary ingredient in their service encounters.

The rest of the findings were similar to the complete sample. In both samples, the impacts of the mediating variables were found to almost match the findings from the complete sample. In Pakistan, student satisfaction was found to be a substantial mediator;

whereas, in China, it was found an insignificant mediator. In Pakistan, student trust was an insignificant mediator; while, in China, it was found significant mediator. In both Pakistan and China, service quality and university reputation were significant mediating factors. The importance of USR's impact in both Pakistan and China, as well as the mediation results, lead us to the conclusion that because the institutional framework can generate varied overall organizational systems, the findings of this article stand in contrast to earlier studies that indicated that SR implementation can differ between cultures (McDonald & Lai, 2011). The findings, on the other hand, confirmed that certain characteristics, virtues, and attributes are universal across cultures and are equally relevant in both local and global situations (Bandsuch, 2013). This demonstrates that SR is gaining traction in various cultures, and as a result, not only do organizations recognize its demand, but customers are becoming warier about using the services of organizations that are not socially responsible (Ailawadi et al., 2014). This indicates that students in different countries are progressively aligning their understanding of USR, which may be directly attributable to globalization and the greater homogenization of customer preferences around the world (Ailawadi et al., 2014).

Multigroup analysis was performed to assess whether the impact of USR on the outcome variables differs between the two countries. The results revealed significant differences in the impact of USR on service quality, student satisfaction, and student trust, this shows that the impact of USR on these outcomes was higher in Pakistan in comparison to China. Although the impacts (USR on service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust) were almost similar in both cultures, the multigroup analysis revealed significant differences when comparing the effect of USR on UP with an impact stronger in Pakistan. Previous literature has also argued that the implementation of SR can differ between cultures because the specific institutional framework could shape diverse overall organizational systems (McDonald & Lai, 2011). The significant differences can be explained in light of Hofstede's cultural typology. Since Pakistan is high on collectivism, Collectivist societies emphasize social order, well-being, and welfare of others (Hofstede, 1991), so the SR issues make up an important feature of collectivist societies. Pakistan has a high level of uncertainty avoidance, which from the perspective of CSR improves corporate sustainability performance (Ho et al., 2012). Furthermore, Uncertainty Avoidance is high in Pakistan, and from a CSR perspective, higher uncertainty avoidance leads to higher corporate sustainability performance (Ho et al., 2012).

Implications

This paper enriches the existing literature in four streams. First, it contributes to the development of studies linking USR, service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, student trust, and UP. Second, it strengthens the role of USR, elaborating on the mediating role of service quality, student satisfaction, university reputation, and student trust in the context of HEIs. Third, the findings advance stakeholder theory and RBV by focusing on USR and UP with the proposed intervening variables in the context of HEIs, by showing that students share a strong connection to a university that undertakes SR initiatives and that by doing so improved performance is achieved through the mediators. To date, there has not been a thorough examination of the USR initiatives and how it impacts student

outcomes leading to improved UP. Finally, it provides a comparative study between two diverse economies (i.e. emerging and developing).

In terms of managerial consequences, USR can assist HEIs in achieving positive student and university outcomes. USR can be a strategic tool for HEIs to shape the perceptions of different stakeholders. The study shows that if educational institutes carefully implement SR initiatives, they have a better chance of attaining improved performance.

Limitations and future research directions

The study has some limitations. First, the current study has assessed USR and its outcomes in only Pakistan and China. Future research shall include other cultures. Additionally, future research can research additional mediating variables such as service motivation, identity, and word-of-mouth. Finally, future research may assess other moderating variables like community support, market orientation, leadership, or university culture. Further, the present study did not assess the impact of control variables on the criterion variable, future research shall assess how is the issue of public or private universities or self-sponsored or government-sponsored students or differences in fields of study factored into the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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