

The Influences of University Social Responsibility Activities on the Brand Trust of Khon Kaen University in Thailand

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Abstract

The trend of social responsibility implementation is widely adopted in public and private organizations, in which this new trend seeks sustainable growth along with good governance. Therefore, this research was conducted to determine the relation between university social responsibility (USR) and brand trust in the context of Khon Kaen University, a renowned public university, in Thailand. The quantitative approach was applied and a questionnaire was used as a tool to collect the data through field surveys. The samples consisted of 400 units of analysis that were purposively randomly sampled from key stakeholders comprising communities, university students, university personnel, and alliance organizations that have already had experience or are familiar with at least one activity under the social responsibility scheme of Khon Kaen University. The survey commenced in June 2016 and the collected data were analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings showed that the target samples had a high level of perception regarding Khon Kaen University's social responsibility activities and a very high level of trust towards the university itself. The correlation coefficients of the observable variables ranged from 0.404-0.773 and were considered statistically significant. The analysis of the relation among the variables using SEM also revealed that the social responsibility of Khon Kaen University has created a statistical significance and a direct and positive influence over the consumers of the university brand for all of three dimensions: credibility, benevolence, and integrity. The sustainability indexes of the model were $\chi^2 = 489.47$, $df = 194$, $\chi^2/df = 2.52$, $GFI = .901$, $CFI = .937$, $RMSEA = .062$ and $SRMR = .059$. In addition, the model also demonstrated a strong positive relation between Khon Kaen University's social responsibilities and university brand trust. As a consequence, it is recommended that Khon Kaen University put more effort into its social responsibility work in order to build trust among stakeholders and to raise its aim for improved educational standards by creating USR in the process of engaging the students and university staff at all levels in its organization.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), University Social Responsibility (USR), Brand Trust, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.

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Introduction

Social responsibility is an emerging trend in today's social context and is among the national priorities. Thailand's government is putting more effort into the issue with the expectation of developing and fostering the social responsibility of the country's educational system by the improving organizational image in general in order to respond to the work and activities related to social responsibility known as corporate social responsibility (CSR). Many organizations, both in the public and private sectors, have adopted CSR in their existing practice and have created a variety of activities to address social problems. The approaches and activities are usually based on the organization's knowledge and expertise, which are also linked to their business vision. Moreover, the systematic and effective planning that focuses on the community and civic engagement could possibly result in the improvement of the organization's image and build trust among stakeholders.

Not only corporations but also educational institutions adopt CSR. Due to the expectation by the public for educational institutions to better respond to social work, along with their mission to provide education and conduct research, a number of world renowned universities have started to take greater part in social responsibility by emphasizing the following dimensions: the ethical development of people, promoting peace, fostering human rights and democratic values, along with the mission to educate students and participate in social development programs for better communities. These are the core elements of university social responsibility (USR), which is a concept related to sustainable human resource development. Now USR has also taken a more significant role in shaping the teaching and learning

methods in Thailand's educational system.

Khon Kaen University, a renowned public university in Thailand, was the first higher education institution in the country's northeastern region. It was founded in 1964 on a 5,500 rai area (2.2 million square meters) as a center for knowledge, local wisdom, and higher education in the region. The university currently has 25 faculties, 1 hospital, Srinagarind Hospital, and other internal faculty-equivalent units such as institutions, departments, and centers for academic and social service. His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej made a speech on 20th December 1969 when he came to witness the official opening of this public university, stating that "The establishment of Khon Kaen University will greatly benefit everyone, as it will expand higher education to people in one of the most important regions of the country. This will consequently result in social development, free people from poverty, and we all should acknowledge this success" (Khon Kaen University, 2016).

Khon Kaen University is among the top universities in the country and has gathered and initiated new knowledge and consistently provides academic services to the people in the region by improving education and the people's lives, promoting good health, employability, increasing income, etc. Therefore, this social work has turned into the "KKU Culture DNA," which was linked to the university's motto—"50 Years of Social Devotion"—on its 50th-year anniversary in 2014. Moreover, the university's strategic plan for 2016-2021 has also stated three strategies: having a "Culture and Care Community," reflecting the university's mission to take good cares of its local communities in every dimension, along with the promotion of art and culture (Khon Kaen University, 2015). Since 2011, Khon Kaen University has assigned the Communication Affairs Division of

the Office of the University President to supervise and monitor its work on social responsibility.

In Thailand, however, there is a limitation of relevant research on the knowledge and impact of USR. Therefore, this research was conducted not only to study the relation between USR and trust regarding educational institutions, but also to pioneer the development of USR, which is aligned with policy framework of the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) (2009) and to develop a university social responsibility framework. The findings from this study can be applied to any activities and policies relevant to university social responsibility at the national level in order to build trust in the quality and standards of the institution and to ensure ethical practices for society.

Literature Review

Social Responsibility Concepts

The concept of social responsibility is based on the belief that organizations and society are to run together in harmony where mutual benefits are shared and where no parties can be separated completely. Society needs to be supported by organizations, and therefore organizations need to adjust themselves and behave following the particular expectations of the society where possible. At present, the issue of moral and ethics has been highlighted and many organizations are requested to express more responsibility to society, which consequently will result in the emergence of CSR (Rapeepan Wongprasert, 2009).

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2000), a global business community for the sustainable future of business, society, and the environment, has defined CSR as a business determination to consistently take part in the development of the economy by focusing on ethical practices in order to improve the quality of

lives of its employees as well as local communities and society in general. Therefore, the scope of CSR includes human rights, labor freedom, and other environmental issues.

Kotler & Kotler (2012) stated that firms or businesses cannot avoid their responsibility to society. Large number of consumers and buyers are well aware of the impact of goods on the environment, and the health and well-being of their families, communities and people in general. In addition, we are in an era in which data are accessible to everyone, including product information, data related to product or service quality, technology, and social activities, and therefore firms have begun to identify their own selling point, making them stand out from competitors.

The competitive margin of social value is a concept that firms use to share with others the idea that they care for customers, communities and the world, which are considered as crucial factors that differentiate them from competitors. Moreover, Kotler & Kotler (2016) stated that organizations that are performing social responsibility work usually gain the trust and loyalty of their employees, investors, and business partners. Effective internal marketing must be aligned then with social values and social responsibility as the companies' strategic roles are to benefit not only consumers, employees, communities, and the environment but also stakeholders.

The pyramid of corporate social responsibility presented by Carroll (1991) divides social responsibility into various types: (1) economic responsibility - the root of social responsibility of any organization that produces products or services to respond to social needs as well as generate income for companies; (2) legal responsibility - to operate businesses lawfully; (3) ethical responsibility - to follow social and ethical values by conducting business ethically;

and (4) philanthropic responsibility – companies are expected to make sacrifices and be responsible to society as a good citizen. The pyramid of corporate social responsibility concept has been widely cited in many research papers and a number of frameworks for social responsibility are also aligned with this pyramid concept.

In sum, even though there are key elements for firms to taking into account in their operations such as profit and loss or managing the internal resources but social responsibilities is not to be overlooked. Successful businesses in today's economy have invested in social responsibility and community engagement to address social and environmental problems, which will help them to stand out from competitors and ensure their sustainable growth.

The University Social Responsibility Concept

Not only corporations but also institutions of higher education adopt CSR. This is because the university is a center for human resource development and is expected by society to also take part in social responsibility in order to supply human resources as future stakeholders in the business sector and society (Shawyun, 2011).

Hanpongpanth (2015) stated that the concept of CSR in Thailand is influenced by the developed countries in the west along with the effort of international companies in the last decade. However, CSR has not completely been adjusted to fit the country's context yet. Increasing needs of society in terms of educating highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens, it is essential that universities recognize their own responsibilities not only as providing skills and knowledge, but also contributing to the formation of citizens endowed with ethical principles, committed to building peace, and defending human rights and

democratic values. All these highlighted the significance of social responsibility of the university which can be termed as "University Social Responsibility, (USR)," and its increased call for the authentic development of human sustainability. USR has begun to receive attention to Thai universities and play a significant role in the university teaching and educating system. As a consequence, many public and private universities are interested more in social responsibility which has resulted in an increased number of activities besides their existing public relation campaigns and made USR one of the most significant elements outlined in missions of the country's high education institutions. In the past, universities mainly focused on academics more than social contribution but at present many institutions are aware of the significance and potential of social responsibility as part of the sustainable development of the organization. Moreover, requests are made by locals that universities use their knowledge to help develop the communities where the universities are located, and the public sector should also actively encourage and support the social responsibility activities of universities (Chacharoen, Wattanapanit, Kerdaroon, Noentong, & Oggungwal, 2011).

The Office of the Higher Education Commission, the Ministry of Education in Thailand, participated in the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE), UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France and defined the key issue of "The role of university for social responsibility," which stated that due to the high dynamic in the higher educational system and because of high social expectations, the role of the university must not be limited only to producing graduates, conducting research, or providing academic services, but should also be required to be socially responsible (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2009). Therefore,

institutions have created mechanisms to address economic problems and promote peace in society. Universities are also requested to take a lead in social responsibility, create social change, and be a role model regarding social responsibility implementation. It is recommended that university rankings on social responsibility be created and that the institutions that perform well in social responsibility be rewarded.

Brand Trust Concepts

Morgan & Hunt (1994) stated that “trust” plays an important role in defining the relation between customers and the organization, meaning that customers have trust and take part in an exchange of reliability and integrity because they rarely know about the goods or services before they are delivered or performed. Therefore trust is important and usually relates to customers at every step, while goods must be accessible both for trial and for the real product itself. Moreover, trust also means that the organization will keep its promise to its customers where satisfactory service is delivered and with effective results. This will build trust on the part of customers. Trust that is built from integrity, honesty, and interest will expand the customer base by spreading the word to other customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1991).

Brand trust is a factor that indicates a relationship between sellers and buyers, and the relationship built by customers’ emotions. Trust exists only when an individual has confidence in consuming products or services in which trust eliminates uncertainty, risk and precaution of thinking process in order to immediately respond to the brand. This could mean that customers have trust that marketers are reliable and honest, while sales representatives are seen as being honest,

straightforward, and responsible for their words (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It might said that brand trust is an intermediary factor that influences consumers before and after deciding to make a purchase and also affects brand loyalty in the long term (Liu et al., 2011).

Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman (1995) stated that the trust building factor could refer to the creditability, capability, and benevolence of a person that are perceived by others, and this happens when customers have trust. This could result in more engagement among the “trustees.” The level of trust solely depends on individuals and their social backgrounds and is usually stable. However, brand trust consists of three dimensions and is composed of a number of factors (Enrique & Vishag, 2013; Pavlou, 2002; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). One, creditability refers to the assessment of products carried out by costumers to prove if goods meet their expectations. Creditability creates security and trust in the quality of goods. Two, benevolence refers the feeling of understanding and care of the manufacturers for their costumers, where the costumer “feels” the good intention of the companies—that they want to make quality products and do not solely focus on profits. Three, integrity refers to brands those are honest with and care about their customers and that they gain trust and loyalty.

Relation between Social Responsibility and Brand Trust

Weber (2008) has suggested that the impact of CSR on organizational benefits can increase the firm’s competitiveness and thus economic success. Firm benefits from CSR include improved access to capital, secured license to operate, revenue increases, cost decreases, risk reduction, increase in brand value, improved customer attraction and

retention, improved reputation, and improved employee recruitment, motivation, and retention.

Even though the amount of research that has studied the relationship between social responsibility that creates a positive impact on customer behaviors (i.e. trust and organization image) is increasing, the study of the impact of CSR on brand trust is very limited (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, a study by Jongchul, Hanjoon, & Chankon (2014) on the relationships among social responsibility, trust, and reputation in South Korea indicated that companies demonstrating participation in social responsibility, charity, as well as operating legally and ethically, usually create a positive influence on customers. Further, a study of Barners (2011) showed that legal, human resource, ethical and economic factors have an influence on a company's social responsibility. However, the factors have been seen to have a positive impact on brand trust, and a multiple regression analysis has also indicated that legal and human resource factors have an influence on companies' social responsibility in general. This aligns with the thought of Dolak (2001), who stated that trust in the firm's brand creates confidence and expectation towards goods without knowledge of their image.

A study of the relationship of university social responsibility with the organizational image of private universities in Thailand by Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern, & Speece (2016) showed that some factors of USR are also a part of quality assurance (QA), which helps improve competitiveness and the ability to produce quality graduates for society. Moreover, students and their parents also believe that USR is a series of activities that will benefit and directly impact the decision-making process in selecting an institution for the study.

Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The sample of this research consisted of stakeholders of Khon Kaen University; that is, communities, academic staff, students, and partners/supporters of the university that attended at least one USR activity or that have received help or support from the university. The non-probability sampling and judgment sampling methods were implemented in this study while data collection was done using a self-administered questionnaire from June 1 to 30, 2016; finally 400 questionnaires were successfully completed and collected.

Measures

This study used the questionnaire to assess the level of social responsibility at the university, which was based on and developed from Carroll's works in four areas (Carroll, 1991); economic responsibilities (ECO), legal responsibilities (LEG), ethical responsibilities (ETH), and philanthropic responsibilities (PHI), while the questionnaire used to assess brand trust was based on the work of Enrique and Vishag (2013); Pavlou, (2002); Rempel et al. (1985) in three dimensions: credibility (CRE), benevolence (BEN), and integrity (INT). In addition to the development of both questionnaires, the researcher also studied theories, concepts, and reviewed the relevant literature in order to define the variables and to develop the research tools used in seminars and interview with the above stakeholders. The questionnaires adopted the Likert scale theory where the participants score their opinions ranging from the most important (5) to the least important (1). The questionnaires were validated by subject matter experts before being disseminated to the participants and were also pioneered among 30 samples in order to assure their reliability by defining Cronbach's alpha

coefficient. The results showed that the alpha coefficient of variables in the study was higher than 0.70 (see Table 1), which demonstrated high reliability (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2010).

Research Hypothesis

The hypotheses listed below are based on literature review towards university social responsibility (USR) and brand trust of Khon Kaen University stakeholders:

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): University social responsibility has a positive relation with credibility.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2): University social responsibility has a positive relation with benevolence.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3): University social responsibility has a positive relation with integrity.

Data Analysis

1. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse general information about the research samples and their level of awareness and perception regarding Khon Kaen University's social responsibility and brand trust where the frequency distribution, percentage, average and standard deviation were implemented.

2. Inferential statistics were used to test or validate the hypotheses by analysing the structural equation modelling (SEM), which was comprised of two stages; (1) the measurement model and (2) the structural model. These are techniques used to analyse hypotheses among latent variables while inferential statistics are used to analyse data and to validate hypotheses (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). For instance, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) had been analysed to test whether the model was fitted by considering the factor loading of each variable. In addition, in the inferential statistical analysis for testing the hypotheses, the statistical significance level was

determined to be 0.05. If a significant value was lower or equal to 0.05, the hypothesis was accepted.

Results and Discussion

Part 1: General Information of Samples

The majority of the research samples were female (60.2%), aged between 18-44 years (78.1%), held a bachelor's degree (74.0%), were employed as government officials and students/college students (34.3% and 29.8%) and had an income lower than 30,000 Thai Baht (86.6%).

The findings from the first part of the questionnaire showed that 96.3% of the research samples were from local communities and lived in Khon Kaen province, and all of them knew about Khon Kaen University. The first three university social responsibility activities of the university that the samples were familiar with were the medical and health services of Srinagarind Hospital, the dental service of Srinagarind Dental Hospital, and the specific treatment at Queen Sirikit Heart Center (Northeast region) at 78.8, 75.3, and 71.8 percent respectively. Other projects that were directly linked to USR, i.e. the sufficiency economy project under royal patronage, the sufficiency economy model project, voluntary activities for the development of Khon Kaen University students and a library for disadvantaged children project, were less known by the research samples.

Part 2: Analysis of Relations among Variables

The level of awareness of Khon Kaen University's social responsibility activities was generally high according to the study (the average score was 4.14 while the standard deviation equaled 0.75) where economic social responsibilities were acknowledged the most. The level of awareness of Khon Kaen University's brand trust ranged at

the highest of all areas where the average statistic was 4.38 and the standard deviation was 0.64. The awareness of reliability ranged at the highest as shown in Table 1.

The analysis of the correlation matrix among the 7 observable variables when considering the correlation coefficient showed that all were positive, representing a statistical alignment of the variables following the structural equation modeling, which ranged from .404 to .773 and .01

as shown in Table 2. The findings for the correlation between each variable also demonstrated that legal responsibility (LEG) and ethical responsibility (ETH) shared the same correlation coefficient figure at .773 while philanthropic responsibility (PHI) and ethical responsibility (ETH) were at .705 and credibility responsibility (CRE) and integrity responsibilities had the lowest statistical correlation coefficient at .404.

Table 1 Perception on USR and Brand Trust of Khon Kean University in Thailand

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	M	S D	Interpretation ¹
University Social Responsibility (USR)				
Economic Responsibility (ECO)	.809	4.23	0.68	Most importance
Legal Responsibility (LEG)	.836	4.02	0.79	Importance
Ethic Responsibility (ETH)	.833	4.12	0.77	Importance
Philanthropy Responsibility (PHI)	.845	4.20	0.75	Importance
Average		4.14	0.75	Importance
Brand Trust on Khon Kean University (BT)				
Creditability (CRE)	.775	4.42	0.64	Most importance
Benevolence (BEN)	.840	4.39	0.65	Most importance
Integrity (INT)	.765	4.33	0.64	Most importance
Average		4.38	0.64	Most importance

Note 1 : Criteria Levels; 1.00 – 1.80 Least importance., 1.81 – 2.60 Low importance, 2.61 – 3.40 Moderate , 3.41 - 4.20 Importance, 4.21 – 5.00 Most importance.

Table 2 Parsons's correlations among observed variables

Variables	ECO	LEG	ETH	PHI	CRE	BEN	INT
Economic Responsibilities (ECO)	1	.662**	.646**	.607**	.496**	.490**	.432**
Legal Responsibility (LEG)	.	1	.773**	.587**	.426**	.449**	.433**
Ethic Responsibility (ETH)			1	.705**	.481**	.522**	.456**
Philanthropy Responsibility (PHI)				1	.470**	.514**	.469**
Creditability (CRE)	.				1	.668**	.404**
Benevolence (BEN)		.		.	.	1	.577**
Integrity (INT)						.	1

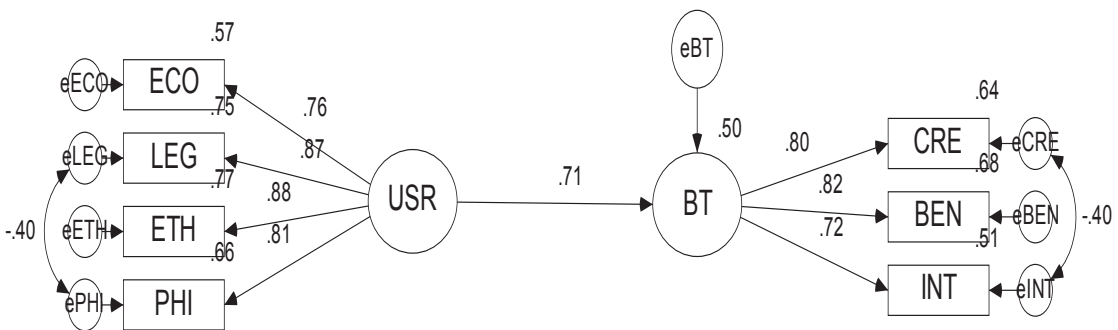
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Part 3: Analysis of the Structural Equation Modeling

The SEM analysis showed that the model was aligned with the empirical data and the five validated goodness-of-fit indexes were $\chi^2 = 489.47$, $df = 194$, $\chi^2/df = 2.52$, $GFI = .901$, $CFI = .937$, $RMSEA = .062$ and $SRMR = .059$. This showed also that the SEM was aligned with the empirical data and that the correlation of the conceptual variables, which were Khon Kaen University social responsibilities, had an influences on brand trust in terms of credibility at ($\beta = .80$, $p < .001$), benevolence at ($\beta = .82$, $p < .001$), and integrity at ($\beta = .72$, $p < .001$). The predictor coefficients (R^2) of the three areas—credibility, benevolence, and integrity—were .64, .68, and .51 respectively, which meant that the university social responsibility model of Khon Kaen University predicted by brand trust towards credibility is 64% , benevolence is 68% and integrity 51% (see Figure 1). The results from the hypothesis testing (Figure 1) showed that (1) university social responsibility had a positive influence on the university’s credibility statistically at .001, (2) had a positive influence on benevolence at .001, as well as (3) integrity, where the three hypotheses were validated and accepted.

The research findings indicated that the university social responsibility of Khon Kaen University had a positive influence on its reliability which is aligned with the study of Jongchu et al. (2014), which stated that organizations that perform economic social responsibility work or charity, as well as operate legally and ethically, significantly affect positive brand trust among customers. These activities also create a positive influence on the customer’s credibility and this is aligned with the study of Doney & Cannon (1997), who discovered a positive relation between brand and the reputation of the university, which is a key to building trust among stakeholders. This study has confirmed that the type of credibility, social responsibility, and reputation of Khon Kaen University helped to create a positive awareness on the part of the university stakeholders through USR, where the relations could be from the university’s reputation as one of Thailand’s universities that provides academic excellence and technological innovation at national and international levels.

The research findings stating that the university social responsibility of Khon Kaen University had positive influence on benevolence



$\chi^2 = 489.47$, $df = 194$, $\chi^2/df = 2.52$, $GFI = .901$, $CFI = .937$, $RMSEA = .062$ and $SRMR = .059$.

Figure 1 The Structural Equation Model of University Social Responsibility and Three Dimensions of Brand Trust of Khon Kaen University.

were aligned with the study of Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, Markov & Hartsell (2014), who discovered that benevolence does not necessarily refer to any involuntary actions to sacrifice for the public benefit but it rather refers to actions that help with emotional fulfillment, which is highly valued and is created from good relationships with customers. These values are not created from physical objects. However, benevolence is the key for good service providing. Consumers usually require trust and hope that companies can solve their problems and also exercise some compassion, care, and support for society. The university social responsibility of Khon Kaen University has affected positively to benevolence as the university has expressed its determination to improve the lives of the people in the local communities and develop the quality of education there.

The research findings indicating that university social responsibility has a positive influence on integrity was also aligned with the study of Barnes (2011), who discovered that integrity is a key to and the spirit of organizational culture and is a symbol of the difference between success and failure of organizations, as Rempel also stated that integrity is a crucial factor in creating trust among customers (Rempel et al., 1985). This could possibly result from the transparency and sincere public relation works of the university, which aims to build trust among the university's stakeholders and to be honest and deliver what is promised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The result of this study indicated that level of awareness of the social responsibility of Khon Kaen University was very high, while the level of trust of stakeholders also ranged at the same level. Moreover, the university social responsibility

created a positive relation with the reliability, benevolence, and integrity of the university's stakeholders, which was extremely beneficial. Therefore, it can be seen that communication of the modern organization regarding the issue of social responsibility is playing an important role in the development of university social responsibility activities.

The positive results in relation to the four areas of USR have proved that this concept can be adapted and implemented in Thailand and any cross-cultural context and research tools developed to assess USR can also be used widely in universities and vocational colleges. Moreover, the social responsibility of the university was also seen to affect the reliability of the university in three areas, which were integrity, benevolence and reliability, which is a new finding in the study of social responsibility.

Therefore, the university must highlight its social responsibility programs by making this a priority at the policy level. University should also define its indicators in order to assess the quality of the work implemented and to award units or departments that perform outstanding work in the delivery of social responsibility activities in order to create motivation for future actions on USR activities. More importantly, the USR should be embedded in the process (USR in Process) in order to effectively engage students and staff at all levels. Other educational institutions should also be able to create brand trust among stakeholders through USR. It is because the strong brand trust of an institution or university will affect its perceived reliability. Since stakeholders will have expected towards standard of education, university should do activities to encourage good citizen concept such as charity and other aspects i.e. economic responsibilities, legal responsibilities,

ethical responsibilities, and philanthropic responsibilities.

Finally, other government organizations such as the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) in Thailand should encourage both private and public universities to realize the importance of social responsibility and its activities by considering how this affects society in general and how it aligns with the university's vision and mission, for example, to produce quality graduates, to provide academic services and research, to cherish culture or to initiate USR awards, etc.

All in all, the results from this research reveal that there is there is a positive correlation between the social responsibility activities of university with the perceptions on brand trust of stakeholders in terms of creditability, benevolence, and integrity. This study provides a foundation for further research and identifies several important implications for the leaders of organisations to consider in terms of USR investment and the effects on brands and/or images within their portfolio.

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