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Abstract

This research explored the importance of university social responsibility (USR) as an implemented strategy for improving service quality and student satisfaction. Specifically, it sought to investigate the impact of USR on student satisfaction through the mediating factor of service quality. The population comprised all students of the Economics and Business Faculty at Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) Surakarta, a state institute. The samples were drawn from students in their fifth semester and beyond, as these students were believed to have a deeper knowledge of the USR activities conducted by the institution, compared to those in their first semester. The variables used are: (1) USR application as the independent variable, (2) service quality as the mediating variable, and (3) student satisfaction as the dependent variable. The data collection started with preparing the tools and information to estimate all the included variables. The questionnaire was made using Google Docs, and a related link was generated for distribution. The respondents then completed the questionnaire, and the data were gathered in a database, and later downloaded in Excel or another format, depending on the statistical analysis tool used. Path analysis was done to test the hypotheses using the WarpPLS 8.0 statistical tool. The results indicated that service quality mediated the USR effect on student satisfaction. Notably, the coefficient values revealed that the indirect USR effect on student satisfaction, through service quality, was stronger than the direct effect. While some prior models have researched the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer satisfaction, this study applies the concept of USR in education, using a distinct set of measurements.

Introduction

Customer satisfaction is a crucial aspect of business that makes consumers become loyal patrons and recommend a product or service to others. Satisfaction is a state through which the desires, expectations, and needs of a user are fulfilled (Panjaitan, 2013). Similarly, within universities, student satisfaction and perceived learning outcomes have gained prominence as indicators of education quality (Garnjost & Lawter, 2019). Student satisfaction means a positive attitude toward the services supplied by the university, as a result of alignment between expectations and reality received (Sopiatin, 2010; Purwandani et al., 2020). In the educational sector, university social responsibility (USR) is one of the strategies to enhance satisfaction. Furthermore, students tend to develop loyalty and become advocates for the university. Wigmore-Álvarez et al. (2020) researched educational institution's concern to adopt social responsibility (SR) into management systems. The results show that few are adopting SR into management systems that follow existing international initiatives, despite the call to action at the 2017 Global Forum for Responsible Management Education. Several studies have shown that excellent service quality is correlated with augmented student satisfaction (Marques et al., 2020; Hai, 2022, Nawarini et al., 2022). According to Alghamdi et al. (2022), USR significantly impacts satisfaction.

Vázquez et al. (2016) reported USR as a marketing plan for university academic curricula. The examination of students' recent sentiments regarding USR aspects disclosed that service quality serves as a satisfaction predictor. This situation led to an improvement in the university's image, a reduction in the total of dropouts, and the attraction of new students. Therefore, the USR model, developed to span various disciplines, was considered to be a competitive benefit against other universities.

Napitupulu et al. (2018) evaluated the grade of university service facilities and identified a low student satisfaction level. This was evident from the gap between user perceptions and expectations, where each item had a negative value. In other words, the quality of campus assistance facilities fell far below user anticipations.

Based on previous research, this study explores two key questions: whether university social responsibility (USR) directly affects student satisfaction and whether it indirectly affects student satisfaction through the mediating role of university service quality. Specifically, this study aims to examine the impact of USR on students by considering the mediating effect of service quality.

Literature Review

Equity Theory Conceptualization, Stakeholder Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and Antecedents of Consumer Satisfaction

Equity theory is based on the argument that "individuals' return in exchange with others must be proportionate to their investment" (Oliver & Swan, 1989). In other words, the ratio of returns to inputs should remain consistent among participants in exchange. This theory also posits that individuals estimate the ratio of their contributions to the rewards they receive by comparing it with the references selected by others (Adams, 1965). Inputs encompass employees' contributions (education, performance, and work experience), while outputs refer to the rewards they receive in return for their assistance (compensation, promotion, and career development opportunities). When an inequality arises between inputs and outputs, people adjust the difference by changing their attitudes to restore the equilibrium between the two ratios.

According to this theory, parties involved in exchanges perceive themselves as being fairly treated (and therefore satisfied) when the output-to-input ratio is viewed as equitable (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Erevvels and Leavitt (1992) emphasized that equity models offered a more comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction in situations that traditional satisfaction models might not capture. For instance, these models have been proven particularly beneficial in situations where satisfaction with the other party is a crucial aspect of the transaction. This theory portrays satisfaction as a relative assessment that considers the quality and benefits attained through a purchase, along with costs and efforts incurred by the consumer to achieve satisfaction.

Hoyer and MacInnis (2008) elaborated that this theory is suitable for marketing studies as it provides insights into comprehensive customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, an assertion supported by Yuan et al. (2010). The outcomes of a process are not limited to certain factors or situations, as they are diverse, making equity theory universally applicable in describing customer behavior and satisfaction. In this suggested model, considering the connection among USR, service quality, university image, and student satisfaction, it can be deduced that when learners enroll in university, they are expected to grasp the strategies implemented across various service processes and encounter distinct experiences. The perception of these experiences shapes satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, can emerge when students feel their needs are not being addressed.

In addition to equity theory, this study also uses stakeholder theory, which defines stakeholders as concerned parties or groups of an organization (Freeman, 1984). This theory further explains that stakeholders are individuals or institutions with, by any means, claims, interests, property rights in a company or its activities, in the present, past, or future". Stakeholder Theory extends the

organization's vision to the external environment, acknowledging the employment of non-financial indicators and verifying external environment-organizational behavior connection (Freeman, 1984).

Muthoni and Irechukwu (2023) scrutinized the effect of stakeholder management practices on customer satisfaction in the public sector in Rwanda. The detailed purposes include determining the effects of stakeholder mapping on customer satisfaction, examining the effects of defending stakeholder management practices on customer satisfaction, and ascertaining the effects of aggressive stakeholder management practices on customer satisfaction in the public sector in the case of Rwanda's Water and Sanitation Corporation (WASAC). This research employs a descriptive, case study to figure out stakeholder management problems and the impacts on customer satisfaction. This study advocates that WASAC managers perform a stakeholder analysis to pinpoint all stakeholders, their characteristics, and their rapport with the company. Moreover, it suggests that companies implement transparency and fairness in decision-making processes, requiring selection and recruitment. This study emphasizes that democracy and inclusiveness should be practiced by the company, while also avoiding any unethical transactions and practices to enhance performance and customer satisfaction. Stakeholder theory is closely related to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Initially, CSR emerged as a philanthropic effort by companies to contribute to the welfare of society. Over time, it progressed into a comprehensive framework stressing work ethics, environmental stewardship, and economic growth. Meanwhile, the Stakeholder Theory, initiated by Freeman (1984), broadens the extent of corporate accountability beyond shareholders to include the whole stakeholders—employees, customers, suppliers, and the wider community (Kalra, 2024). The synergy between CSR and Stakeholder Theory proposes a comprehensive framework to address the various obstacles businesses encounter in the modern era, such as climate change, social inequality, and efforts to achieve social justice. By implementing a stakeholder-oriented method, companies can better grow sustainable and ethical business practices aligning with stakeholders' benefits. This holistic approach is both morally admirable and pragmatically advantageous, as empirical studies have disclosed that companies that embrace stakeholder engagement as a fundamental component of their CSR strategies often experience increased continuing success and sustainability (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Lyon & Maxwell, 2007).

The Effect of USR on Service Quality and Student Satisfaction

Latif et al. (2021) characterized USR as the dedication of a university to acknowledge societal interests, thereby improving the well-being of its partners by providing high-grade academic services. Similarly, Esfijani et al. (2013) conceptualized USR as the integration of all university's roles and activities with the community's needs. This integration occurs through active, transparent, and ethically sound engagement with the community, all while meeting the expectations of various stakeholders. As an organizational entity, a university bears the responsibility for the consequences of its strategies and policies, given its role in education and the promotion of societal responsibility. Parsons (2014) argued that USR serves as a managerial strategy for overseeing the university's internal operations and bolstering its external reputation. Furthermore, Vallaeys et al. (2009) identified USR as the practical application and sharing of precepts and values through societal involvement, responsible institutional practices, professional education, and the sharing of social learning. USR primarily focuses on how effectively the university addresses ethical dimensions, research and development responsibilities, and philanthropic obligations.

Service quality is a focused assessment that accurately signals student perception of specific service dimensions. Organizations prioritize service quality provided to customers because this plays a role in fostering a competitive benefit, enticing new clients, and maintaining existing ones (Ugboma et al., 2007). Zammuto et al. (1996) described the perceived rate as a customer appraisal of the knowledge or goodness of an entity. In a university context, perceived service quality can result from students' evaluation of different service interactions. This encompasses meetings with administrative staff, lecturers, librarians, and security personnel. Service quality significantly

influences a university's performance, while Zeithaml (1987) defined it as conformance to student specifics. The implication is that scholars determine the service quality. The perceived or cognitive value of assistance is also formed by past experiences with service delivery. As a result, student expectations, service delivery processes, and the outputs from the university collectively impact perceived service quality (PQ). In education, achieving satisfaction requires building strong relationships with students (Darawong and Sandmaung, 2019). Pedro et al. (2018) affirmed a valid positive connection between PQ and student fulfillment within higher education institutions (HEI). They also noted that PQ and satisfaction exhibited significant variations when learners were exposed to diverse teaching approaches. Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2016) reported a direct and positive role of perceived service grades on student satisfaction. Suranta and Rahmawati (2024) identified USR's direct effect on university image, service quality, and student devotion. The direct effect of USR on service quality variables is supported by Latif et al. (2021, 2022).

According to Oliver and Desarbo (1989), student satisfaction refers to the inclination for a personal and subjective evaluation of diverse outcomes and encounters tied to education. This assessment undergoes continuous modification through repeated interactions in the university environment. Moreover, student satisfaction stands as a transient attitude formed through the appraisal of their interactions with the educational services offered. The university places specific emphasis on this domain because of its repercussions on motivation, such as attracting new students and retaining the existing ones. The importance of student satisfaction is underscored by the potential for contented students to either reenroll in their current institutions for further analyses or seek enrollment in new courses (Helgesen & Nesset, 2007). Consequently, universities should strive to meet and exceed student expectations to ensure continued operation (Anderson et al., 1994). Student satisfaction refers to the positive attitude students hold toward the services provided by the university, resulting from the alignment between expectations and the reality experienced (Sopiatin, 2010; Purwandani et al., 2020). Satisfied learners are more likely to become loyal and advise products or services to others. Chandra et al. (2018) carried out a study to inspect the effect of service quality on student satisfaction and loyalty at universities in Riau. This study involved 1,000 students from 13 universities in the province. The findings revealed a positive relationship between service quality and student satisfaction, as well as a positive effect of student satisfaction on student loyalty. Hasan et al. (2008) conducted a study to explore the relationship between service quality dimensions (tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy) and overall service quality with student satisfaction using questionnaires to 200 undergraduate students from two private higher education institutions. The empirical proofs of this study strengthen Parasuraman's (1985) SERVQUAL, related to factors that contribute to student satisfaction. This is further reinforced by research conducted by Stankovska et al. (2024) and Supriyanto et al. (2024). Based on the background and prior investigations, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: USR affects service quality.
H_2: USR affects student satisfaction.
H_3: Service quality affects student satisfaction.
H_4: The USR effect on student satisfaction is mediated by service quality.
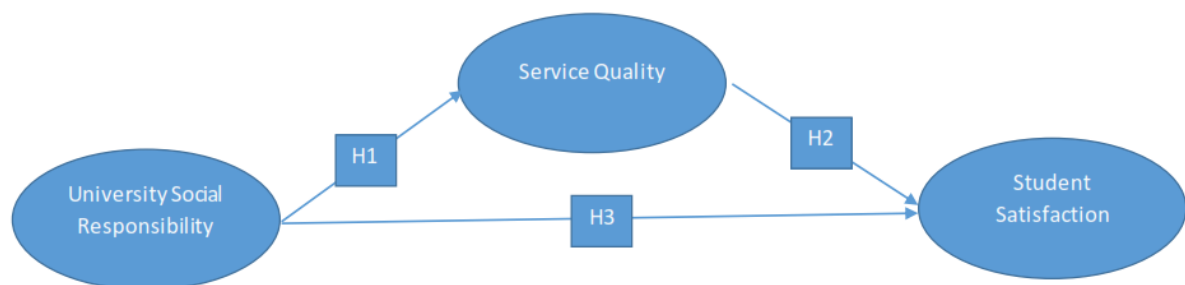

Figure 1. Study Model (Source: Analysis by authors)

Research Methods

This survey was carried out at one state-owned university in Indonesia, namely Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS), Surakarta. This study used primary data obtained through a questionnaire to assess: (1) the USR commission in the university, (2) service quality, and (3) student satisfaction. The population comprised all students of the Economics and Business Faculty at UNS. The samples included students in their fifth semester and above because the students at these stages were considered to have a more comprehensive understanding of USR activities conducted by the institution, compared to those in the first semester.

The variables used are: (1) USR application, a separate variable estimated with a 10-item tool designed by Adel et al. (2021); (2) service quality, a mediating variable as measured with SERVQUAL from Hassan and Shamsudin (2019), consisting of a reliable instrument with 22 items covering five dimensions: Tangible, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy, with five items of reliability dimension; and (3) student satisfaction, the dependent variable, assessed using the 6-item instrument developed by Gallardo-Vazquez et al. (2020).

The data collection process began with preparing the tools or information to estimate all variables. The questionnaire was made using Google Docs and the link to the questionnaire was provided to the respondents. The respondents then filled out the questionnaire, and the data were gathered in the database and downloaded in Excel or another format, depending on the statistical analysis tool used. Data tabulation and analysis were also conducted, encompassing data quality assessment through validity and reliability testing. Path analysis was performed to test the hypotheses with the WarpPLS 7.0 statistical instrument.

Results and Discussion

Population and Sample

This research comprised a total population of 480 students, with a sample size of 178 students, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Population and Sample

No.	University	Population	Sample	Average GPA
1	UNS	480	178	3.66
	Total	480	178	3.66

Sources: Data processed by authors

Study Model and Analysis Results

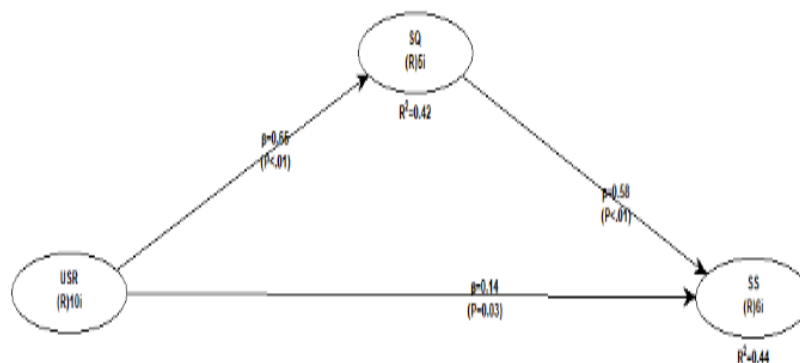The study model and the analysis results are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Study Model and Results (Source: Analysis by authors)

Table 2 shows that three variables indicate reliability, as evidenced by Cronbach's alpha scores for USR, service quality, and student satisfaction of 0.902, 0.909, and 0.936, respectively. Furthermore, the values of all variable coefficients exceed 0.5. The construct values for the four variables are also above 0.5, indicating the validity of the variables.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha, Combined Loadings, and Cross-Loadings

No.	Items	USR	SQ	SS
	Cronbach's alpha coefficients	0.902*	0.909	0.936
	Combined loadings and cross-loadings:			
1	USR1	0.753**		
2	USR2	0.666		
3	USR3	0.780		
4	USR4	0.836		
5	USR5	0.739		
6	USR6	0.757		
7	USR7	0.717		
8	USR8	0.786		
9	USR9	0.625		
10	USR10	0.629		
11	SQ1		0.832**	
12	SQ2		0.896	
13	SQ3		0.851	
14	SQ4		0.858	
15	SQ5		0.844	
16	SS1			0.859**
17	SS2			0.758
18	SS3			0.907
19	SS4			0.922
20	SS5			0.877
21	SS6			0.893

Description: The loading is not rotated and the cross load is rotated on its side. SE and P values are provided for each loading. A P value < 0.05 is desired for reflective indicators. *The variable constructs are reliable, with a Cronbach alpha value exceeding 0.5, and **valid, indicated by a loading factor exceeding 0.5. The data were processed by the authors.

Table 3. Model Fit and Quality Indices

No.	Description	Value	Acceptable	Ideally	Decision
1	Average path coefficient	0.456, P<0.001			Good
2	Average R-squared	0.434, P<0.001			Good
3	Average adjusted R-squared	0.429, P<0.001			Good
4	Average block VIF	1.461	<= 5	<= 3.3	Good
5	Average full collinearity VIF	1.887	<= 5	<= 3.3	Good
6	Tenenhaus GoF	0.532	large >= 0.36		Good
7	Simpson paradox ratio	1.000	>= 0.7	1	Good
8	R-squared contribution ratio	1.000	>= 0.9	1	Good
9	Statistical suppression ratio	1.000	>= 0.7	1	Good
10	Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio	1.000	>= 0.7	1	Good

Source: Data processed by authors

Table 3 shows the index values (APC, ARS, AARS, AVIF AFVIF, GoF, SPR, RSCR, SSR, and NLB CDR) indicate good status. Hence, the study model was considered fit.

Table 4. Results of Hypothesis Testing

No.	Description	Path coefficients and P values	Hypothesis	Decision
1	USR → SQ	0.651, <0.001	H1: USR affects service quality.	Supported
2	USR → SS	0.140, 0.028	H2: USR affects student satisfaction.	Supported
3	SQ → SS	0.578, <0.001	H3: Quality of service affects student satisfaction.	Supported
4	USR→SQ→SS	0.651*0.578=0.376	H4: The USR effect on student satisfaction is mediated by service quality.	Supported

Source: Data processed by authors

The analysis results detailed in Table 4 reveal the following findings. Initially, the coefficient value for the effect of USR on service quality was 0.651, with a significance value of less than 0.001. This result underscores a direct impact, thus affirming the validation of hypothesis 1. Second, the coefficient value associated with USR's influence on student satisfaction was 0.140, with a significance value of 0.028, indicating a direct effect and the acceptance of hypothesis 2. These results are consistent with Latif et al.'s (2021) work, where the implementation of USR by the university was associated with enhanced student satisfaction and a reduced likelihood of students transferring to other institutions. Third, the coefficient for the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction was calculated at 0.578, with a significance value of less than 0.001. This indicates a significant direct influence and the acceptance of hypothesis 3. These results were supported by Marques et al. (2020); Hai (2022); and Nawarini et al. (2022). Fourth, the USR variable directly correlated with service quality, impacting student satisfaction. This indicates the service quality mediating role and the acceptance of hypothesis 4. These results were supported by Latif et al. (2021), highlighting that applying USR in colleges could enhance service quality and student satisfaction. Finally, the coefficient score of the direct USR effect on student satisfaction was 0.140, indirectly mediated by 0.376 (0.651*0.578) with service quality as a mediator. Because the indirect impact coefficient exceeds that of the direct value, the service quality as a mediator has a stronger influence than the direct effect.

The research results show that USR directly affects service quality and student satisfaction, emphasizing the need for the university to adopt a USR strategy. USR also indirectly affects student satisfaction, through the mediating role of service quality. The indirect effect was stronger than the direct effect, highlighting that implementing USR not only improves the university's reputation and service quality but also significantly enhances student satisfaction. Satisfied students were more likely to remain at their current university, showing reduced intention to transfer to other institutions. Furthermore, they could serve as marketing agents, promoting the university to other parties, including friends and families.

In today's challenging circumstances, particularly in countries that have undergone economic transformation, the university education market is experiencing profound changes, including the emergence of private universities, increased foreign competition, a sharp rise in the number of educational institutions, reduced revenues from the public budget, and adverse demographic trends. In response, universities must recognize the significance of their stakeholders, identify key stakeholders, and implement effective strategies to address their needs and expectations. One possible way to drive positive changes is by adopting the social responsibility concept. For universities, it is necessary to cultivate social responsibility by establishing a comprehensive framework referred to as university social responsibility (USR). This framework integrates key components such as economic, ethical, social, philanthropic, and environmental responsibilities, as highlighted by Tetrevová and Sabolová (2010). USR can assist HEIs in achieving positive outcomes for both students and universities. USR can be a strategic tool for HEIs to shape the perception of various stakeholders (Latif, 2022). Therefore, universities need to incorporate USR into their strategic planning for higher education.

This study has several implications. First, it examined the effect of USR on student satisfaction, facilitated by service quality. Future research could explore additional impacts beyond these variables. Further studies could also delve into the direct and indirect impacts of USR on student perceptions, academic programs, and universities. Second, the practical implications are highly significant, specifically for universities. Integrating SR into the overall university strategy is crucial. This approach could yield positive outcomes across various areas, such as improving services for students and enhancing the university's image within society. Third, the implications extend to society, particularly students and their families. With SR integration into university strategies, students could benefit from improved services, leading to greater satisfaction as they receive more attention from the university. As a result, students are less likely to consider transferring to other universities, feeling satisfied and fulfilled by their present university experience. Fourth, these results have economic implications, mainly for academic institutions. The institution's sustainability is strengthened when students remain committed to their current educational path and choose not to transfer to other universities. A positive university image, perceived by both students and families, serves as a powerful marketing tool, encouraging recommendations to prospective students seeking a reputable educational institution.

Conclusion

In summary, this research aimed to analyze the contribution of USR to student satisfaction, considering the mediation factor of service quality. The analysis revealed that service quality mediated the USR influence on student satisfaction. Meanwhile, USR directly impacted student satisfaction, with the indirect effect proving to be more pronounced. These results underscored the significance of implementing USR strategies to boost service quality, ultimately leading to greater student satisfaction. Therefore, for state universities, such as Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS), prioritizing student satisfaction necessitated measures to enhance service quality. This encompasses improving university service facilities, particularly those with the lowest satisfaction ratings based on user perceptions, such as campus facilities, computers and multimedia laboratories, classrooms, and Wi-Fi networks.

This study had several limitations. It was conducted at only one state university, which resulted in a relatively small sample size of 178 respondents. Moreover, the questionnaire was developed using Google Docs and distributed through WhatsApp groups. To address these limitations, future studies could expand the sample to include multiple private and state universities, with a target of approximately 500 respondents for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. Employing methods such as Focus Group Discussions (FGD) could also help ensure more effective monitoring of responses. Furthermore, the research utilized path analysis with WarpPLS 8.0, but additional analyses to further strengthen the relationships between variables were not conducted. Future studies could incorporate additional analyses, such as multigroup analysis, to enhance the robustness of the research findings.

Acknowledgement

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