

# Student–university identification and loyalty through social responsibility

## A cross-cultural analysis

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the value of university social responsibility (USR) by investigating its impact on student–university identification and student loyalty. It also examines the mediating effect of student–university identification and the moderating effect of the perceived importance of USR. A comparative study is also conducted between students from two diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An online questionnaire was administered to students of universities in two different emerging markets economies (Lebanon and Colombia). The collected data were tested by applying descriptive techniques, cluster analysis and partial least square structural equation modeling with multi-group analysis using SmartPLS3.0 software.

**Findings** – The findings revealed that USR affects student loyalty both directly and indirectly through student–university identification.

**Research limitations/implications** – Assessing the model through a more varied sample population from different cultural backgrounds would entail more universal results and the ability to generalize the causality relationship between USR and student identification and loyalty.

**Originality/value** – This study is a valuable addition to the scarce literature on USR and its interplay with student–university identification. It presents USR as a vital marketing tool to achieve student identification and loyalty, being key factors that impact student enrollment and retention. It also translates into a competitive advantage for higher education institutions to overcome the fierce competition in the educational market. Additionally, this research can be considered a laboratory for theory testing and theory building due to its unique context and original primary data.

**Keywords** Higher education, Perceived importance of USR, Student loyalty, Student–university identification, University social responsibility

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

Today, higher education institutions (HEIs) are experiencing a tremendous pressure and a fierce competition due to the increasing number of college students and the steady growth in the number of universities incurred in this industry. In addition, globalization and the emerging social and environmental challenges affected this industry and imposed major changes on the approach and objective of education (Nunez Chicharro and Carrillo, 2009), urging universities to reconsider their vision and procedures to respond effectively and efficiently to the social crises and environmental changes (Gonzalez-Perez *et al.*, 2007). These strains highlight the importance of socially responsible practices and their impact on HEIs. Accordingly, university social responsibility (USR) appears as a vital tool to respond effectively to the global changes, as well as to the vicious competitiveness in the educational market (Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016).



A university's teaching mission goes far beyond providing the general education, knowledge and technical skills required for occupations and professions (Altbach, 2008). Universities play a key role in shaping the nation's identity (Sullivan, 2003). Despite the importance of the USR, there is a limited academic research on USR and its effect on university stakeholders (Gonzalez-Perez, 2011; Larran-Jorge *et al.*, 2012), even though an organization's socially responsible behavior takes into consideration the needs and interests of all affected stakeholders (Gaete, 2009). However, there is abundant research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) that can serve as a base to tackle USR by analogy.

Many researchers examined the direct and indirect effects of CSR on several outcomes internal to the company such as employee identification, satisfaction, commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Turker, 2006; Gonzalez-Perez, 2013; El-Kassar, Yunis and El-Khalil, 2017; El-Kassar, Messarra and El-Khalil, 2017). Also, CSR practices have been proven to affect outcomes external to the company, some of which are customer-company identification and customer loyalty (Homburg *et al.*, 2009; Martínez and Del Bosque, 2013; Pérez and Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2015). However, only few have tried to assess the relationship between USR and student-related outcomes, namely student-university identification and loyalty which is believed to affect student recruitment and retention (Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016). Therefore, there is a crucial need for further research that examines the relationship between USR and student-related outcomes to identify the constructs that are vital to students (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Elliott and Shin, 2002). Besides, previous research on higher education management including USR, student loyalty and satisfaction calls for cross-cultural analysis to replicate the outcomes using student populations from different cultural backgrounds to secure a greater validity and generalizability of the results (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009; Vázquez *et al.*, 2014; Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016).

The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of USR concept by investigating its impact on student-university identification and loyalty. It also intends to assess the mediating effect of student-university identification on the relationship between USR and student loyalty, as well as the moderating effect of the perceived importance of USR on the model relations. In addition, a comparative analysis between students from two different cultural backgrounds is conducted. Furthermore, this research has a unique context of study as the data were collected in two culturally different emerging markets economies (Lebanon and Colombia). Besides, literature based on emerging economies other than India and China tends to be scarce (Singh *et al.*, 2017; Singh and Gaur, 2009, 2013). Therefore, this study with its distinctive contexts and original primary data could be considered a laboratory for both theory testing and theory building.

This study constitutes a fundamental contribution to the literature on USR and an addition to the modest number of research in this area. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first paper that tests an unexplored association between USR and student-university identification, which will also be presented as a mediator to the relationship between USR and student loyalty. Additionally, it examines the moderating effect of the perceived importance of USR on the proposed conceptual model. The research is also a primary comprehensive paper that validates the antecedents of student loyalty through a cross-cultural analysis (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009; Vázquez *et al.*, 2014; Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016), thus generating universal results with a greater validity.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: a background on the concepts related to this study is provided in Section 2. The theoretical framework is presented in Section 3, along with the development of the conceptual model and hypotheses to be tested. The research methodology is described in Section 4 and the data analysis results and interpretations are given in Section 5. The discussion, limitations and suggestions for future research are provided in Section 6.

## 2. Literature review

Nowadays, HEIs are liable to the society and the market needs as never before. They ought to find a balance between the academic environment and the public interest (Altbach, 2008), where fulfilling the society's expectations from higher education has become necessary to survive and prosper.

Currently, the role of universities goes beyond providing academic services (Altbach, 2008) to building socially responsible generations that embrace sustainable and environmental practices as well as the interest of the community at large. Consequently, USR emerged in higher education as a new paradigm (Giuffré and Ratto, 2014) that impacts different internal and external stakeholders. However, students remain the keystone of the educational system and the primary stakeholder directly affected by university's socially responsible behaviors, which influence students' experiences and attitudes.

Furthermore, HEIs are considered service providers and they apply many principles that govern the services industry (Vázquez *et al.*, 2014), where some researchers consider customer–company identification as one of the main positive consequences of CSR image (Salmones *et al.*, 2005; Martínez and Del Bosque, 2013). Recently, more customers are making purchasing decisions based on their perception of the company's ethical and socially responsible initiatives (Grimmer and Bingham, 2013). According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), this relation between the company and its customers is governed by the social identity theory (SIT) developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity is the way an individual identifies himself in line with his perception of the social group he belongs to or he identifies with. It serves as a base through which customers define themselves, identify with the company and build a solid customer–company relationship according to the attractiveness of the offered social identity and the extent to which it satisfies one or more major “self-definitional needs” (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In this regard, many studies tackled the relationship between CSR and customer–company identification (Pérez and Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2015). However, in the higher education industry, some studies concluded that students are giving more attention to USR (Ali and Ali, 2016), yet there is scarcity of research examining students' perception of USR and its effect on student–university identification.

On the other hand, previous research revealed that CSR can affect loyalty (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001; Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2001; Pérez and Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2015). In fact, an increasing number of customers value socially responsible behaviors, which leads to a stronger commitment toward the organization and greater loyalty (Maignan *et al.*, 1999). The importance of this outcome as a result of social responsibility practices reinforces the need for further research to evaluate a similar effect on USR and student loyalty.

In addition, several studies indicated that employees' attitudes toward their organizations are influenced by their perception of CSR (Turker, 2006, 2009). Accordingly, the organization's socially responsible initiatives appear to be more impactful on employees who highly value CSR compared to those who perceive it of low importance (El-Kassar, Messarra and El-Khalil, 2017). This perception leads to a greater employee identification (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2007) and loyalty (Ali *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2014).

## 3. Conceptual model and hypotheses

### 3.1 USR and student–university identification

Since people aspire to achieve a positive self-image (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), employees and customers tend to relate to firms showing shared values and desired attributes. Accordingly, CSR activities appeared to enhance employee–company identification (Kim *et al.*, 2010). Also, empirical studies showed a positive relationship between CSR

and customer–company identification (Marin and Ruiz, 2007). By analogy to these relationships, we assume a similar relationship between USR and student–university identification and we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1. Perceived USR is directly and positively related to student–university identification.*

### *3.2 Student–university identification and loyalty*

Ahearn *et al.* (2005) validated customer–company identification and its positive consequences on customers’ behaviors. More specifically, those who strongly identify with a company tend to buy more and to recommend the company and its services or products, which can be translated into greater customer satisfaction and loyalty. This result is supported by both the organizational identification theory (Cheney and Tompkins, 1987) and the SIT. Organizational identification, which is the tendency of an individual to identify with his organization, is linked to main organizational outcomes that comprise employee loyalty and retention (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, according to the SIT, the group identification always includes an emotional component (Homburg *et al.*, 2009). Identification with the company occurs when customers exhibit positive views and emotions toward the company. Since most of the research focused mainly on customer loyalty as a direct outcome for the customer–company identification (Abdeen *et al.*, 2016; Ahearn *et al.*, 2005; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004), we suppose a positive association between student–university identification and student loyalty leading to the following hypothesis:

*H2. Student–university identification directly and positively affects student loyalty.*

### *3.3 USR and student loyalty*

Previous studies showed that CSR can affect loyalty (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001; Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2001). In fact, socially responsible behaviors contribute to enhancing customers’ trust (Aaker, 1996; Maignan *et al.*, 1999) that stems directly from the service consumption, and indirectly from the firm’s reputation (Delgado Ballester and Munera Alemán, 2001), leading to customers’ stronger commitment toward the organization. Furthermore, researchers discerned an increased number of customers keen to purchase goods and services from firms engaged in social causes (Gaur *et al.*, 2015; Jones, 1997; Ross *et al.*, 1992). Customers value these efforts and reward the firm with greater loyalty (Maignan *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H3. USR is directly and positively related to student loyalty.*

Recent studies have demonstrated the mediating role of employee–organization identification on the relationship between CSR and favorable outcomes such as commitment and organization citizenship behavior (El-Kassar, Yunis and El-Khalil, 2017; El-Kassar, Messarra and El-Khalil, 2017). In an analogous manner, student–university identification plays a mediating role in the relationship between USR and student loyalty. Accordingly, we posit the following:

*H4. The relationship between USR and student loyalty is mediated by student–university identification.*

The above-stated relationships can be illustrated by the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.

## **4. Research methodology**

### *4.1 Participants*

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted from previously developed scales with tested validity and reliability. It was sent by e-mail to all currently enrolled

students in two private universities located in two different countries: The Lebanese American University (LAU) in Lebanon and Universidad EAFIT in Colombia.

For Lebanon, the questionnaire was in English language only; no Arabic version was needed since English is the adopted instruction language at LAU. As for Colombia, the questionnaire was translated to Spanish and revised by a professional to ensure accurate translation, and consequently a better understanding of the questions and more reliable responses. The administered survey returned 690 responses from Lebanon out of which 429 were complete and deemed usable. As for Colombia, it resulted in 190 complete and usable responses. Accordingly, the analysis was conducted on a total of 619 questionnaires complete and usable from both populations.

Respondents comprised 370 females (59.8 percent) and 249 males (40.2 percent), with 1 percent aged 17 years (6 students), 35.5 percent of them aged 18–19 years (220 students); the rest were distributed as follows: 20 years old (18.4 percent), 21 years old (14.7 percent), 22 years old (10 percent), 23 years old (8.4 percent), 24 years old (4 percent) and 25 years old and above (7.5 percent). Undergraduate students represented the greater portion (92.4 percent) corresponding to 572 students of the sample population, and 47 graduate students (7.6 percent).

#### 4.2 Measures

The survey comprises three parts in addition to demographic questions, and is based on a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) or from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The demographic section includes questions such as gender, age and class level as suggested in Ho *et al.* (2017). The first part covers 11 items adopted from Burcea and Marinescu (2011) to measure perceived USR toward students (6 items) and toward society (5 items).

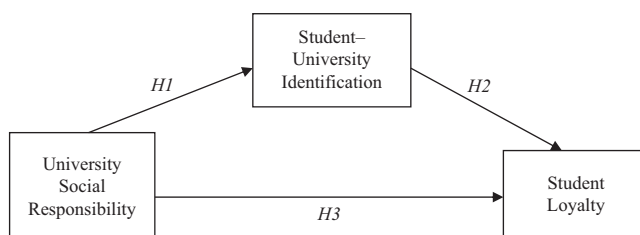
The second part adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992) contains seven items to evaluate student–university identification with questions such as “I strongly identify with my university” and “I like to tell that I am a student at my university”.

The last part of the survey is comprised of three items measuring student loyalty adapted from the scale developed by Homburg and Giering (2001).

### 5. Results

The proposed conceptual model was tested using SmartPLS3.0 software for all the latent constructs (USR, student–university identification and student loyalty). The parceling method was applied by combining USR toward students and toward society into one construct, then the analysis of the first model was performed accordingly.

The parceling method was used to transform the higher-order, multidimensional USR construct into a first-order latent construct (see Bagozzi and Edwards, 1998; Coffman and MacCallum, 2005). The parcels are composite scores used to decrease the total number of observed variables, or indicators, measuring USR (Aluja-Fabregat and Blanch, 2004). The parcels were obtained by averaging the scores of items measuring USR toward



**Figure 1.**  
The conceptual model

students and society. By using these parcels as indicators, USR becomes a first-order latent construct (Landis *et al.*, 2000).

When testing relationships among latent factors, the use of parceling offers estimation and psychometric benefits (Little *et al.*, 2002). In fact, data based on individual items compared with data based on aggregate scores result in “lower reliability, lower communality, a smaller ratio of common-to-unique factor variance, and a greater likelihood of distributional violations” (Little *et al.*, 2002, p. 154). Landis *et al.* (2000) indicate that sample size limitations can be avoided through the use of parceling. Little *et al.* (2002) propose that by using parceled items, the structural model becomes more parsimonious.

5.1 Model 1

*Outer model analysis.* Model 1 was tested by examining the reliability and the discriminant validity of the three latent constructs (USR, student–university identification and loyalty) as shown in Tables I and II. In the process of validating the measurement, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on each set of items used to test USR (11 items), student–university identification (7 items) and student loyalty (3 items). Almost all the items scored a significant loading (greater than 0.7), except for one item related to student identification which was excluded. The significant factor loadings confirm the convergent validity of the three constructs.

Also, the achieved values of the average variance extracted (AVE) for student–university identification, student loyalty and USR constructs are 0.688, 0.767 and 0.914, respectively. In fact, these values are above 68 percent, thus surpassing the required 50 percent (Fornell and Larker, 1981). Finally, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and Dillon-Goldstein’s  $\rho$  for the three factors exceed the minimum limit of 0.6 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) confirming the high-scale reliability of

**Table I.**  
Model 1 outer  
loadings and  
construct reliability

| Constructs                           | Manifest<br>variables label | Items  | Standardized<br>loadings |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Student–university<br>identification | STUIDF1                     | I strongly identify with my university   | 0.872                    |
|                                      | STUIDF2                     | I feel good to be a student at my university   | 0.906                    |
|                                      | STUIDF3                     | I like to tell that I am a student at my university                                      | 0.884                    |
|                                      | STUIDF4                     | I feel attached to my university   | 0.882                    |
|                                      | STUIDF5                     | When someone criticizes my university, it feels like a<br>personal insult                | 0.767                    |
|                                      | STUIDF6                     | I am very interested in what others think about my<br>university                         | 0.634                    |
| Student loyalty                      | STULOY1                     | I recommend my university to others  | 0.899                    |
|                                      | STULOY2                     | I continue graduate studies at my university if the<br>major/degree I require is offered | 0.850                    |
|                                      | STULOY3                     | I come back and join my university alumni chapters                                       | 0.879                    |
| USR toward society                   | USRSOC                      |  | 0.954                    |
| USR toward students                  | USRSTU                      |  | 0.958                    |

**Table II.**  
Discriminant validity

|                       | STUIDF | STULOY | USR   | Cronbach’s<br>$\alpha$ | rho_A | Composite<br>reliability | Average variance extracted<br>(AVE) |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|-------|------------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Discriminant validity | STUIDF | 0.830  |       | 0.907                  | 0.928 | 0.929                    | 0.688                               |
|                       | STULOY | 0.802  | 0.876 | 0.849                  | 0.860 | 0.908                    | 0.767                               |
|                       | USR    | 0.589  | 0.635 | 0.956                  | 0.906 | 0.955                    | 0.914                               |

the proposed constructs. Moreover, the scale’s validity is demonstrated as the diagonal entries of the discriminant validity matrix, shown in Table II, are larger than the entries in their respective rows or columns.

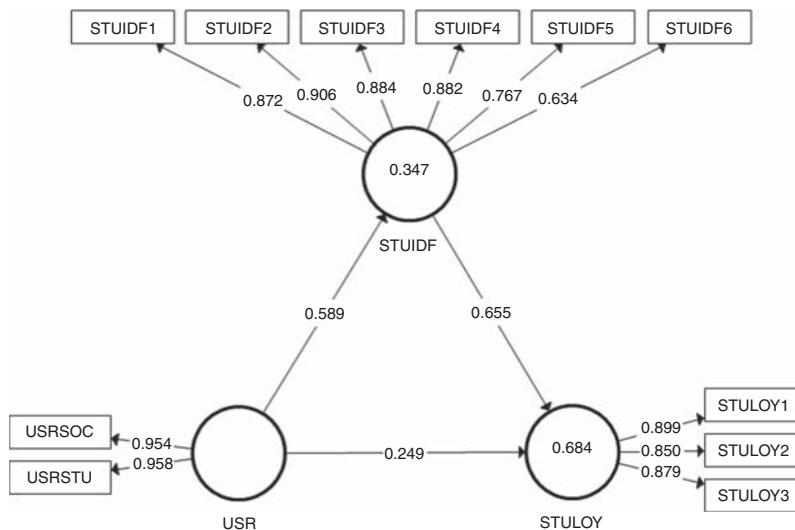
*Inner model analysis.* The inner model analysis showed an  $R^2 = 0.347$  for student identification and 0.684 for student loyalty, which confirms that the proposed model can explain a considerable part of the variance of these constructs. According to Chin (1998), this model’s validity is deemed satisfactory.

The outer loading and the values of path coefficients are depicted in Figure 2. The path coefficients and their significance, listed in Table III, revealed that USR has a significant direct impact on student–university identification (reg. coeff. std. = 0.589,  $p$ -value = 0.0000) and student loyalty (reg. coeff. std. = 0.249,  $p$ -value = 0.0000) which confirms  $H1$  and  $H3$ . Accordingly, USR significantly affects student identification, which in turn positively and directly impacts student loyalty (reg. coeff. std. = 0.655,  $p$ -value = 0.0000) supporting  $H2$ .

Also, USR exhibits a positive indirect effect on student loyalty with a  $p$ -value = 0.0000 (Table III) which supports  $H4$ . The results show that student identification partially mediates the relationship between USR and student loyalty.

*Discussion.* HELs play a vital role in promoting socially responsible culture that affects students’ experiences and directs their focus toward societal and public interest.

This research explores the proposed relationships between USR and student–university identification and loyalty. Data analysis results confirmed that USR has a positive and



**Figure 2.**  
Results of the  
conceptual model

|  | Original sample (O) | Sample mean (M) | SD    | <i>t</i> -statistics (O/SD) | <i>p</i> -values |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|-------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Path coefficients: direct effects</i>   |                     |                 |       |                             |                  |
| STUIDF → STULOY                            | 0.655               | 0.655           | 0.029 | 22.650                      | 0.000            |
| USR → STUIDF                               | 0.589               | 0.589           | 0.031 | 18.948                      | 0.000            |
| USR → STULOY                               | 0.635               | 0.635           | 0.028 | 22.830                      | 0.000            |
| <i>Path coefficients: indirect effects</i> |                     |                 |       |                             |                  |
| USR → STULOY                               | 0.386               | 0.386           | 0.024 | 15.959                      | 0.000            |

**Table III.**  
Model 1 path  
coefficients

significant impact on student–university identification, which validates *H1* and aligns with the findings of previous CSR research that links it to customer–company identification (Marin and Ruiz, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2010) where students represent the company customers. Moreover, the results are supported by the SIT. Adopting socially responsible initiatives grants the university a better image and reputation. Since students perceive themselves as part of the university they belong to, they tend to identify more with it based on the attractiveness of its social identity. Accordingly, students’ perception of socially responsible behaviors practiced by the HEI appears as a strong determinant of student identification with the university.

Results also affirmed a positive and significant relationship between USR and student loyalty. This outcome confirms *H3*, in consistency with researchers’ findings noting an increased number of customers who value the firm’s engagement in social causes (Ross *et al.*, 1992; Jones, 1997), and who reward it with a stronger loyalty (Maignan *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, students perceive and appreciate USR initiatives undertaken by universities, yielding a direct effect on student loyalty.

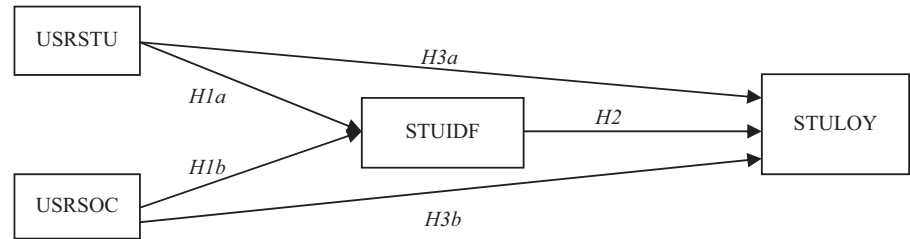
This study also validated student–university identification as a strong determinant of loyalty. Previous research indicated that customer–company identification has positive consequences on customers’ behaviors (Ahearn *et al.*, 2005). Other studies considered customer loyalty as a direct outcome for customer–company identification (Ahearn *et al.*, 2005; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2004). When identifying with the company, customers are likely to increase their purchase and to recommend the company’s services or products, which convert into greater satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, students who identify with their universities tend to recommend them more and exhibit a greater loyalty. This outcome is supported by the social identity and the organizational identification theories. According to the SIT, exhibiting positive views and emotions toward the university leads students to identify with it. Additionally, organizational identification is associated with key organizational outcomes that include employee loyalty (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). In the academic setting, it represents the students’ sense of belonging and membership that translates into loyalty. Accordingly, there is a positive direct association between student–university identification and loyalty, which supports *H2*. The results also show that student identification partially mediates the relationship between USR and student loyalty implying the presence of other factors that can play a mediating role.

5.2 Model 2

Following the analysis of the first model using the combined USR dimensions, it becomes clear that exploring the above model in terms of each of the USR dimensions and loyalty yields additional insight into the proposed relationships. Consequently, the USR construct was split into two dimensions (USR toward students and toward society). The analysis was then conducted to test the below sub-hypotheses depicted in the new model (Figure 3):

*H1a.* USR toward students directly and positively affects student–university identification.

*H1b.* USR toward society directly and positively affects student–university identification.



**Figure 3.**  
The conceptual  
model in terms of  
the 2 sub-dimensions  
of USR



*H2.* Student–university identification directly and positively affects student loyalty.

*H3a.* USR toward students directly and positively affects student loyalty.

*H3b.* USR toward society directly and positively affects student loyalty.

*H4a.* Student identification mediates the relationship between USR toward students and loyalty.

*H4b.* Student identification mediates the relationship between USR toward society and loyalty.

*Outer model analysis.* The four constructs in Model 2 (USR toward students, USR toward society, student–university identification and loyalty) were analyzed by examining the reliability and discriminant validity. Almost all the items scored significant factor loadings well above the threshold of 0.7, see Table IV. This led to the removal of that particular item to ensure the convergent validity of the constructs.

The AVE for student–university identification (AVE = 0.688), student loyalty (AVE = 0.767), USR toward society (AVE = 0.725) and USR toward students (AVE = 0.683) exceeded the required 0.5 (Fornell and Larker, 1981). Also, the reliability of the four constructs was well confirmed (Table IV) with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and Dillon-Goldstein's  $\rho$  way above 0.6 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Gaur and Gaur, 2009). The discriminant validity matrix depicted in Table V supports the scale's validity as the diagonal entries are larger than the entries in their respective rows or columns.

| Manifest<br>variables label | Items  | Standardized<br>loadings |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| STUIDF1                     | I strongly identify with my university   | 0.872                    |
| STUIDF2                     | I feel good to be a student at my university   | 0.906                    |
| STUIDF3                     | I like to tell that I am a student at my university  | 0.884                    |
| STUIDF4                     | I feel attached to my university   | 0.882                    |
| STUIDF5                     | When someone criticizes my university, it feels like a personal insult                                       | 0.767                    |
| STUIDF6                     | I am very interested in what others think about my university  | 0.633                    |
| STULOY1                     | I recommend my university to others  | 0.899                    |
| STULOY2                     | I continue graduate studies at my university if the major/degree I require is offered                        | 0.849                    |
| STULOY3                     | I come back and join my university alumni chapters   | 0.879                    |
| USRSOC1                     | My university is committed to other stakeholders' welfare (staff, faculty, suppliers, NGOs, etc.)            | 0.829                    |
| USRSOC2                     | My university contributes financially to social responsibility activities directed toward society            | 0.864                    |
| USRSOC3                     | My university conducts workshops/conferences/lectures to increase awareness of social responsibility         | 0.828                    |
| USRSOC4                     | My university encourages employees' efforts (staff and faculty) for social responsibility related activities | 0.872                    |
| USRSOC5                     | My university's socially responsibility initiatives are satisfactory   | 0.863                    |
| USRSTU2                     | My university participates in environmental protection programs (recycling, tree plantation, etc.)           | 0.809                    |
| USRSTU3                     | My university has a fair system of complaints  | 0.835                    |
| USRSTU4                     | My university has cooperation agreements with other institutes to improve education quality                  | 0.766                    |
| USRSTU5                     | My university encourages students to participate in social responsibility related activities                 | 0.850                    |
| USRSTU6                     | My university contributes financially to social responsibility activities directed toward students           | 0.869                    |

**Table IV.**  
Model 2 outer  
loadings and  
construct reliability

Table V.  
Discriminant validity

|        | STUIDF | STULOY | USRSOC | USRSTU | Cronbach's<br>$\alpha$ | rho_A | Composite<br>reliability | Average variance<br>extracted (AVE) |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| STUIDF | 0.830  |        |        |        | 0.907                  | 0.928 | 0.929                    | 0.688                               |
| STULOY | 0.802  | 0.876  |        |        | 0.849                  | 0.861 | 0.908                    | 0.767                               |
| USRSOC | 0.548  | 0.591  | 0.851  |        | 0.905                  | 0.907 | 0.929                    | 0.725                               |
| USRSTU | 0.586  | 0.626  | 0.822  | 0.827  | 0.884                  | 0.888 | 0.915                    | 0.683                               |

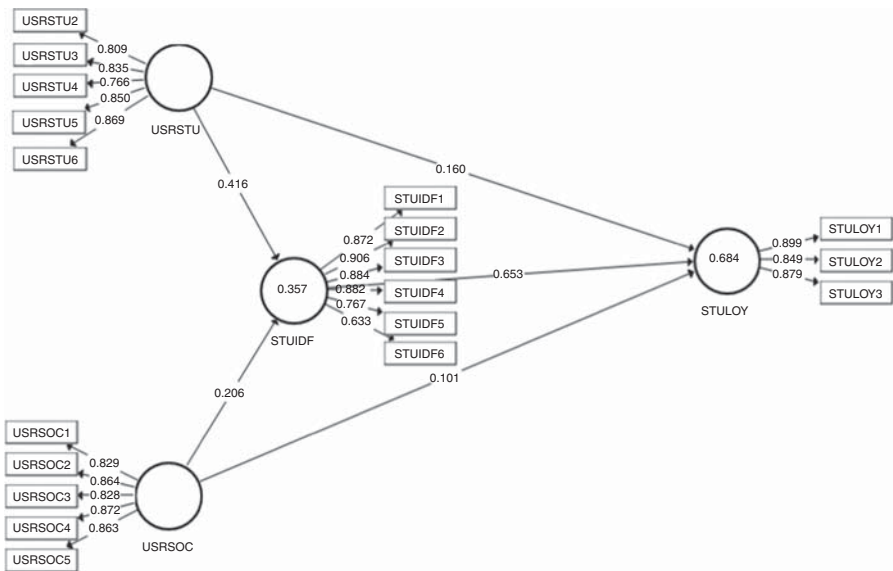
Figure 4.  
Results of structural  
Model 2

*Inner model analysis.* In the inner model analysis (Figure 4), student identification and student loyalty achieved an  $R^2 = 0.357$  and  $0.684$ , respectively, affirming that the validity of Model 2 is satisfactory (Chin, 1998).

Figure 4 shows that student identification has a strong significant effect on student loyalty (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.653$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.0000$ ), supporting *H2*. Furthermore, USR toward students has a positive direct impact on both student identification (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.416$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.0000$ ) and student loyalty (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.160$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.0000$ ), which confirms *H1a* and *H3a*. However, USR toward society appears to have less impact on student loyalty (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.101$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.024$ ), as well as on student identification (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.206$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.004$ ). Nonetheless, the results indicate that these effects are significant and *H3b* and *H1b* are supported.

Moreover, the results indicate that student–university identification partially mediates the relationship between USR toward students and loyalty. This partial mediation is confirmed through the significant direct effect shown in Table VI, with a reg. coeff. std. =  $0.160$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.0000$ . The indirect effect is also significant (reg. coeff. std. =  $0.272$ ,  $p$ -value =  $0.0000$ ), thus supporting *H4a*. Similar results are obtained for *H4b*.

*Discussion.* Consistent with the SIT, the results of Model 2 confirmed that USR toward students positively and significantly affects student–university identification. The engagement of the university in socially responsible practices leads to a better connection and a greater identification with the institution, which supports *H1a*. Similarly, *H3a* is confirmed with a



strong positive relationship between USR toward students and loyalty. Students appear more interested in socially responsible behaviors practiced toward them, which they reward with a greater sense of loyalty toward their institution (Maignan *et al.*, 1999). Hence, USR toward students can be considered a strong determinant of student–university identification and student loyalty.

As for USR toward society, the analysis confirmed its relation with student identification and loyalty. However, this relationship is less significant compared to USR toward students; these findings support *H1b* and *H3b*. Unsurprisingly, students better perceive and are more receptive of socially responsible actions directed toward them than toward society.

Moreover, the partial mediation effect of student–university identification on the relationship between USR toward students and loyalty as well as USR toward society and loyalty reflects the presence of other factors that affect student loyalty.

### 5.3 Multi-group analysis

*Multi-group analysis by gender.* A multi-group analysis by gender revealed differences in the significance in the relationships between USR toward society and student–university identification, USR toward society and student loyalty and USR toward students and student loyalty.

Table VII reveals that the effect of USR toward society on student–university identification was significant for the female students ( $p$ -value = 0.006) and not significant for the male students ( $p$ -value = 0.214). This suggests that female students are sensitive to university's socially responsible acts toward society, which leads to identification with their universities, while male students' identification with their universities is not affected by USR toward society.

|  | Original sample (O) | Sample mean (M) | SD    | <i>t</i> -statistics (O/SD) | <i>p</i> -values |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|-------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Path coefficients: direct effects</i>   |                     |                 |       |                             |                  |
| STUIDF → STULOY                            | 0.653               | 0.651           | 0.029 | 22.598                      | 0.000            |
| USRSOC → STUIDF                            | 0.206               | 0.206           | 0.072 | 2.864                       | 0.004            |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.101               | 0.101           | 0.045 | 2.267                       | 0.024            |
| USRSTU → STUIDF                            | 0.416               | 0.418           | 0.066 | 6.269                       | 0.000            |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.160               | 0.162           | 0.044 | 3.669                       | 0.000            |
| <i>Path coefficients: indirect effects</i> |                     |                 |       |                             |                  |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.135               | 0.134           | 0.047 | 2.839                       | 0.005            |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.272               | 0.272           | 0.044 | 6.109                       | 0.000            |

**Table VI.**  
Model 2 path  
coefficients

|  | Original sample (O) |       | SD     |       | <i>t</i> -statistics (O/SD) |        | <i>p</i> -values |       |
|--|---------------------|-------|--------|-------|-----------------------------|--------|------------------|-------|
|  | Female              | Male  | Female | Male  | Female                      | Male   | Female           | Male  |
| <i>Path coefficients: direct effects</i>   |                     |       |        |       |                             |        |                  |       |
| STUIDF → STULOY                            | 0.662               | 0.646 | 0.037  | 0.045 | 18.131                      | 14.489 | 0.000            | 0.000 |
| USRSOC → STUIDF                            | 0.256               | 0.130 | 0.092  | 0.105 | 2.782                       | 1.244  | 0.006            | 0.214 |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.047               | 0.168 | 0.058  | 0.071 | 0.812                       | 2.368  | 0.417            | 0.018 |
| USRSTU → STUIDF                            | 0.382               | 0.456 | 0.091  | 0.094 | 4.185                       | 4.858  | 0.000            | 0.000 |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.196               | 0.105 | 0.058  | 0.070 | 3.392                       | 1.501  | 0.001            | 0.134 |
| <i>Path coefficients: indirect effects</i> |                     |       |        |       |                             |        |                  |       |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.170               | 0.084 | 0.063  | 0.067 | 2.688                       | 1.252  | 0.007            | 0.211 |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.253               | 0.294 | 0.059  | 0.068 | 4.275                       | 4.343  | 0.000            | 0.000 |

**Table VII.**  
Multi-group analysis  
by gender – direct  
and indirect effects

Moreover, the direct effect of USR toward society on student loyalty is not significant for female students ( $p$ -value = 0.417), while it is significant for male students ( $p$ -value = 0.018). This indicates that female student loyalty toward university cannot be directly achieved by socially responsible practices toward society, but rather through student–university identification, as the indirect effect is significant ( $p$ -value = 0.007), see Table VII. As for male student, the indirect effect is not significant ( $p$ -value = 0.211). Hence, for male students, loyalty can be attained directly through socially responsible practices toward society, but not through student–university identification.

Furthermore, the direct effect of USR toward students on student loyalty is significant for female students ( $p$ -value = 0.001) but not significant for male students ( $p$ -value = 0.134). Thus, for female students, practicing USR toward students leads to student loyalty both directly and through identification with the university. However, for male students, loyalty is not achieved directly by USR practices toward students, but rather through student–university identification. This result is confirmed through the significant indirect effect of USR toward students on male student loyalty ( $p$ -value = 0.0000), as shown in Table VII.

*Multi-group analysis by country.* The multi-group analysis by country (Table VIII) also revealed differences in the significance for the following relationships: USR toward society and student loyalty, USR toward students and student–university identification and USR toward students and student loyalty.

Table VIII indicates that the direct effect of USR toward society on student loyalty is not significant for Colombian students ( $p$ -value = 0.824), while it is significant for Lebanese students ( $p$ -value = 0.039). Hence, USR toward society impacts Lebanese students' loyalty but not Colombian students' loyalty toward their university.

Similarly, the direct effect of USR toward students on identification is not significant for Colombian students ( $p$ -value = 0.300), while it is highly significant for Lebanese students ( $p$ -value = 0.000). This suggests that Colombian students' identification with the university cannot be attained by socially responsible practices toward them. It is achieved through USR toward Lebanese students.

Furthermore, the effect of USR toward students on student loyalty is marginally significant for Colombian students ( $p$ -value = 0.070), but not significant for Lebanese students ( $p$ -value = 0.105). Thus, for Colombian students, practicing USR toward them leads to loyalty directly ( $p$ -value = 0.070), and not through identification, as the indirect effect is not significant ( $p$ -value = 0.295). However, for Lebanese students, loyalty is not achieved directly ( $p$ -value = 0.105) but rather through identification ( $p$ -value = 0.000).

**Table VIII.**  
Multi-group analysis  
by country – direct  
and indirect effects

|  | Original sample (O) |       | SD     |       | <i>t</i> -statistics ( O/SD ) |        | <i>p</i> -values |       |
|--|---------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------------------------------|--------|------------------|-------|
|  | Colom.              | Leb.  | Colom. | Leb.  | Colom.                        | Leb.   | Colom.           | Leb.  |
| <i>Path coefficients: direct effects</i>   |                     |       |        |       |                               |        |                  |       |
| STUIDF → STULOY                            | 0.628               | 0.716 | 0.072  | 0.031 | 8.785                         | 22.801 | 0.000            | 0.000 |
| USRSOC → STUIDF                            | 0.451               | 0.154 | 0.141  | 0.070 | 3.186                         | 2.192  | 0.001            | 0.029 |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.023               | 0.098 | 0.101  | 0.048 | 0.223                         | 2.071  | 0.824            | 0.039 |
| USRSTU → STUIDF                            | 0.133               | 0.459 | 0.128  | 0.064 | 1.038                         | 7.143  | 0.300            | 0.000 |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.173               | 0.081 | 0.095  | 0.050 | 1.812                         | 1.621  | 0.070            | 0.105 |
| <i>Path coefficients: indirect effects</i> |                     |       |        |       |                               |        |                  |       |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.283               | 0.110 | 0.100  | 0.050 | 2.821                         | 2.192  | 0.005            | 0.029 |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.084               | 0.329 | 0.080  | 0.048 | 1.047                         | 6.827  | 0.295            | 0.000 |

We can draw from the above that USR toward Colombian students directly affects their loyalty, while USR toward society has an indirect effect through identification; the latter fully mediates this relationship.

As for Lebanese students, it is the USR toward students that indirectly affects their loyalty, with student–university identification fully mediating this relationship. Also, USR toward society leads to loyalty directly and indirectly through student identification, hence, partially mediating the relationship between USR toward society and student loyalty.

It is also worth mentioning that USR toward society has a greater impact on Colombian students' identification (reg. coeff. std. = 0.451) compared to the impact of USR toward students (reg. coeff. std. = 0.133). However, USR toward Lebanese students has the greater effect on student–university identification (reg. coeff. std. = 0.459) in comparison to a lower impact of USR toward society (reg. coeff. std. = 0.154).

In fact, most Latin American populations have a strong collectivistic element. According to Geert Hofstede, the founder of comparative intercultural research who developed the first empirical model of “dimensions” of national culture, Colombia scored one of the lowest individualistic scores out of all the countries in the world (13 out of 100 on the Hofstede model for individualism). It is considered one of the most collectivistic cultures, with the society maintaining a high degree of interdependence among its members. Parents raise their children to value the role of the family in providing support and maintaining unity. They are taught to care for the welfare of all family members rather than to attend to their own personal interests which explains the greater impact of social responsibility initiatives toward society on Colombian students.

As for Lebanon, it scored higher than Colombia on Hofstede's model for individualism (40 out of 100), indicating a lower level of collectivism. Children are raised to believe that they are members of a family and are not considered independent individuals. However, their individualism, self-centeredness and selfishness are well nurtured. Raising narcissistic children in a small country like Lebanon which continuously faces many external pressures and influences is becoming an epidemic. This can explain the discrepancy between Colombian and Lebanese students' sensitivity and response to socially responsible practices toward them or toward society.

*Perceived importance of USR.* Several studies indicated that employees' perception of CSR shapes their attitudes toward their organizations. Thus, those who value CSR and perceive it as highly important are directly and positively affected by the CSR practices of their organizations (El-Kassar, Messarra and El-Khalil, 2017). This perception leads to a greater employee identification (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2007), satisfaction and loyalty (Ali *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2014), and to lower turnover rates (Brammer *et al.*, 2007). By analogy to the relationship between CSR and employee identification and loyalty as well as the effect of the perceived importance of CSR on these relations, we assume that the higher the perceived importance of USR, the greater the student identification and loyalty. Consequently, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H5.* Students' perception of the importance of USR moderates the relationships among USR, identification and loyalty.

To test *H5*, the sample population was divided into two groups according to students' perception of the importance of social responsibility. Cluster analysis was performed to identify the two groups of students who view USR of high importance (group 1) or low importance (group 2). A multi-group analysis was then conducted to test the differences in the significance of the relationships between USR toward society and student–university identification, USR toward society and student loyalty and USR toward students and student loyalty.

As shown in Table IX, the effect of USR toward society on student identification was significant for those who perceived social responsibility of high importance ( $p$ -value = 0.002), and not significant for those who perceived it of low importance ( $p$ -value = 0.842). Apparently, students who grant high importance to social responsibility are more likely to be affected by socially responsible actions toward society, leading to a higher level of identification with their university. However, no significant influence of socially responsible actions toward society on identification was found for the second group.

Additionally, the direct effect of USR toward society on student loyalty is not significant for students with high perception of SR ( $p$ -value = 0.519), while it is significant for students with low perception ( $p$ -value = 0.004), which indicates that student–university identification fully mediates the relationship between USR toward society and student loyalty for students that highly perceive social responsibility. On the other hand, identification does not mediate the relationship between USR toward society and loyalty for those who perceive USR as less important. Therefore, loyalty for these students can only be achieved directly by USR toward society.

As for USR toward students, a direct positive impact was found to affect student loyalty for students with high perception of SR ( $p$ -value = 0.000). In addition, a significant positive impact was found on student identification for this group. Hence, USR toward students leads to student loyalty either directly or indirectly through student–university identification. Consequently, identification partially mediates this relationship. The effect of USR toward students on identification was also found significant for the group with low perception of SR ( $p$ -value = 0.000). However, the direct effect was not found significant ( $p$ -value = 0.309). Thus, student–university identification fully mediates the relationship between USR toward students and loyalty for students with low perception of SR.

In summary, the perception of SR among students moderates the relationships among USR, identification and loyalty as the significance of the relationships differ between those who perceive SR of high or low importance.

6. Implications, limitations and recommendations

The main purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of USR through examining its relationship with student–university identification and student loyalty which are two important and highly regarded outcomes that support universities’ efforts to survive and succeed. The findings revealed that USR affects student loyalty both directly and indirectly through student–university identification. Consequently, student–university identification mediates the relationship between USR and student loyalty. Furthermore, when the two dimensions of USR, toward students and toward society, were taken into consideration, the

Table IX.  
Multi-group analysis  
by perceived  
importance of  
USR – direct and  
indirect effects

|  | Original sample (O) |            | SD          |            | <i>t</i> -statistics ( O/SD ) |            | <i>p</i> -values |            |
|--|---------------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------------|------------|
|  | High<br>IMP         | Low<br>IMP | High<br>IMP | Low<br>IMP | High<br>IMP                   | Low<br>IMP | High<br>IMP      | Low<br>IMP |
| <i>Path coefficients: direct effects</i>   |                     |            |             |            |                               |            |                  |            |
| STUIDF → STULOY                            | 0.674               | 0.632      | 0.033       | 0.047      | 20.143                        | 13.324     | 0.000            | 0.000      |
| USRSOC → STUIDF                            | 0.285               | 0.020      | 0.091       | 0.099      | 3.140                         | 0.200      | 0.002            | 0.842      |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.034               | 0.221      | 0.052       | 0.077      | 0.646                         | 2.881      | 0.519            | 0.004      |
| USRSTU → STUIDF                            | 0.381               | 0.469      | 0.085       | 0.100      | 4.470                         | 4.690      | 0.000            | 0.000      |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.205               | 0.074      | 0.055       | 0.073      | 3.750                         | 1.018      | 0.000            | 0.309      |
| <i>Path coefficients: indirect effects</i> |                     |            |             |            |                               |            |                  |            |
| USRSOC → STULOY                            | 0.192               | 0.012      | 0.062       | 0.062      | 3.088                         | 0.201      | 0.002            | 0.841      |
| USRSTU → STULOY                            | 0.257               | 0.297      | 0.058       | 0.066      | 4.437                         | 4.500      | 0.000            | 0.000      |

same results were obtained. However, when students were grouped according to gender, country and perception of the importance of USR, significant differences in the relationships were found.

Multi-group analysis by gender indicated differences in the significance of the relationships. For female students, practicing USR toward students leads to loyalty both directly and through identification with the university. However, for male students, loyalty is not achieved directly by USR practices toward students, but rather through identification. Similarly, due to cultural differences, grouping by country also resulted in differences in the significance of the relationships. Colombian students were more affected by USR toward society, while USR toward students led to a greater effect among Lebanese students. As per Hofstede's model of individualism, this discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that the society in Colombia is considered more collectivistic when compared to the individualistic society in Lebanon.

Cluster analysis was used to group students according to their perceived importance of USR. Significant differences in these relationships were identified. In particular, students who perceive social responsibility of high importance are more affected by socially responsible actions toward society leading to student–university identification, which in turn leads to loyalty. However, for students who perceive SR of low importance, loyalty can be achieved directly through USR toward society and not through identification. Hence, for these students, the relationship between USR toward society and loyalty is partially mediated by identification. This suggests that other factors such as student satisfaction, university image and service quality may explain the relationship between USR toward society and loyalty. However, USR toward students does not affect students with low perception of SR directly, but rather through student–university identification, which fully mediates this relationship.

USR in its two dimensions leads to student loyalty directly or through student identification regardless of differences in gender, country or perceived importance of USR. However, these factors influence the significance of the relationships among USR toward students, USR toward society, student identification and loyalty.

The proposed model and the deduced effects and relationships have vital practical implications, since managers of HEIs can take advantage of identifying the drivers that affect student loyalty. It will help them make informed decisions and direct their efforts toward the factors that mostly influence the desired outcomes. They can design and implement social responsibility programs and activities targeted toward students or toward society, while taking into account the effect of the gender, the level of individualism/collectivism of the society, and the perceived importance of SR on achieving student loyalty.

Accordingly, USR appears to be a pivotal marketing tool to meet the main internal stakeholders' needs and to achieve student identification and loyalty, being key factors that impact student enrollment and retention (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). This translates into a competitive advantage that will leverage universities' efforts to defeat market competitiveness.

In addition, HEIs cannot escape the impact of global environmental and social challenges, nor their role in responding to these changes. This objective can be achieved by implementing ethical and socially responsible practices and values into their “management, teaching, research and extension” (Giuffré and Ratto, 2014), which will optimize their contribution to building sustainable societies.

This study is a valuable contribution to the scarce literature on USR and the lack of research on the interplay between USR and student–university identification. It establishes USR as an antecedent to student–university identification and loyalty. This, in turn, translates into a vital marketing tool that can enhance universities' recruitment and retention efforts (Sánchez-Hernández and Mainardes, 2016). In addition, this study was conducted in unique and distinct contexts in two countries considered as emerging

economies, and it relies on original primary data. Thus, it can serve as a laboratory for both theory testing and theory building (Singh *et al.*, 2017; Singh and Gaur, 2009, 2013). Moreover, the cross-cultural analysis performed between two countries from diverse cultural backgrounds validates the results.

Nonetheless, this paper has some limitations. Since some of the outcomes can be attributed to the university's culture, assessing the model through a more varied sample population from different cultural backgrounds would entail more universal results and the ability to generalize the causality relationship between USR and student identification and loyalty. In addition, the partial mediation effect on the relationship between USR and student loyalty reveals the presence of other determinants for student loyalty. Therefore, there is a crucial need for further studies that tackle the relationship between USR and other antecedents to detect factors which are vital to students (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Elliott and Shin, 2002).

To conclude, USR can no longer be disregarded by academics and university administrators. Further research in this area is required to deepen knowledge of USR and its impact on students' attitudes and perceptions of university-related outcomes such as perception of university image and quality of service, as well as student satisfaction. Such understanding will eventually determine the practical applications and inferences that will support the HEIs' survival and progress.

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