

The Roles of Local Employment and Environmental Sustainability on Business Performance: The Mediating Role of Brand Image in The Modern Trade Business in Rural Areas in Thailand

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Abstract

The concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been raised and highlighted in many industries to help build society's sustainable prosperity. In particular, the modern trade business is among Thailand's sectors that have begun incorporating SDGs in business activities. However, whether the SDGs adopted by the modern trade business affect the company image and performance is still an issue that needs to be explored. In response to these research questions, this study aims to investigate the influence of modern trade businesses' local employment and environmental sustainability practices on the brand image and business performance perceived by customers. In this research, stratified random sampling was employed for sample selection. Survey data were collected from customers of modern trade stores located in rural areas of five cities in the central region of Thailand, namely Nakorn Pathom, Samut Songkhram, Ayudhaya, Kanchanaburi, and Lop Buri. The data were derived from 557 customers and 52 managers from 52 stores. Partial least squares structural equation modeling will be used in the data analysis. The PLS-SEM results showed that local employment ($\beta=0.087$; $p=0.018$) and environmental responsibility ($\beta=0.132$; $p<0.001$) could directly promote business performance. Sobel's test results demonstrated that business performance could also be indirectly promoted by fostering brand image through both local employment ($t=6.359$; $p<0.001$) and environmental responsibility ($t=6.324$; $p<0.001$). This research contributed new and additional knowledge and expanded the concept of the Corporate social responsibility (CSR) theory to the context of the modern trade business that was still underexplored.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Local Employment, Environmental Responsibility, Business Performance, Brand Image, Modern Trade Business

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บทบาทของการจ้างงานในท้องถิ่นและความยั่งยืนของสิ่งแวดล้อมต่อผลการดำเนินงานธุรกิจ:
บทบาทสื่อกลางของภาพลักษณ์ของแบรนด์ในธุรกิจการค้าสมัยใหม่
ในพื้นที่ชนบทของประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

แนวคิดของเป้าหมายการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน (SDGs) ได้รับการหยิบยกและให้ความสำคัญในหลายอุตสาหกรรม เพื่อช่วยสร้างความเจริญรุ่งเรืองอย่างยั่งยืนให้กับสังคม โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งธุรกิจการค้าสมัยใหม่เป็นหนึ่งในภาคส่วนของประเทศไทยที่เริ่มนำ SDGs ไปใช้กับกิจกรรมทางธุรกิจ อย่างไรก็ตาม SDGs ที่ธุรกิจการค้าสมัยใหม่นำมาใช้จะส่งผลกระทบต่อภาพลักษณ์และผลประกอบการของบริษัทหรือไม่นั้นยังคงเป็นประเด็นที่ต้องติดตามกันต่อไป เพื่อตอบคำถามการวิจัยเหล่านี้ การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอิทธิพลของการจ้างงานในท้องถิ่นของธุรกิจการค้าสมัยใหม่และแนวทางปฏิบัติด้านความยั่งยืนด้านสิ่งแวดล้อมที่มีต่อภาพลักษณ์ของแบรนด์และผลการดำเนินงานทางธุรกิจที่ถูกรับรู้ ในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ใช้การสุ่มแบบแบ่งชั้นภูมิในการคัดเลือกตัวอย่าง ข้อมูลการสำรวจรวบรวมจากลูกค้าของร้านค้าสมัยใหม่ที่ตั้งอยู่ในพื้นที่ชนบทของ 5 เมืองในภาคกลางของประเทศไทย ได้แก่ นครปฐม สมุทรสงคราม อยุธยา กาญจนบุรี และลพบุรี ข้อมูลได้มาจากลูกค้า 557 รายและผู้จัดการ 52 รายจาก 52 ร้านค้า Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) ถูกนำมาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล ผลลัพธ์ของ PLS-SEM แสดงให้เห็นว่าการจ้างงานในท้องถิ่น ($\beta=0.087$; $p=0.018$) และความรับผิดชอบต่อสิ่งแวดล้อม ($\beta=0.132$; $p<0.001$) สามารถส่งเสริมผลการดำเนินงานทางธุรกิจได้โดยตรง ผลของ Sobel Test แสดงให้เห็นว่าผลการดำเนินงานทางธุรกิจสามารถถูกส่งเสริมทางอ้อมได้ด้วยการส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์ของแบรนด์ผ่านการจ้างงานในท้องถิ่น ($t=6.359$; $p<0.001$) และความรับผิดชอบต่อสิ่งแวดล้อม ($t=6.324$; $p<0.001$) งานวิจัยนี้ก่อให้เกิดความรู้ใหม่และเพิ่มเติมและขยายแนวคิดของทฤษฎีความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคม (CSR) ไปสู่บริบทของธุรกิจการค้าสมัยใหม่ที่ยังไม่ถูกศึกษา

คำสำคัญ: ความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กร (CSR) การจ้างงานในท้องถิ่น ความรับผิดชอบต่อสิ่งแวดล้อม
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Introduction

The growing interest in healthy and sustainable living and environmental concerns, such as food security, global warming, and climate change, have collective impacts on the living of humans and animals (Hák, Janoušková, & Moldan, 2016; Moyer & Hedden, 2020). A topic that has often been raised and draws attention from scholars is how to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 to gain a better and more sustainable future for all humanity (Hák et al., 2016; Sachs et al., 2019). The concept of SDGs is the integration of 17 goals with 69 targets and 232 specific indicators signaling a paradigm shift for all humanity and the world in human, social, and environmental development, which are 1) no poverty, 2) zero hunger, 3) good health and well-being, 4) quality education, 5) gender equality, 6) clean water and sanitation, 7) affordable and clean energy, 8) decent work and economic growth, 9) industry, innovation, and infrastructure, 10) reduced inequality, 11) sustainable cities and communities, 12) responsible consumption and production, 13) climate action, 14) life below water, 15) life on land, 16) peace, justice, and strong institutions, 17) partnerships for the goals (Salvia, Leal Filho, Brandli, & Griebeler, 2019; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017). The concept of SDGs has drawn not only the interest of governments and their agents but also businesses worldwide. Since consumers have become more sophisticated and responsible for their society and the surrounding environment, firms cannot escape from developing specific actions and campaigns to facilitate their concerns about their communities and surrounding natural environments (Pawaskar, Raut, & Gardas, 2018). These corporates' actions and campaigns maximize their customers' satisfaction allowing them to achieve lasting business success (Pizzi, Rosati, & Venturelli, 2021; Rosati & Faria, 2019). Firms use various environmental and social-friendly actions as marketing strategies to develop consumers' positive attitudes and emotions, leading to long-term relationships and support for their businesses (Fatima & Elbanna, 2022; Ratasuk, 2021). In Thailand, modern trade businesses, such as department stores, discount stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores, like other businesses, employ environmentally and socially beneficial practices as their tools to create a good brand reputation and image to gain support from consumers, which is essential to their success (Wagner, Bicen, & Hall, 2008). Thailand's modern trade industry has grown significantly in the past years and remains in the 1st place among ASEAN nations in terms of market size, margin, and store ratio to population (Francois, Kuijpers, Potia, & Razdan, 2022; Ratasuk, 2021; Tunpaiboon, 2021). According to Tunpaiboon (2021),

the modern trade business in Thailand generated a total value of 2.8 trillion baht increasing 7.7% from the year before, accounting for 16.5% of the country's GDP in 2019, and continued to grow in the following years, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since modern trade businesses expand not only in urban but also in rural areas throughout the country, they need significant support from local communities where their stores are located, particularly in rural areas where people tend to have a closer relationship with their community (Chipp et al., 2011; Fun, Chiun, Songan, & Nair, 2014). Among social-friendly activities used by modern trade businesses, promoting economic benefits and the well-being of society by creating decent jobs and addressing environmental concerns are often used as effective CSR strategies to encourage a good relationship with local communities (Moiescu, 2015). These activities are harmonized with several goals of the SDGs. For example, their local employment and job creation accommodate several goals: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequality, and sustainable cities and communities (Barbier & Burgess, 2020; Dantas et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2019). The environmental sustainability activities also address many goals, such as good health and well-being, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, and life on land (Elder & Olsen, 2019; Omisore, 2018; Parmentola, Petrillo, Tutore, & De Felice, 2022).

However, it is still skeptical whether the practices can boost their business performance because, even though there is research on the impact of corporate environmental sustainability practices on business performance, it is still limited in the context of the modern trade business, particularly in rural areas in Thailand. Also, research on local corporate employment in the literature is still limited, particularly in its contributions to business performance in the modern trade business context.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the roles of local corporate employment and environmental sustainability in promoting business performance in the modern trade business in rural areas. The mediating roles of the brand image were added to the research model to be studied as the mechanism of the proposed relationships. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept was also employed to explain the proposed relationships. The results are expected to provide insightful knowledge to verify whether business sustainable development practices are beneficial in the context of modern trade business. The results are expected to provide some guidelines for modern trade businesses to improve their brand image and business performance through SDGs practices.

Literature Review

This study investigated the impacts of local employment and environmental responsibility actions of modern trade businesses in rural areas in Thailand on their business performance and the mediating roles of their brand image on corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Theories of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to activities, practices, and the status of businesses that are linked to their obligations to their stakeholders and the society and communities they operate (Currás-Pérez, Dolz-Dolz, Miquel-Romero, & Sánchez-García, 2018; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018). The main idea is that a company should not only make a profit but do more than legal requirements to ethically benefit the surrounding community (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). It is a management concept whereby firms integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and respond to their stakeholders, who are more than their shareholders. The Stakeholder Theory found by Freeman (2001), focusing on the relationships between a business and all its stakeholders, such as customers, investors, employees, suppliers, and communities, argues that a firm should create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. Many studies describe CSR in multidimensional terms. For example, Carroll (1991) viewed CSR as a four-leveled pyramid consisting of economic, legal, environmental, and philanthropic dimensions from the bottom to the top of the pyramid, and the higher levels cannot be performed unless the lower level is achieved. The economic extent is the firms' economic responsibilities to their stakeholders, for example, making a return on investment to shareholders, creating economic growth and decent jobs for society, and offering innovative and quality products to customers, while the legal dimension is their responsibilities to always comply with the laws on whatever they do and wherever they go (Carroll, 1991; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018). The environmental or ethical dimension is their responsibility to perform more than legal requirements, for example, using clean energy in their operations and stopping providing environmentally unfriendly packaging, and finally, the philanthropic dimension is their responsibility to promote social welfare (Carroll, 1991; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018). There are still many other CSR-related theories. For example, the instrumental theory explains that corporates achieve monetary objectives by conducting social activities as marketing tools to satisfy and value shareholders long-term (Garriga & Melé, 2004). And the political theory highlights businesses' reasonable social power exploitation in the political fields (Frynas & Stephens, 2015).

In the modern trade business, consumers tend to blame modern retailers for potential harm to the natural environment and that their operations and production create waste and pollution, despite their compliance with the laws, causing concerns about how businesses take responsibility for local communities economically (Wagner et al., 2008). Besides, they are allegedly blamed for forcing local companies to go out of business, which negatively impacts their image and needs to be addressed (Coe & Wrigley, 2017; Talari, 2017; Wagner et al., 2008). To address this issue, modern trade businesses campaign for economic development in all communities they go, which means not only responding to the benefits and commitments to shareholders, but also the development of the economy in which a company operates, for example investing in infrastructure, creating jobs, and providing skills development to local labor (Jonikas, 2014).

Business Performance

Business Performance (BPM) is a set of metrics indicating the efficiency and effectiveness of the operations of businesses as a whole, reflecting how well they exploit their resources to achieve their goals (Anabila, 2020; Marr & Schiuma, 2003; Pathiranage, 2019). BPM, as a complex variable, can be measured in several dimensions, such as financial and non-finance performance, marketing performance, innovation performance, quality performance, customer satisfaction, market share, sales growth, and profitability (Kafetzopoulos, Psomas, & Skalkos, 2019; Nabass & Abdallah, 2018). It is the desired outcome for all businesses that have been studied broadly on what can be its potential antecedents (Kafetzopoulos et al., 2019; Pathiranage, 2019; Ribeiro-Navarrete, Botella-Carrubi, Palacios-Marqués, & Orero-Blat, 2021). For example, Pathiranage (2019) argued that organizational culture could positively influence business performance. Bakator, Petrović, Borić, and Đalić (2019) also argued that human resource management has a positive impact on overall business performance. According to Akintimehin et al. (2019), social capital significantly affected the business performance of businesses in the Nigerian informal sector. In addition, Abushaikh, Salhieh, and Towers (2018) found an indirect relationship between warehouse waste reduction and business performance via warehouse operational and distribution performance.

Local Employment

Local employment refers to a business practice that employs people living in the communities where their businesses operate (Tackie, Chen, Ahakwa, Atingabili, & Ansah, 2022; Tang, 2010). This business practice promotes the local economy by not only bringing in investment but also creating jobs and developing human resources in local communities, which support the local economy and improve the standard of living of local people (Chen, 2021; Tackie et al., 2022). The study by Tackie et al. (2022) found that local employment significantly reduces poverty in Ghana. Tang (2010) studied the roles of local employment of Chinese companies in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and found that local employment not only creates jobs for local people but also promotes the development of local human resources. Many businesses use local employment as a critical economic responsibility which is a crucial part of their CSR strategies to create positive emotions and attitudes toward their companies, brands, and products for business support (Fox, 2004; Luetkenhorst, 2004; MacGregor, Espinach, & Fontrodona, 2007; Madрахimova, 2013; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018).

Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability refers to the responsibility for conserving natural resources and protecting global ecosystems by supporting health and well-being, now and in the future (Dantas et al., 2021; Kopnina, 2020; Kour et al., 2020). In this case, it refers to the responsibility of corporates to sustain the environment and natural surroundings in the communities where they do business. Thus, the concept of corporate environmental responsibility has been chosen and investigated as environmental sustainability in this study. Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER) refers to business practices that represent the commitment of firms to conduct their businesses in environment-friendly ways and minimize damages and effects to surrounding natural environments that come from their operations (DesJardins, 1998; Lenzen & Murray, 2010). According to the SDGs concept, profit and environmental responsibility should go together to achieve business and social sustainability (Li, Liao, & Albitar, 2020; Qin, Harrison, & Chen, 2019). Companies employ it as an essential part of CSR campaigns to enhance several positive business outcomes since profit maximization is no longer the only goal they must achieve (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Ratasuk, 2021). Wu, Liang, and Zhang (2020) found that CER positively affects Chinese firms' innovation performance. According to Xu, Lu, Lin, and Li (2021), CER was found to have a positive

impact on the financial performance, such as Return of Equity (ROE) and Economic Added Value (EVA), of firms in the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry.

Brand Image

Brand image refers to the perception of brands in the mind of customers associated with their direct and indirect experience with products and services and other brand associations, such as advertising and promotion, packaging, who use the brand, and which occasions and situations the brand is used (Patterson, 1999; Prabowo, 2019; Ratasuk, 2021; Wijaya, 2013). Previous research shows that brand image significantly influences several desired business outcomes, for example, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and customer repurchase intentions (Konuk, 2018; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Ratasuk & Gajesanand, 2020). Ratasuk and Buranasompob (2021) found a positive contribution of brand image on customer repurchase intentions in convenience-store coffee shops in Bangkok. The study by L.-C. Huang, Gao, and Hsu (2019) showed significant positive effects of brand image on perceived value and repurchase intention in ecotourism. And DAM and DAM (2021) revealed a positive influence of brand image on customer satisfaction of customers of supermarkets in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Hypotheses Development

All hypotheses were developed on the ground of the CSR theory as follows:

Local employment and business performance

As an economic CSR practice, local corporate employment is expected to promote community economic well-being, enhancing customers' positive attitudes toward businesses (De Grosbois, 2012; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Ndubisi, Zhai, & Lai, 2021). According to the CSR theories, once positive attitudes and emotions of stakeholders are developed, they tend to support the businesses. Customers, a major stakeholder of businesses, are willing and continue to support businesses when their pleasant emotion develops, leading to better business performance, mainly marketing and financial performance (J.-W. Huang, Li, & Yen, 2016; Waheed & Zhang, 2020). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H1: Local employment positively affects business performance

Environmental responsibility and business performance

Among several corporate practices that are compatible with the concept of sustainable development goals (SDGs), corporate environmental responsibility is one of the most common ones that is widely adopted by businesses in many industries worldwide (Dahlmann, Stubbs, Griggs, & Morrell, 2019; Rashed & Shah, 2021). The primary purpose of taking environmental responsibility actions is to create positive attitudes and emotions toward their businesses which are essential for achieving several preferred business outcomes, such as repurchase intentions, brand loyalty, customer trust, and customer satisfaction, indicating the performance of their businesses (Bacinello, Tontini, & Alberton, 2020; Battisti & Perry, 2011; Ngwakwe, 2009; Shabbir & Wisdom, 2020). Shabbir and Wisdom (2020) found that environmental responsibility positively influences the financial performance of Nigerian manufacturing firms, although it is insignificant and positively and significantly affects their profitability. The study by Halme, Rintamäki, Knudsen, Lankoski, and Kuisma (2020) revealed a significant positive effect of environmental performance on business competitiveness. Hence, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H2: Environmental responsibility positively affects business performance

The mediation of brand image on the impacts of local employment and environmental responsibility on business performance

Given that local corporate employment and environmental responsibility can be used as CSR practices, they are expected to enhance the brand image of businesses (Bashir & Amir, 2019; Lu, Ren, Zhang, Wang, et al., 2020; Ratasuk, 2021). And a good brand image should promote business performance by fostering desired business outcomes, for example, customer trust, customer satisfaction, customer repurchase intentions, and brand loyalty, which are known to be good indicators of business performance (Bashir & Amir, 2019; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Ratasuk, 2021). According to Negara, Mantikei, Christa, and Sintani (2020), brand image and reputation significantly impact logistics companies' business performance. Bashir and Amir (2019) revealed evidence of the mediating role of brand image on the relationship between economic CSR activities and customer satisfaction in hotels in Pakistan. Moreover, Lu, Ren, Zhang, Rong, et al. (2020) found a significant mediation of corporate image on the association between CSR dimensions and SMEs' organizational performance. Thereby, the following hypotheses were proposed.

H3: Brand image positively mediates the relationship between local employment and business performance

H4: Brand image positively mediates the relationship between environmental responsibility and business performance

Methodology

Sample and data collection procedure

Since the context of this study focuses on customers of modern trade businesses in rural areas in Thailand, survey data were collected from customers and managers of modern trade stores located in rural areas of five cities in the central region of Thailand, namely Nakorn Pathom, Samut Songkhram, Ayudhaya, Kanchanaburi, and Lopburi. The samples were selected using a stratified random sampling method. Ten modern trade stores were randomly selected in each city, and in each selected store, a manager was asked to participate in the study, and 12 customers of each store were randomly approached. Therefore, there was a total of 50 managers and 600 customers approached in this study. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to at least ten modern trade stores in each city. A set of questionnaires was employed in a modern trade store, including a questionnaire for a store manager and twelve questionnaires for customers. The questionnaires include a cover letter stating clearly the research objectives and instructions. Both questionnaires for managers and customers contain two main parts: participants' characteristics and question sets measuring participants' attitudes toward latent variables in the research model. Customers measured local employment, environmental responsibility, and brand image, while store managers measured business performance. The survey was voluntary, and the collected data were held anonymously.

Measurements

All variables were measured using scales adapted from previous studies that have been proven valid and reliable. All question items measuring each variable were rated on a five-point Likert scale, including (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

Local employment was measured by customers using the four-item scale adapted from Moisescu (2015). Sample question items are "This business increases employment in local communities" and "This business replaces existing jobs with higher wage jobs in local communities." Environmental responsibility was assessed by customers using the four-item scale adapted from Wang, Hu, and Zhang (2020). Sample question items are "This business performs energy saving." and "This business releases carbon emission."

Brand image was measured by customers using the four-item scale adapted from Alguacil, García-Fernández, Calabuig, and Gálvez-Ruiz (2021). Sample question items are " Brand Name ethically does business." and "This brand is persuasive and shrewd."

Store managers measured business performance using the four-item scale adapted from Anabila (2020). Sample items are " Market share of our business unit has increased in last three years" and "Sales of our business unit have increased in last three years."

Control Variables

Five control variables, namely gender, age, education, income, period of residence, and local familiarity, were included in this study. Scholars widely employ these demographic variables to affect consumer behaviors in business and management contexts.

Data analysis

The data collected from managers and customers of each store were computed before structural equation modeling analysis. This study employed partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the proposed research model. PLS integrates a principal component analysis (PCA), path analysis, and a set of regressions to estimate the model's paths standardized regression coefficients, and measurement items' factor loadings (Chin, 1998; Lin et al., 2020). Unlike others, PLS effectively produces more accurate results when the data is from a small sample or not normally distributed than other structural equation modeling techniques (Joe F Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012). WarpPLS 8.0 program is selected because it is the latest version that has been improved from previous versions in many functions. Before the PLS-SEM proceeds, descriptive statistics, validity and reliability tests, normality tests, multicollinearity tests, and model-fit indices are used to evaluate the model quality.

Results

A total of 557 valid completed customer and 50 valid completed manager questionnaires were returned, accounting for a 100% and a 92.83 % response rate, respectively. The descriptive statistics of customer characteristics and behaviors, including gender, age, education, income, residential period, community familiarity, and store visit, are reported in Table 1. The sample includes 179 male participants (32.14%), 75 female participants (13.46%), and 303 LGBT (54.40%). Three hundred sixty-two participants (64.99%) are 18 to 25 years old, and 113 (20.29%) are 26 to 35. Three hundred

sixty participants (64.63%) have an undergraduate degree, and 104 (18.67%) have a high school diploma. Two hundred twenty-eight participants (40.93%) earn less than 10,000 Baht per month, and 210 (37.70%) earn between 10,001 to 20,000 Baht per month. A hundred seventy-six participants (31.60%) have resided in their communities for 2 to 5 years, and 135 (24.24%) have resided in the community for 1 to 2 years. Two hundred fifty-one participants (45.06%) have an average level of community familiarity, and 117 (21.01%) have a high level of community familiarity. Two hundred and six participants (36.98%) visit modern trade stores 2 to 3 times a week, and 145 (26.03%) visit modern trade stores more than five times a week.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Characteristics		Descriptive Statistics
Gender	Male	179 (32.14%)
	Female	75 (13.46%)
	LGBT	303 (54.40%)
Age	18 to 25 years old	362 (64.99%)
	26 to 35 years old	113 (20.29%)
	36 to 45 years old	61 (10.95%)
	46 to 60 years old	20 (3.59%)
	61 years old and older	1 (0.18%)
Education	Lower than high school	26 (4.67%)
	High school	104 (18.67%)
	Associate degree	49 (8.80%)
	Undergraduate degree	360 (64.63%)
	Master degree	14 (2.51%)
	Doctoral degree	4 (0.72%)
Income (per month)	Less than 10,000 Baht	228 (40.93%)
	10,001 to 20,000 Baht	210 (37.70%)
	20,001 to 30,000 Baht	84 (15.08%)
	30,001 to 40,000 Baht	21 (3.77%)
	40,001 to 50,000 Baht	6 (1.08%)
	More than 50,000 Baht	8 (1.44%)
Residential period	Less than one year	97 (17.41%)

Table 1: Sample characteristics (Continue)

Descriptive Statistics		
	1 to 2 years	135 (24.24%)
	2 to 5 years	176 (31.60%)
	5 to 10 years	82 (14.72%)
	10 to 20 years	36 (6.46%)
	Longer than 20 years	31 (5.57%)
Community familiarity	Very low	59 (10.59%)
	low	86 (15.44%)
	Average	251 (45.06%)
	high	117 (21.01%)
	Very high	44 (7.90%)
Store visit	Less than once a week	42 (7.54%)
	One time a week	54 (9.69%)
	2 to 3 times a week	206 (36.98%)
	4 to 5 times a week	110 (19.75%)
	More than five times a week	145 (26.03%)

The overall model quality was tested in various dimensions to ensure qualified data for running PLS-SEM: Firstly, the convergent validity was tested using factor loading values. It is ideal if the values are at least 0.7 (Kock, 2015). Table 2 shows that none of the latent variables' factor loadings was lower than 0.7, which means the model's convergent validity was ideal.

Table 2: Indicator loadings and cross-loadings of latent variables

	BPM	Local	CER	BI
BPM 1	(0.768)	0.008	0.118	-0.110
BPM 2	(0.864)	0.020	0.029	0.027
BPM 3	(0.884)	0.008	-0.077	0.021
BPM 4	(0.869)	-0.035	-0.056	0.050
Local 1	-0.043	(0.808)	0.060	0.058
Local 2	0.006	(0.955)	-0.036	-0.011
Local 3	0.038	(0.856)	0.024	-0.039
Local 4	-0.004	(0.955)	-0.037	-0.003

**Table 2:** Indicator loadings and cross-loadings of latent variables (Continue)

	BPM	Local	CER	BI
CER 1	0.141	-0.081	(0.815)	-0.187
CER 2	-0.199	-0.066	(0.808)	0.247
CER 3	0.003	0.069	(0.864)	-0.023
CER 4	0.051	0.069	(0.854)	-0.032
BI 1	-0.070	0.031	0.038	(0.857)
BI 2	-0.005	0.025	-0.028	(0.840)
BI 3	0.041	-0.050	0.041	(0.846)
BI 4	0.035	-0.007	-0.053	(0.836)

Note: BPM= business performance, Local= local employment, CER= corporate environmental responsibility, and BI=brand image.

Secondly, the discriminant validity was also tested by comparing each variable' s square root of average variance extracted (AVE) with its correlations with other variables. According to Kock (2015) , its discriminant validity is satisfactory as long as each variable' s square root of average variance extracted (AVE) is higher than all correlations with other variables. Table 3 shows that the square root values of all variables' AVEs are higher than their other correlations indicating an acceptable level of discriminant validity (J.F. Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2017). Thirdly, the reliability was tested using Cronbach' s alpha and composite reliability coefficients, which are suggested to be acceptable when they are no less than 0.7 (Hair Jr, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014; McNeish, 2018) . As presented in table 3, none of Cronbach' s alpha and composite reliability coefficients were lower than 0. 7, which means the reliability was satisfactory. Fourthly, the multicollinearity was tested using the full variance inflation factor (VIF) values, which should not be over 3. 3 to be ideal and 5 to be acceptable (Kock & Lynn, 2012; Senaviratna & Cooray, 2019) . Table 3 shows that none of the full VIF reaches 3. 3, indicating no sign of a severe multicollinearity issue. Lastly, all of the full VIF values are lower than 3.3 can also indicate that common method bias (CMB)is not a serious issue (J.F. Hair et al., 2017; Kock, 2017).

Table 3: Variables' correlations and reliability

	BPM	Local	CER	BI	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
BPM	(0.848)										
Local	0.370 **	(0.896)									

Table 3: Variables' correlations and reliability (Continue)

	BPM	Local	CER	BI	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
CER	0.387 **	0.545**	(0.836)								
BI	0.518 **	0.518**	0.525**	(0.845)							
Gender	- 0.072	-0.016	-0.036	-0.090	(1.000)						
Age	0.006	0.091**	0.096**	0.042	0.053	(1.000)					
Edu	0.050	-0.027	0.019	0.014	-0.117**	- 0.134**	(1.000)				
Income	0.005	0.054*	0.074**	0.002	0.051	0.516**	0.153**	(1.000)			
Period	0.041	0.133*	0.025	0.077*	0.041	0.337**	- 0.191**	0.159**	(1.000)		
Fam	0.102 *	0.224**	0.158**	0.132* *	0.046	0.273**	- 0.161**	0.201**	0.527* *	(1.000)	
Visit	0.044	0.172**	0.130**	0.208* *	-0.063	0.129**	-0.066	0.163**	0.281* *	0.315* *	(1.000)
Composite Reliability	0.911	0.942	0.902	0.909	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Cronbach's alpha	0.868	0.916	0.856	0.866	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Full Collin. VIF	1.433	1.650	1.661	1.837	1.036	1.577	1.154	1.516	1.532	1.532	1.206

Note: ** and * mean a p-value of <0.01 and ≤0.05, respectively; BPM=business performance, Local=local employment, CER=corporate environmental responsibility, BI=brand image, Gender=gender, Age=age, Edu=education, Income=income, Period=residential period, Fam=community familiarity, and Visit=store visit.

Table 4 shows the normality test results presenting that not all variables were normally distributed, which confirm that PLS-SEM is appropriate for this research as recommended by Sarstedt, Hair Jr, Cheah, Becker, and Ringle (2019)

Table 4: Normality Test Results

	BPM	Local	CER	BI	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
Normal-JB	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Normal-RJB	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Note: BPM=business performance, Local=local employment, CER=corporate environmental responsibility, BI=brand image, Gender=gender, Age=age, Edu=education, Income=income, Period=residential period, Fam=community familiarity, and Visit=store visit.

Furthermore, the model's overall quality was tested using the ten model-fit indices shown in Table 5 (Kock, 2017). The results show that all indices were satisfactory, indicating that this research model has sufficient quality.

Table 5: PLS-SEM's model fit indices

Model fit indices	Coefficient	Result
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.133**	Significant
Average R-square (ARS)	0.349**	Significant
Average adjusted R-square (AARS)	0.342**	Significant
Average variance inflation factor (AVIF)	1.326	Ideally
Average full variance inflation factor (AFVIF)	1.467	Ideally
Tenenhaus GoF index (GoF)	0.562	Large
Simpson's paradox ratio (SPR)	0.917	Acceptable
R-square contribution ratio (RSCR)	1.000	Ideally
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	1.000	Acceptable
Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio (NLBCDR)	0.833	Acceptable

Note: ** means a p-value of ≤ 0.01

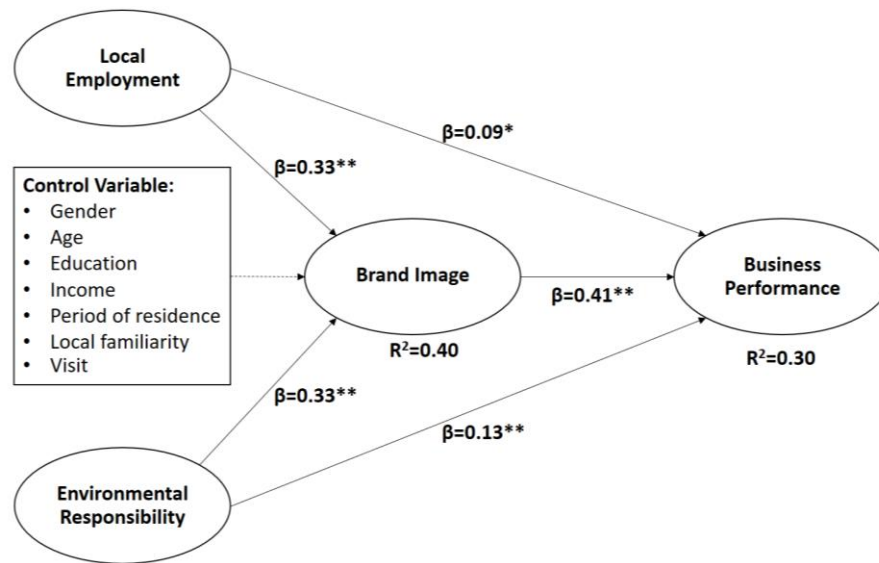


Figure 1: Structural equation model results

Note: ** and * mean a p-value of ≤ 0.01 and ≤ 0.05 , respectively.

Table 6: Path Coefficient

	Local	Envi	Image	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
BPM	0.087	0.132	0.407							
Image	0.087	0.132	0.407	0.087	0.132	0.407	0.087	0.132	0.407	0.087

Note: BPM= business performance, Local= local employment, CER= corporate environmental responsibility, BI= brand image, Gender= gender, Age= age, Edu= education, Income= income, Period=residential period, Fam=community familiarity, and Visit=store visit.

Table 7: Standard Errors

	Local	Envi	Image	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
BPM	0.042	0.041	0.040							
Image	0.041	0.041		0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042

Note: BPM= business performance, Local= local employment, CER= corporate environmental responsibility, BI= brand image, Gender= gender, Age= age, Edu= education, Income= income, Period=residential period, Fam=community familiarity, and Visit=store visit.

**Table 8:** P-Value

	Local	Envi	Image	Gender	Age	Edu	Income	Period	Fam	Visit
BPM	0.018	<0.001	<0.001							
Image	<0.001	<0.001		0.096	0.490	0.015	0.442	0.256	0.308	0.006

Note: BPM=business performance, Local=local employment, CER=corporate environmental responsibility, BI=brand image, Gender=gender, Age=age, Edu=education, Income=income, Period=residential period, Fam=community familiarity, and Visit=store visit.

The PLS-SEM results are presented in figure 2 and explained in detail as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Local employment is positively associated with business performance. The results showed a significant positive association between the two variables ($\beta=0.087$; $p=0.018$). Thereby, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2: Environmental responsibility is positively associated with business performance. The results showed a significant positive association between the two variables ($\beta=0.132$; $p<0.001$). Thereby, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3: Brand image positively mediates the relationship between local employment and business performance. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between local employment and brand image ($\beta=0.334$; $p<0.001$) and a significant positive relationship between brand image and business performance ($\beta=0.407$; $p<0.001$). Also, according to the results from the Sobel test suggested by Hayes and Preacher (2014), brand image has significant positive mediation on the relationship ($t=6.359$; $p<0.001$). As a result, referring to hypothesis 1 and the Sobel test result, this can be concluded that brand image partially mediates the relationship between local employment and business performance. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was confirmed.

Hypothesis 4: Brand image positively mediates the relationship between environmental responsibility and business performance. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between environmental responsibility and brand image ($\beta=0.331$; $p<0.001$) and a significant positive relationship between brand image and business performance ($\beta=0.407$; $p<0.001$). Also, according to the results from the Sobel test suggested by Hayes and Preacher (2014), brand image has significant positive mediation on the relationship ($t=6.324$; $p<0.001$). As a result, referring to hypothesis 2 and the Sobel test result, this can be concluded that brand image partially mediates the relationship between environmental responsibility and business performance. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was confirmed.

Moreover, the effects of control variables on the brand image were also reported. The findings of all seven control variables showed that only education ($\beta=0.090$; $p=0.015$) and store visits ($\beta=0.104$; $p=0.006$) are positively and significantly associated with brand image.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the impacts of business practices employed by modern trade businesses as CSR strategies, including local employment and environmental responsibility, which are expected to respond to the need for SDGs trends on business performance and the mediating role of brand image on the ground of a CSR theory like the stakeholder theory.

The results showed that local employment and environmental responsibility could affect business performance, as explained by the theory, which can be interpreted in modern trade stores where customers perceive higher levels of local corporate employment and environmental responsibility tend to achieve higher business performance. The reason behind this may be that local employment and eco-friendly practices benefit their communities economically and environmentally by providing decent jobs to people in their communities, improving their economic well-being, and saving and sustaining their natural environments.

The benefits of local employment are in correspondence with several SDGs, including no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequality, and sustainable cities and communities, as mentioned earlier (Barbier & Burgess, 2020; Dantas et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2019). The benefits of environmental sustainability practices are also concurrent with good health and well-being, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, and life on land (Elder & Olsen, 2019; Omisore, 2018; Parmentola, Petrillo, Tutore, & De Felice, 2022).

As a result, customers' positive attitudes and emotions toward the businesses are fostered and lead to sustainable business support, as explained by CSR. These two direct relationships are aligned with prior research (Long & Lin, 2018; Shabbir & Wisdom, 2020). For example, Torugsa, O'Donohue, and Hecker (2013) found that the economic dimension of CSR, including local employment, is essential to sustainable long-term financial success for Australian SMEs. The study by Li et al. (2020) revealed a positive impact of environmental responsibility on Chinese firms' competitive advantages, innovation, and business value.



The positive mediating roles of the brand image reflect the importance of local corporate employment and environmental responsibility in creating customers' satisfaction and positive attitudes and emotions toward businesses and their brands, leading to continuing to support the companies, which may lead to other preferred outcomes, such as repurchase intentions and brand loyalty that take part in accelerating businesses' performance. This phenomenon is consistent with several prior CSR studies (Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Ratasuk, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). For example, Mohammed and Rashid (2018) found that economic CSR, which includes corporation job creation or local employment and other activities that promote economic welfare, and ethical CSR, which consists of all corporate environmental responsibility practices, enhance businesses' brand image. Ratasuk (2021) also found a positive impact of the no-plastic bag campaign on the brand image of modern trade businesses in Bangkok. Moreover, J.-W. Huang et al. (2016) revealed the positive mediating role of brand image on the relationship between green innovation and business performance in Taiwan's quick-service restaurant business.

Theoretical contributions

The research's findings provide a meaningful theoretical contribution and expansion to the literature on SDGs, CSR, and business performance studies, particularly in the modern trade business. From the theoretical perspective, the findings of this research are as predicted by the CSR theories. The corporates' activities benefit several stakeholders, particularly customers and their communities, leading to many preferred business outcomes other than profit maximization (Currás-Pérez et al., 2018; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018). Corporate local employment, as an economic CSR practice, and environmental responsibility, as environmental CSR, are beneficial to communities where businesses are operating and their customers live, promoting their local economy and maintaining their natural environment nurturing communities' sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Carroll, 1991; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Sachs et al., 2019). In return, businesses earn their customers' positive attitudes and emotions toward themselves and their brands and receive support from them and their communities. These findings provide additional evidence of the roles of local corporate employment, as an economy CSR practice, on brand image and business performance, which is still limited. Likewise, the findings also provided the roles of corporate environmental responsibility in the modern trade business in rural areas in Thailand, which needed to be explored.



Practical contributions and suggestions

The research findings provide practical benefits to modern trade businesses' management and marketing teams since they can be employed as a guideline to foster their business performance and promote their brand image. According to the findings, the management and marketing teams should focus on practices that enhance their brand image to stimulate their business performance. Hiring local people in the community where their businesses are located is a must. Besides, they should support communities in other ways that can help grow the local economy, such as providing fair employment with decent pay and compensation, supporting education and needed skill training in the communities, supporting local businesses by selling their products and partnering up with them to strengthen the local economy. In addition, they should highlight eco-friendly business practices by using natural energy, such as solar and wind power, in their store operation to limit releasing carbon footprints, such as avoiding providing plastic containers, bags, and straws that cannot be recycled. Instead, they should provide eco-friendly products.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

Even though this research contributes to various new knowledge and evidence supporting the existing CSR literature, particularly in modern business, there are still limitations that should be addressed. First, the data were collected in only five cities which may not be a good representative of all rural areas in Thailand, prohibiting the generalizability of the results. To ensure generalizability, future research is suggested to collect data in other cities in different regions or parts of the country. Secondly, this research managed data cross-sectionally causing difficulty in confirming causal relationships and directions; instead, the findings could only be explained in terms of correlation. A future study is suggested to plan a more extended period for data collection. Finally, only two CSR strategies were investigated, while many other interesting CSR actions have not been explored as keys to business success. Hence future research is suggested to include other potential CSR actions that businesses often employ in the study model to expand the knowledge of CSR and SDGs.

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