



The implementation of environmental practices in small businesses operating in a green university

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Abstract

This research examined the impact of university environmental policies on the implementation of green practices and the performance of small enterprises operating on university campus. The objective of this study was twofold: (1) to analyze the relationship between external pressure factors and the adoption of green practices; and (2) to study the influences of green practices on business performance. Based on data derived from questionnaires of 67 small businesses operating in a green university, the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was applied to test these relationships. The results showed that environmental pressure influences the adoption of green practices. Also, the adoption of such practices positively affects the performance of the businesses in terms of cost reduction and better business image.

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Introduction

Presently, the world is facing uncertain environmental problems. The major problems include global warming, wastewater and pollution problems, which adversely affect society overall. Due to concerns about environmental issues, regulators, particularly in the business sector, play an important role in imposing environmental regulations or policies to control, motivate and incentivize businesses to be more environmentally friendly (Zailani et al., 2012). While some businesses are pushed by regulators, many businesses are proactively interested in environmental protection and initiate and implement environmental strategies (Chan & Wong, 2006; Fraj et al., 2015; Menguc et al., 2010).

In addition to the business sector, many educational institutions around the world have demonstrated interest in sustainability and environmental issues and have adopted the green university policy. The significant missions of a green university not only provide education about the environment but also serve as a substantial mechanism to drive higher levels of sustainable and environmental management (Lozano et al., 2015). Accordingly, the university integrates the principles of environmental stewardship into their educational courses, and also applies the guidelines of environmental management into the administration of their institute (Dahlawi & El Sharkawy, 2021; Disterheft et al., 2012). Subsequently, the effects disperse through every sector of the university, including the businesses and stores that operate on campus which are exposed to the environmental pressures of the institution. Thus, whether the adoption of a green policy in a university will

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affect the operations of the businesses on the university campus as it does in the business sector is an area of research interest. So far, there has not been any research to indicate whether green universities place any pressure on the operations and performances of campus businesses. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine whether environmental pressures impacted on the implementation of green practices by small businesses operating in a green university, and whether such implementation leads to positive performance.

The outcomes of this research are expected to benefit green universities to develop and create environmental policies suitable for businesses that operate within environmental regulations, as well as encouraging the businesses to be interested in green practice implementation in order to enhance their business operations. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for other types of businesses conforming to certain requirements and environmental regulations to formulate their own environmental policies. This study also clarified the relationships among environmental pressure, the implementation of green practices, and business performance.

Literature Review

Stakeholder Theory

According to the stakeholder theory, businesses must consider the interests of their stakeholders for the effective management of the businesses (Freeman, 1984). It is argued that an ability to manage stakeholder relationships positively influences the survival and long-term performance of businesses (Vitolla et al., 2019). Primary stakeholders include shareholders, regulators, customers, employees, suppliers, and communities.

Regarding the implementation of green practices, stakeholders have played a significant role to push businesses to go green. Many stakeholders, especially governmental agencies, pressure businesses to eliminate and monitor their environmental inefficiencies (Vitolla et al., 2019). Basically, environmental pressure is the pressure from an external environment including laws, regulations, policies, and consumer behaviors. These pressures influence the behaviors of persons or business entities to potentially change their attitudes, thoughts, values, and behaviors in order to conform to the pressure regardless of whether or not the persons or businesses desire to participate (González-Benito & González-Benito, 2010; Schandl et al., 2016).

Environmental pressure comes from multiple stakeholders. Zailani et al. (2012) found empirical evidence that, besides internal business strategies, society and government agencies all play a part in driving businesses to apply environmental management in their organizations in order to produce better outcomes. This is consistent with the research by Bagur-Femenias et al. (2013) who found that the pressures of the legal environment and organizations associated with the business's location act as a major motivation to the adoption of green practices in small service businesses. In the manufacturing industry, Dornfeld et al. (2021) found that external pressures from legislation and governmental regulations encourage businesses to adopt environmental strategies and practices. Chan and Hawkins (2010) state that the influence of a customer's environmentally friendly behavior is one of the factors that affects a business's decision to adopt environmental stewardship and develop new products responding to the needs of the consumers. If businesses do not adjust to keep up with the demand of consumers, especially in a highly competitive market, the risk is that competitors will seize the advantage. Therefore, competitors and the competitive environment are other factors affecting the application of green practices.

Regarding environmental management in universities, educational institutions around the world are turning their interest into environmental studies and applications of Environmental Management Systems (EMS) as part of their institutions' administration (Dahlawi & El Sharkawy, 2021; Disterheft et al., 2012). These institutions sometimes call themselves "Green University". The affiliations of the educational institutions that adopt EMS and the businesses operating on campus are characterized as both regulator bodies and supervising agencies. Once a regulator has formulated a policy, it will also exert pressure on the policy decisions of the agency under its supervision creating environmental pressure (González-Benito & González-Benito, 2010; Schandl et al., 2016).

According to the stakeholder theory and the research results mentioned above, the environmental pressure from stakeholders influences the adoption of green practices. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H1: Environmental pressures have a positive correlation with the adoption of green practices.

Natural Resource-Based View of the Firm

Based on the resource-based theory, competitive advantage can be sustained if a firm uniquely owns resources and capabilities and uses them to implement

strategies (Barney, 1991). Hart (1995), who extended the resource-based theory, proposed the natural resource-based view of the firm, and argued that strategy, competitive advantage, and positive financial performance are likely to be rooted in capabilities that facilitate environmentally friendly economic activity. Knowledge and capabilities obtained from the implementation of green practices are valuable and imperfectly imitable and these capabilities are the source of sustained competitive advantage (Hart, 1995).

Results from the literature show that the adoption of green practices can help businesses improve their financial efficiency through cost reduction and increased competitiveness. Hofer et al. (2012) examined the relationships between green practices and corporate performance and found that enterprises could benefit from reducing waste and creating more efficient constructs. According to the study by Perramon et al., (2014), it was found that environmental practices have a positive impact on the business operations in terms of management, competitiveness, entity image, the satisfaction of the stakeholders and financial performance. Alonso-Almeida et al. (2018) studied environmental management in small tourism businesses and found that environmental management practices constitute an efficient method of cost reduction. Brulhart et al. (2019) conducted an empirical study about the adoption of green practices in the food and beverage, and household and personal products industries and found that environmental proactivity significantly influences profitability.

The implementation of green practices becomes a main driver to improve competitiveness through business image by attracting new environmentally concerned consumers while satisfying existing customers. Consumers are becoming more aware of environmental issues and, consequently, prefer products from environmentally friendly businesses (Fraj et al., 2015; Singjai et al., 2018). From the above discussion, it can be argued that the implementation of green practices can help businesses to achieve cost and differentiation competitive advantages. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated.

H2: Implementing green practices has a positive impact on performance.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model of the study.

Methodology

Population and Data Collection

The population used in this study comprised all small business enterprises operating in a central cafeteria of a university that implemented environmentally friendly strategies. These enterprises shared similar characteristics such as size (1–5 employees), form of business (sole proprietorship), and business type (retailing). The university selected for this study was recognized as the leading green university in Thailand. There was a total of 82 businesses consisting of 59 restaurants (72 percent), and 23 snack bars (28 percent). The researchers selected these businesses because they were subjected to environmental pressures from their key stakeholders in the green university. This allowed the researchers to examine the relationships between environmental pressures, green practice application, and business performance.

The questionnaire was developed and adapted based on previous literature. Environmental Pressure (ENP) was measured through 4 questionnaire items adapted from Bagur-Femenias et al. (2013). Green Practice (GP) and Firm Performance (PERF) were each measured through 8 items adapted from Bagur-Femenias et al. (2013) and Pereira-Moliner et al. (2012). All questionnaire items were measured with a 5-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire was reviewed by an expert and no material errors were found during the review process. During March 2019, the paper-based questionnaires were handed out to the business owners and collected the following week. Of the 82 questionnaires, 67 were completed and usable, representing 82 percent of the population. Table 1 presents characteristic of the population and samples.

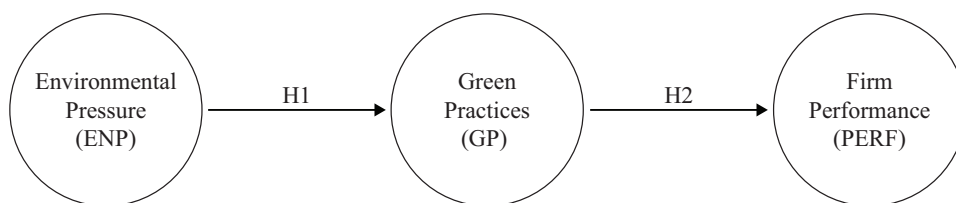


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Table 1 Characteristic of the population and samples

Population and samples	Restaurant	Snack bar	Total	Percent
Population	59	23	82	100
Less unusable and non-response	13	2	15	18
Final samples	46	21	67	82

Data Analysis

Data from all usable questionnaires were statistically analyzed by the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method. This method was chosen because it is suitable for the correlation analysis of reflective measured constructs and it is also suitable for studies with a small sample size in social science studies (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2019). The analysis was divided into two processes: The procedure to verify the measurement model, and structural model analysis using the bootstrapping technique.

Common method bias was also investigated and controlled through procedural and statistical methods suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). For the procedural control, the questionnaire was designed in a way that the respondents could not predict the outcomes or the relationships between independent and dependent constructs and ensuring the respondents' privacy.

Regarding the statistical controls, Harman's Single-Factor test was performed by including all measures in a principal components analysis, the result of which should not be greater than 50 percent (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results showed that one factor explains 38 percent of variance. It could be concluded from the procedural control and the statistical test that the common method bias did not produce a significant effect on the results of this research.

Results

Analysis of the Measurement Models

Measurement models were validated in order to make sure all measures reflected the construct empirically (Hair et al., 2017). Results from the analysis of the measurement models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Results of the measurement models

Construct	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
External Environmental Pressure (ENP)		0.836	0.891	0.671
1. Pressure from stakeholders to transform into a greener operation	0.833			
2. Pressure from competitors	0.797			
3. Pressure from business environment	0.868			
4. Pressure from the university	0.775			
Green Practice (GP)		0.866	0.896	0.522
1. Use of green containers	0.779			
2. Use of organic raw materials	0.664			
3. Reduce the use of harmful chemical product	0.759			
4. Waste separation	0.698			
5. More efficient use of electricity	0.841			
6. More efficient use of water supply	0.813			
7. Wastewater management	0.615			
8. Discounts for green customers	0.562			
Firm Performance (PERF)		0.922	0.935	0.645
1. Reduce overall operating costs	0.780			
2. Reduce utility costs	0.826			
3. Attract new customers	0.801			
4. Differentiate from competitors	0.776			
5. Increase profitability	0.822			
6. Has a better business image	0.747			
7. Increase customer satisfaction	0.782			
8. Increase sales compared to competitors	0.883			

Firstly, the reliability of the measurement models was assessed. The results show all items were reliable. As Table 2 shows, the loadings of all items were higher than the threshold of 0.70 except four items (2, 4, 7, and 8 of GP construct) whose loadings were slightly lower than the threshold. However, it has been argued that items with loading between 0.40 and 0.70 can be retained in the model in order to reflectively maintain the holistic picture of the construct (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, these items were retained.

Secondly, the internal consistency was evaluated through composite reliability. The composite reliability values of all measures were higher than the threshold of 0.70. Therefore, the constructs had a high level of internal reliability. Then, convergent validity was assessed based on the average variance extracted (AVE). As presented in Table 2, the AVE values were above the 0.50 threshold. Finally, the discriminant validity was assessed based on the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values were well lower than the threshold value of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, the HTMT confidence interval does not include 1. Therefore, all constructs were measured uniquely. Based on the analysis of measurement models, it can be argued that all the constructs were reliable and accurate.

Analysis of the Structural Model

The assessment of the structural model involves examining the model's predictive capabilities and the

relationships between the constructs. As presented in Table 4, all of the path coefficients were significant at the 1 percent level. Additionally, the R^2 values indicate that the research model explains 29.50 percent of the variance of the green practice, and 26.90 percent of the firm performance. The influence of an independent construct on the dependent construct was accessed through the f^2 values. It is recommended that f^2 values of 0.02, 0.05, and 0.35, respectively, represent low, moderate, and large effects of an independent construct (Hair et al., 2017). The results showed that ENP had a large effect on GP, and GP also had a large effect on PERF. Figure 2 presents the path coefficients of the structural model.

Analysis of Indirect Effect

The analysis of indirect effect investigates a mediating effect of GP to the relationship between ENP to PERF through the procedures suggested by Hair et al. (2017). The results showed that the indirect effect is significant ($t = 4.513, p = .000$) and the confidence interval does not include zero (0.187–0.433). The authors also conducted an additional test to investigate whether there was a direct effect from ENP to PERF. The results showed that the direct effect does not exist since zero is included in the confidence interval $[-0.283–0.281], t = 0.275, p = .783$. It can be argued that environment pressure could potentially lead to positive financial performance only if green practices are implemented.

Table 3 The HTMT ratio and confidence interval

Construct	ENP	GP
GP	0.616 [0.410–0.791]	
PERF	0.269 [0.135–0.434]	0.554 [0.376–0.726]

Table 4 Results of structural modeling

Hypothesis	R^2	f^2	β	t -Value	p
H1: ENP $\rightarrow$ GP	0.295	0.418	0.543	6.124	.000
H2: GP $\rightarrow$ PERF	0.269	0.368	0.519	5.593	.000

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether environmental pressures impact on the implementation of green practices by businesses operating in a green university,

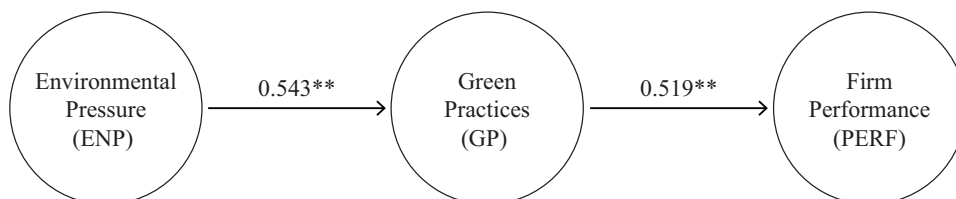


Figure 2 Results of the structural model

Note: ** $p < .01$.

and whether such implementation leads to improved performance. As suggested by the stakeholder theory, this study found that external environmental pressures have a high impact on green practices implemented by the businesses. The results from this study support previous research, which shows that small businesses are implicitly and explicitly pushed by several stakeholders such as governments, customers and partners to implement green practices (Bagur-Femenias et al., 2013; Vitolla et al., 2019; Zailani et al., 2012). Results of this study are consistent with the research by Dornfeld et al. (2021), which found that the factors that influence organizations to adopt green policies are legislation and governmental regulations. Therefore, such factors may affect an organizational policy formulation. The organization may presume that if they do not comply with the external pressure factors, they will not be able to sustainably run their businesses. For this study, the university played a significant role to influence small businesses to implement green practices or strategies. Businesses that fail to comply with regulatory requirements may suffer from sanctions, fines, increase in operating costs such as rent, and contract termination.

Regarding the relationship between the implementation of green practices and firm performance, results from this study show that green practices significantly impact on the performance of the businesses operating on a green campus. This study supports the natural resource-based view of the firm that the implementation of green practices could help businesses to improve their learning and innovative capabilities. Then, these capabilities will assist businesses to initiate new ideas and approaches to investigate and eliminate environmental inefficiencies leading to better performance in terms of business reputation and cost reduction.

Results of this study were consistent with the previous studies that the adoption of green practices positively affects both financial and non-financial performances (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2018; Brulhart et al., 2019; Hofer et al., 2012; Singjai et al., 2018). This may be because customers acknowledge the values of the implementation of green practices, such as using cardboard boxes instead of foam boxes, bringing their own containers and reducing plastic bag use, and the importance of environmental protection and support by purchasing products from environmentally aware businesses. In addition, businesses can also reduce costs by implementing green practices such as reducing water and electricity use. Furthermore, the green practices on waste management such as filtering food waste or separating used oil before emitting into the sewer help the surrounding environment to be cleaner,

with less unpleasant odors, resulting in a better overall image. Consequently, customers will be more likely to buy products and use services resulting in improved business performance.

In addition, this study confirmed that environmental pressure alone does not lead to better performance. Positive business performance can be obtained if businesses turn their environmental pressures into actions by implementing green practices. This study extends a previous study by investigating an indirect effect of green practices on the relationship between environmental pressure and improved performance (Bagur-Femenias et al., 2013). It can be argued that environment pressure would produce better business performance only if green practices are adopted.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results contribute to the stakeholder theory and confirm that environmental pressure influences the adoption of green practices in a setting where a regulatory stakeholder has a strong impact on the survival of a business. Also, the adoption of such practices positively affects the performance of the businesses as suggested by the natural resource-based view of the firm in this particular setting. The results indicate that the implementation of green practices not only helps businesses to identify and eliminate their environmental inefficiencies, but also maintains a livable and sustainable environment. Businesses adopting these practices will be able to reduce their carbon emission, utility consumption, and waste as well as increase the use of eco-friendly products leading to a better environment and society.

Previous studies have focused on proactive environmental entities that adopt green practices from a desire to protect the environment and consequently meet or exceed the regulations or legal stipulations (Fraj et al., 2015; Singjai et al., 2018). These studies found that proactive environmental strategies and practices significantly improve business performance. On the other hand, this study focused on reactive environmental entities that adopt green practices designed to merely conform to regulation requirements or external pressures. The results also show a positive relationship between green practices and business performance. It can be argued that whether motivated by external pressure or internal desire, the application of green practices will positively affect the firm's performance, especially small businesses.

For the management point of view, a business could benefit from the implementation of green practices by

improving its learning and innovative capabilities. These capabilities will help the business to initiate new ideas and approaches to minimize environmental inefficiencies leading to better performance.

Universities can apply results of this study to develop and create environmental policies suitable for businesses that operate within environmental regulations. Moreover, the universities could use this study to encourage the businesses to be interested in green practice implementation in order to enhance their business operations.

Since the samples of this study were small-size enterprises, mostly sole proprietorships, in a green university, these businesses may not receive environmental pressure from other major stakeholders, such as creditors and investors. Therefore, the use of the research results must be carried out with caution. Future research should expand the scope of study to businesses with higher environmental pressure and consider other types of businesses with environmental requirements and regulations, such as the hotel and tourism industry. In addition, the adoption of green practices may not contribute directly to business performance, especially in terms of profitability or other financial matters (López-Gamero et al., 2009). Future studies may add other constructs that would lead to better environmental performance in order to acquire a clearer holistic picture of the impacts of green strategies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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