



Identifying the mediating role of corporate reputation in the relationship between selected RepTrak™ facets and customer loyalty of Malaysia Airlines Berhad

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ABSTRACT

Corporate reputation is a part of the intangible asset management that can help create a competitive advantage in firms. Hence, it is crucial for firms to create a favourable reputation and build a good perception among stakeholders. However, crises are inevitable and can cause a firm's reputation to be tarnished and its credibility to be questioned. Therefore, this study aims to identify the mediating role of corporate reputation on the relationship between selected facets of the RepTrak™ reputation model, namely, products/services, innovation, citizenship, leadership, performance and customer loyalty from the perspective of Malaysia Airlines Berhad's (MAB) customers. Online and offline questionnaires were administered to MAB consumers which yielded 173 valid responses. The collected data were then analysed using partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in Smart-PLS 3.2.7. The findings confirmed the positive relationships between the four facets of RepTrak™ with corporate reputation in the current context; however, innovation demonstrated a negative but significant relationship with corporate reputation. In addition to that, the relationship between corporate reputation and customer loyalty was also established. Further, the results confirmed corporate reputation as a mediator that mediates the relationship between all five determinants of RepTrak™ model and customer loyalty. The conclusion, the implications and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: **RepTrak™ model, reputation, customer loyalty, aviation industry, corporate & marketing communications**

INTRODUCTION

Corporate reputation is a pivotal management objective which has the potential to create a sustainable competitive advantage (Pfister, Schwaiger, & Morath, 2019). It has become a significant aspect of corporate communication and marketing which examines the perception of multiple stakeholders towards a corporation (Argenti, 2015; Cornelli, 2017). Corporate reputation is an intangible asset (Brønn & Buhmann, 2018; Fisher-Buttinger, & Vallaster, 2011) and is closely related to the survival and sustainability of a firm (Chan, Leong, Nadarajan, & Ramayah, 2016; Chan, Sathasevam, Muhammad Noor, Khiruddin, & Mohd Hasan, 2018; Gatzert & Schmit, 2016), especially during a crisis where the firm's credibility comes under scrutiny (Wei, Ouyang, & Chen, 2017).

In understanding the advantages of having a strong and positive reputation, many organisations have recognised the relevance of building a favourable reputation for their long-term survival and to enhance organisational and marketing performance (Eckert, 2017; Goldring, 2015), particularly in today's digital era wherein information is disseminated instantaneously without proper verification (Dutot, Galvez, & Versailles, 2016). Obviously, a weak corporate reputation will serve as a hindrance for a company to build its competitive advantage (Sihite, Sule, Azis, & Kaltum, 2016).

In a similar vein, the reputation of companies in the aviation industry is influenced by competitive dynamics within the sector such as the attractiveness of destinations and online user-generated content about their experiences (Ramos, Casado-Molina, & Peláez, 2017). According to Mohamed Ayub et al. (2017), a favourable firm reputation takes years to develop, but can easily be tarnished by a single crisis. For instance, Malaysia's national aircraft carrier, Malaysia Airline System (MAS), now known as Malaysia Airlines Berhad (MAB), experienced a major international reputation loss in 2014 due to two tragedies: MH370 and MH17. In both tragedies, all passengers and crew members onboard, a total of 537 people were killed; tarnishing the reputation of the aircraft carrier and discrediting airplanes as one of the safest transportations ("MH370 and MH17", 2015; Larbi, 2017).

In addition, the airline company did not make it into 2018 Global RepTrak® 100's ranking list of "Top 100 Reputable Companies around the Globe" (Reputation Institute, 2018). The reported net loss experienced by MAB immediately after the crisis, in the first half of 2014 was RM750.43 million, an increase of 65% compared to the corresponding period the year before (RM454.81 million) (Chin, 2014). Both tragedies led to reputation loss and caused many customers to avoid flying with MAB (Adapa & Roy, 2017; Worlu & Ahmad, 2019). This case resonates with the notion that "the value of a corporate reputation is magnified" during crises (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 34–35).

Based on the above notion, reputation management has become a prime focus of many researches (Chan et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2018; Dutot et al., 2016; Eckert, 2017; Gatzert & Schmit, 2016; Wei, Yu, & Chen, 2017). Although researchers have developed various concepts and models to conceptualise and measure corporate reputation, including "World's Most Admired Companies" ranking by Fortune Magazine, Reputation Quotient (RQ), and the RepTrak™ reputation model developed by Charles Fombrun (Eckert, 2017), the current research decided to adopt the RepTrak™ reputation model (an extension of RQ) because this model is still understudied, particularly in the context of developing countries like Malaysia (Chan et al., 2018; Kanto, de Run, & Mohd Isa 2013).

Several past studies have used the applications of RQ and RepTrak™ reputation model to examine the reputation of corporations in industries such as food and beverages (Mohd Sah & Abdullah, 2014), health care, tourism, manufacturing (Rungnapar Pitprecha, 2013), education (Chan & Mohd Hasan, 2019), and banking (Kanto, de Run,

& Md Isa, 2016). However, there is limited empirical work done in the aviation industry (Cheah, Nair, Thinavan, & Wee, 2014). Hence, this research attempts to apply the selected RepTrak™ reputation model in the context of the Malaysian aviation industry; namely in MAB, to examine the perception of current customers with regard to the reputation of the company. Based on the research setting discussed, the current study aims to determine the mediating role of corporate reputation on selected RepTrak™ reputation facets (products/services, innovation, citizenship, leadership, performance) and customer loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RepTrak™ reputation model

The RepTrak™ reputation model was developed by Fombrun (2006), to quantify corporate reputation with a rating score that ranges from 0 to 100. The model attempts to explain stakeholder behaviour resulting from pulse (trust, admire, feeling and esteem) that is interrelated with perceptions of stakeholders towards an organisation. These perceptions are built on seven facets (Reputation Institute, 2018): products/services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, vision & leadership, and performance (Fombrun, Ponzi, & Newburry, 2015).

Relationships between selected facets of RepTrak™ model, corporate reputation, and customer loyalty

Past studies have shown that facets of RepTrak™ have been positively associated with corporate reputation. For instance, Feldman, Bahamonde, and Bellido, (2013) conducted a comparative study and associated better product/service quality, higher visibility of CSR activities, higher productivity, stronger competitive advantage and increased market worth as the outcomes of an enhanced reputation. The findings illustrate that there is a positive association between products/services, citizenship, performance, and corporate reputation (Feldman et al., 2013). Furthermore, this is corroborated by Rungnapar Pitpreecha (2013) who ranked products/services as the most important contributor to reputation in Thailand business companies.

On the other hand, the findings of Kanto et al. (2016) based on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), concluded that five multi-dimensional facets of RQ, namely emotional appeal, product and services, financial performance, vision & leadership, and social responsibility are highly important for the Malaysian banking industry. However, the study did not find the workplace environment as a determinant factor. This is also congruent with the study of Mohd Sah and Abdullah (2014), where workplace was perceived very low among customers as influencing reputation. In addition, the findings of Rungnapar Pirpreecha (2013) also showed that governance has no influence on corporate reputation.

The different results are attributable to the fact that different stakeholder groups will have different perceptions on each reputation dimension. For instance, investors are most likely to be concerned with performance and governance, whereas customers will place more emphasis on products/services, and employees on workplace and leadership (Geller, 2014; Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegthart, 2016). This is consistent with Abuín's notion (2019) that various stakeholder groups should be treated differently as the attributes of reputation can be perceived differently by each stakeholder group which justifies the reasons for excluding the workplace and governance dimensions. Based on this argument, the current study analysed only five dimensions; namely product and services,

innovation, citizenship, vision & leadership and performance because those dimensions are more pertinent and oriented towards the customer.

Foroudi, Jin, Gupta, Melewar, and Foroudi (2016) argued that being innovative and being the first to launch products/services in a market is extremely beneficial in boosting reputation. Being innovative means possessing an advantage that distinguishes one from the other rivals (Fang, Palmatier, & Grewal, 2011). Interestingly, some other past findings pointed out that innovation possesses less to no significance in predicting corporate reputation (Feldman et al., 2013; Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2013). However, other researchers confirmed that innovation does drive reputation (Dangelico, 2015; Dutot et al., 2016; Foroudi et al., 2016; Makkonen & Inkinen, 2014). It is interesting to note that countries with a developing economy prioritise dimensions which are more business-oriented, and innovation is often seen as an indispensable asset (Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2013).

Citizenship is the commonly used term to represent corporate social responsibility (CSR) which refers to social and environmental influences of economic activities (Lu, Abeysekera, & Cortese, 2015). Numerous researches have confirmed the significant and positive associations between citizenship and reputation (Lu et al., 2015; Lü, Jing, & Cao, 2014; Ogunfowora, 2014; Taghian, D'Souza, & Polonsky, 2015; Zhu, Sun, & Leung, 2013). For instance, Lu et al., (2015) theorised that the perceived acts of CSR positively affect corporate reputation, which makes the quality of CSR reporting essential in creating a favourable image. As business organisations demonstrate their commitment in impacting society and environment positively, this creates a desired impression which helps to build the reputation (Lu et al., 2015; Taghian et al., 2015).

A recent study done by Park (2019) also found that CSR has a positive significant influence on corporate reputation in the airline industry with customer satisfaction and attitude as moderators. Thus, based on the above discussion, citizenship is considered a significant attribute for reputation driver (Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2013). This is further supported by the notion of Orlitzky and Swanson (2012) that stakeholders will admire and respect organisations that carry out good deeds to the society and the environment.

Leaders tend to be viewed as a form of representation of their respective organisations. Thus, stakeholders expect the leader's personality to reflect the organisation. As such, the notion "ethical leadership" was born. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) defined ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). Ethical leaders display the desirable traits of morality, integrity, fairness, accountability, authenticity, and trustworthiness. They hold themselves accountable for their actions, and simultaneously use the reward-punishment system for others who should also take responsibility for their actions. Ethical leaders are morally obligated to offer products and services that are harmless to consumers, be honest and transparent about their business operations, and be concerned with the social and environmental impacts of their economic activities (Zhu et al., 2013). This suggests that the leadership dimension can be associated with the betterment of products/services, citizenship, and performance.

Some studies have shown the significant and positive association between leadership and corporate reputation (Men, 2014; Ogunfowora, 2014; Zhu, 2014). For instance, Stavrinoudis and Chrysanthopoulou (2017) investigated the role of leadership in building the corporate reputation of reputable hotels. Their results showed that charismatic leadership elements have a significant positive influence on reputation. Based on this discussion, strong leadership does significantly and positively influence corporate

reputation as a good and appealing leader is a catalyst for enhancing the trust and admiration of stakeholders (Halff, 2013).

Last but not least, performance also contributes to corporate reputation. Numerous past studies have presented findings on the significant and positive associations between corporate performance and reputation (Lu et al., 2015; Ogunfowora, 2014; Taghian et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2013; Zhu, 2014). The perceived excellence of corporate performance is theorised to create the impression that an organisation has a desirable reputation (Lu et al., 2015). Meanwhile, other researchers deduced that a positive reputation promotes confidence and support among stakeholders, which leads to enhanced performance (Feldman et al., 2013; Taghian et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2013). For instance, Vig, Dumičić, and Klopotan (2017) who investigated the relationship between corporate reputation and financial performance in Croatia, revealed that products and services, corporate integrity, and organisational performance are the predictors that can contribute to financial performance. This implies that reputation contributes positively to financial performance. Based on this discussion, excellent and solid reputation is a prominent tool that helps organisations to generate profit, sustain its financial performance and promote future growth continuously. Hence, future profitability is the strength of an organisation to sustain outstanding performances.

Corporate reputation is not only a strategically important factor, but also a core advantage for success in competitive markets. Therefore, the aviation sector with excellent reputation looks forward to not only continuous use of its services and attracting potential customers, but also retaining existing customers (Park, 2019). A firm's positive reputation and the customer loyalty it cultivates can serve as major advantages (Seo & Park, 2017). Their empirical study found that airline corporate reputation can significantly influence behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. This supports the work of Ali, Alvi, and Ali (2012), that found a significant positive relationship between corporate reputation and consumer loyalty as well as customer satisfaction in Pakistan's telecommunication industry. In addition, de Leaniz and del Bosque Rodríguez (2016) who studied the Spanish hospitality industry, found that corporate image has a positive effect on corporate reputation, and corporate reputation influences customer loyalty positively. This aligns with the results of Gorondutse, Hilman, and Nasidi (2014) whose work found that corporate reputation has a positive effect on customer loyalty in the food and beverage companies of Nigeria.

Based on these discussions of past studies, therefore, the study conceptualised and hypothesised:

- H₁: The RepTrakTM model attributes will have a positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H_{1a}: Citizenship will have a significant positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H_{1b}: Innovation will have a significant positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H_{1c}: Leadership will have a significant and positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H_{1d}: Performance will have a significant and positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H_{1e}: Product and services will have a significant positive relationship with corporate reputation.
- H₂: Corporate reputation will have a significant positive relationship with customer loyalty.

H₃: Corporate reputation mediates the relationship between facets of the RepTrak™ model (product/services, innovation, citizenship, leadership, performance) and customer loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study utilised a quantitative method (survey) to solicit responses from MAB customers who have experienced using the services provided by the company. The survey method was selected because it is more cost-effective and time-efficient to gather large responses from the target population (de Leeuw, 2008). Further, according to Babbie (2015), the survey design is suitable for this study as it allows the researchers to measure the attitudes and opinions of respondents effectively in a large population.

Population and sampling procedures

The sampling technique adopted for this study was purposive sampling. The concept of purposive sampling concerns the focus on subjects who possess a particular characteristic which could answer the research questions (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Specifically, this method was chosen because the researchers identified the sample as MAB customers who would have a better understanding of the overall company performance, thus, enabling them to provide much more appropriate responses to achieve the research objectives. For data collection, a structured questionnaire was administered to customers who have had experiences with MAB and this yielded 173 valid responses. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), a sample size ranging from 30 to 500 is sufficient and acceptable for social science studies. In addition, the same survey was made available on an online platform for voluntary participation, from which the researchers only selected those who have had experiences with MAB.

Research instrument & operationalisation of variables

The research instrument (survey) comprised four sections. Section A collected data about the demographic background of the respondents. Section B measured the exogenous variables which are the selected five dimensions of the RepTrak™ reputation model, whereas Section C measured the mediating variable which is the corporate reputation. Section D measured customer loyalty as the endogenous variable. The survey questions were in English and responses were measured using the 5-point Likert-type scale, with values ranging from 1 as “Strongly disagree” to 2 as “Disagree”, 3 as “Slightly agree”, 4 as “Agree” and 5 as “Strongly agree”. Demographic questions in Section A were designed to solicit information related to gender, age, race, education level, nationality, as well as frequency and years of consumer experience. For Section B, the items were adopted from the work of Fombrun et al. (2015). These items were based on the 17 attributes of the exogenous variables, that is, the selected determinants of the RepTrak™ reputation model and were measured using the 5-point Likert-type scale. The dimensions were products/services, innovation, citizenship, vision & leadership, and performance (Fombrun et al., 2015). For Section C, corporate reputation was measured through four items which encompassed trust, admire, feeling and esteem and were adopted completely from Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg (2011). For Section D, the items to measure customer loyalty were adapted from Nadiri, Hussain, Ekiz, and Erdogan (2008).

FINDINGS

More than half of the respondents were females (53.8%), Chinese (63.6%), Malaysian (74.0%) and/or have attained tertiary education up to the bachelor's degree level (54.9%). The majority of the respondents were represented by young adults aged between 21 and 30 years old (82.1%).

Before testing the model, this study tested and controlled for common method variance (CMV) which is the method bias or same source bias that may arise from using self-report measures from the same sample during a survey (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In this study, the correlation matrix procedure was used as one of the methods to detect CMV (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991; Tehseen, Ramayah, & Sajilan, 2017). CMV occurs when there is a substantially high correlation found among latent variables ($r > 0.9$). The outcome of the correlation test indicates that none of the latent variables correlated more than 0.90 (See Table 1). Hence, the results assured that CMV was not an issue in this study.

Table 1. Correlation matrix among the variables

Variable (s)	Product & services	Innovation	Citizenship	Vision & leadership	Performance	Reputation	Loyalty
Product & services	1						
Innovation	.615**	1					
Citizenship	.605**	.660**	1				
Vision & leadership	.654**	.753**	.697**	1			
Performance	.487**	.705**	.576**	.796**	1		
Reputation	.664**	.565**	.650**	.730**	.599**	1	
Loyalty	.648**	.569**	.574**	.644**	.585**	.799**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

All the hypotheses developed were examined using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SEM was deemed a suitable statistical tool for this study as Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) can handle complex models which contain many latent variables and constructs (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). In addition, PLS-SEM can also handle data from non-probability sampling, with a small sample size and non-normal distribution (Awang, Afthanorhan, & Asri, 2015; Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). A two-stage analytical procedure was performed using Smart-PLS 3.2.7. The measurement model was tested first, followed by the structural model.

Measurement model

Two types of validity, namely convergent validity and discriminant validity, were assessed in the measurement model. The convergent validity of the measurement model was ascertained by examining factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) (Hair, Hult, Tomas, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017).

As shown in Table 2, the factor loadings are all greater than 0.7, as suggested by Hair, Ringle, & Sarsterd (2011). The values obtained for AVE and CR are also all higher than 0.5 and 0.7, respectively as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). Thus, convergent validity was confirmed.

Table 2. Convergent validity

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
Citizenship (CITI)	CITI1	0.856	0.793	0.797	0.878	0.706
	CITI2	0.833				
	CITI3	0.830				
Innovation (INNO)	INNO1	0.863	0.826	0.827	0.896	0.742
	INNO2	0.859				
	INNO3	0.862				
Leadership (LEA)	LEA1	0.858	0.886	0.887	0.921	0.754
	LEA2	0.851				
	LEA3	0.902				
	LEA4	0.841				
Performance (PERF)	PERF1	0.898	0.893	0.900	0.933	0.824
	PERF2	0.911				
	PERF3	0.914				
Products and services (PS)	PS1	0.881	0.871	0.876	0.912	0.721
	PS2	0.799				
	PS3	0.864				
	PS4	0.851				
Corporate Reputation (CR)	CR1	0.869	0.901	0.901	0.931	0.771
	CR2	0.878				
	CR3	0.882				
	CR4	0.882				
Customer Loyalty (CL)	CL1	0.875	0.914	0.919	0.935	0.743
	CL2	0.870				
	CL3	0.859				
	CL4	0.848				
	CL5	0.857				

CR= Composite reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Two criterions, Fornell-Larcker (1981) and Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015) were used to assess discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion was examined by comparing the square root of the AVE with the correlations between the constructs. Table 3 shows that all the square roots of AVE (diagonal values) are more than the correlation coefficients between the constructs (off-diagonal values), indicating that discriminant validity was adequate (Fornell-Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity is also established if all the HTMT values obtained are less than the required threshold of $HTMT_{.85}$ (Kline, 2011) or $HTMT_{.90}$ (Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001). As shown in Table 4, all the HTMT values are less than $HTMT_{.90}$ indicating that discriminant validity was established. The collinearity issue was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) with a cut-off value of 5 as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). The VIF values, as presented in Table 5, are all less than 5 and guaranteed that there was no collinearity issue in the study.

Table 3. Discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion

	CITI	CL	CR	INNO	LEA	PERF	PS
CITI	0.840						
CL	0.564	0.862					
CR	0.703	0.784	0.878				
INNO	0.641	0.601	0.601	0.861			
LEA	0.694	0.672	0.778	0.729	0.863		
PERF	0.542	0.614	0.640	0.685	0.797	0.908	
PS	0.524	0.655	0.700	0.568	0.610	0.429	0.849

Table 4. Discriminant validity using HTMT Ratio

	CITI	CL	CR	INNO	LEA	PERF	PS
CITI							
CL	0.651						
CR	0.824	0.858					
INNO	0.787	0.688	0.696				
LEA	0.818	0.742	0.870	0.851			
PERF	0.633	0.674	0.710	0.795	0.892		
PS	0.626	0.730	0.788	0.669	0.696	0.482	

Structural model

The structural model was tested using a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 10,000 (Andrews & Buchinsky, 2002; Streukens & Leroi-Werelds, 2016) to improve the accuracy level of the estimation. The structural model assessed all the relationships between the constructs as well as their corresponding beta and t-values. The results are shown in Table 5.

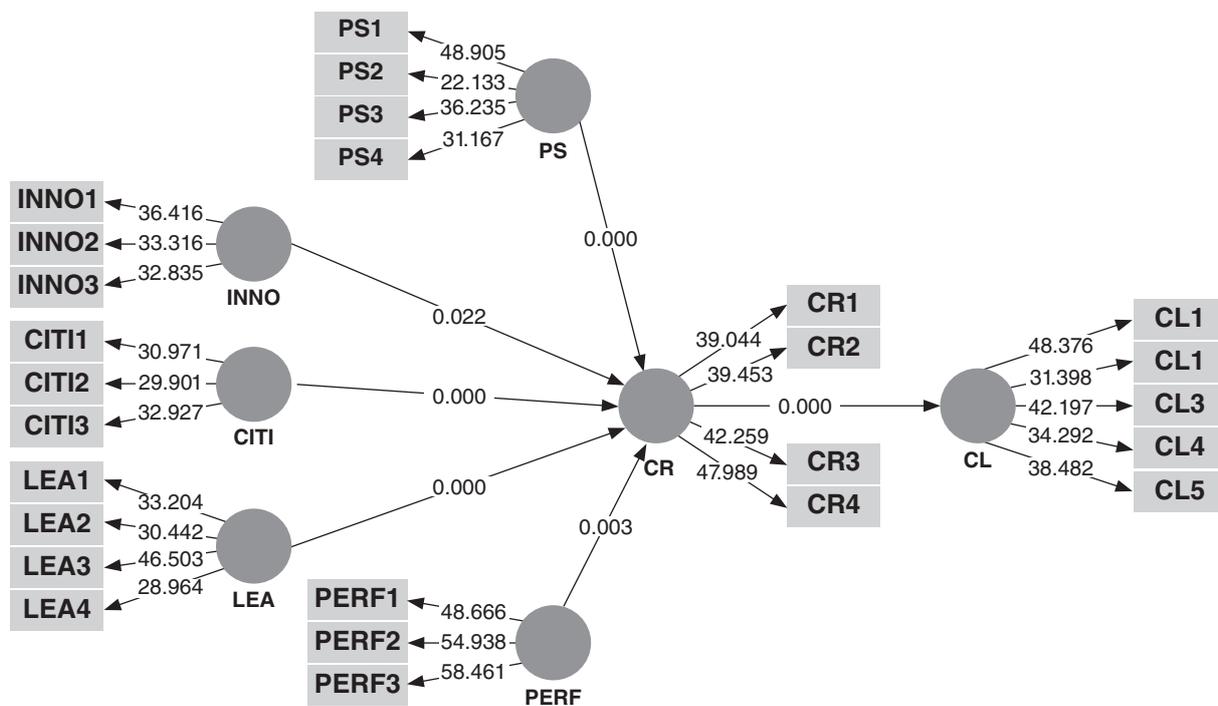


Figure 1. Structural model

The predictors Citizenship ($\beta = 0.285, t = 4.892, p = 0.001$), Leadership ($\beta = 0.339, t = 3.866, p = 0.001$), Performance ($\beta = 0.157, t = 1.879, p = 0.003$), and Product and services ($\beta = 0.355, t = 5.733, p = 0.001$) were found to have a positive relationship with corporate reputation. However, Innovation ($\beta = -0.138, t = 2.000, p = 0.023$) was found to be negatively correlated to corporate reputation. In addition, Corporate Reputation ($\beta = 0.784, t = 21.264, p = 0.001$) was also found to have a positive relationship with Customer Loyalty. This gives support for $H_1, H_{1a}, H_{1c}, H_{1d}, H_{1e}$, and H_2 , whereas H_{1b} was partially supported as innovation demonstrated a negative but significant relationship with corporate reputation. The R^2 value of 0.614 suggests that 61.4% of the variation in corporate reputation is explained by selected RepTrak facets, whereas the R^2 value of 0.731 for customer loyalty indicates that corporate reputation can explain 73.1% of the variance in customer loyalty.

Table 5. Direct effects

Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. error	T-value	P	Decision	R ²	Q ²	f ²	VIF
CITI → CR	0.285	0.058	4.892**	0.001	Supported	0.614	0.420	0.142	2.129
CR → CL	0.784	0.037	21.264**	0.001	Supported	0.731	0.523	1.592	1.000
INNO → CR	-0.138	0.069	2.000*	0.023	Partially Supported			0.027	2.628
LEA → CR	0.339	0.088	3.866**	0.001	Supported			0.096	4.438
PERF → CR	0.157	0.084	1.879*	0.030	Supported			0.003	3.057
PS → CR	0.355	0.062	5.733**	0.001	Supported			0.265	1.762

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Mediation analysis

Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping method was used to test the indirect effects of citizenship, innovation, leadership, performance, product and services on customer loyalty through the mediating effect of corporate reputation. As illustrated in Table 6, the relationships CITI → CR → CL ($\beta = 0.224, p < 0.01, BC_{0.95}LL = 0.149$ and $UL = 0.302$), INNO → CR → CL ($\beta = -0.018, p < 0.05, BC_{0.95}LL = -0.199$ and $UL = -0.018$), LEA → CR → CL ($\beta = 0.266, p < 0.01, BC_{0.95}LL = 0.154$ and $UL = 0.385$), PERF → CR → CL ($\beta = 0.123, p < 0.05, BC_{0.95}LL = 0.015$ and $UL = 0.232$) and PS → CR → CL ($\beta = 0.278, p < 0.01, BC_{0.95}LL = 0.193$ and $UL = 0.365$) were all significant. The confidence intervals (BC) of all the relationships as reported in Table 6 do not straddle a value of 0 in between suggesting that corporate reputation does mediate the relationships between all these variables and customer loyalty. Thus, H_3 is supported. In this study, the Q^2 values are more than 0 for corporate reputation ($Q^2 = 0.420$) and customer loyalty ($Q^2 = 0.523$), suggesting that the model has sufficient predictive relevance.

Table 6. Results of mediation analysis

Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T-value	P	Confidence interval (BC)		Decision
					LL	UL	
CITI → CR → CL	0.224	0.046	4.857**	0.001	0.149	0.302	Supported
INNO → CR → CL	-0.108	0.055	1.976*	0.024	-0.199	-0.018	Supported
LEA → CR → CL	0.266	0.071	3.772**	0.001	0.154	0.385	Supported
PERF → CR → CL	0.123	0.067	1.845*	0.033	0.015	0.232	Supported
PS → CR → CL	0.278	0.052	5.330**	0.001	0.193	0.365	Supported

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, BC= Bias Corrected, UL = Upper Level, LL = Lower Level

DISCUSSION

The present finding of products/services being a significant predictor of corporate reputation aligns with the study done by Vidaver-Cohen and Brønn (2013) and Rungnapar Pitpreecha (2013) who ranked Products/Services as the most crucial predictor of corporate reputation, whilst other researchers deduced that the quality of products and services drives reputation significantly (Feldman et al., 2013; Mira et al., 2014). A study conducted by Gatzert and Schmit (2016) also concluded that it is possible for consumers to judge the quality of products and services based on the reputation of the brand. This is likely to happen when consumers have no direct experience with the products and services, and have a limited credible source of information to make a purchase decision. Since, the study employed the purposive sampling technique, all participating respondents are expected to have prior experiences with MAB's services. Thus, it is more likely for them to make judgements based on their personal experiences whether the airline company is favourable or not.

In addition, the hypothesis of innovation being one of the predictors of corporate reputation was also found to have a significant but negative relationship. This means that innovation is negatively perceived by MAB customers with regard to its reputation. This finding contradicts with previous findings that found “less to no” significance of the innovation facet in predicting corporate reputation (Feldman et al., 2013; Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2013). However, other researchers agree with the current finding as they have deduced that innovation drives reputation (Dangelico, 2015; Dutot et al., 2016; Foroudi et al., 2016; Makkonen & Inkinen, 2014). This finding also corroborates with the study carried out by Vidaver-Cohen and Brønn (2013) that highlighted countries with a developing economy prioritise facets which are more business-oriented, with Innovation listed at the top of the ranking.

Based on the results, citizenship is perceived to be another significant predicting factor of corporate reputation of MAB. This finding is congruent with the findings found in America, Switzerland, Japan, across Europe and Latin America whereby the respondents of past RepTrak™ surveys placed Citizenship as the third most significant reputation driver (Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2013). Other researchers also highlighted the role of CSR as an influencing factor of corporate reputation (Feldman et al., 2013; Park, 2019; Taghian et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2013).

In this respect, a favourable CSR approach will help corporations earn confidence and positive perceptions from stakeholders by portraying excellence in management and supporting common good (Taghian et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2013). With the emergence of ethical consumers, corporate reputation now relies heavily on social and environmental contributions resulting in CSR being regarded a key factor of long-term sustainability (Feldman et al., 2013).

The current finding on leadership as one of the significant predictors of corporate reputation is also supported (Zhu et al., 2013; Zhu, 2014). It should be noted that ethical leadership has a significant and positive influence on corporate reputation through an enhanced CSR approach, provided the ethical leadership is strong. Committed ethical leaders will implement the CSR approach consistently, which creates an intangible value – a strong corporate reputation over time. Conversely, CSR projects without dedication and consistency tend to create a negative impression among stakeholders who will view the CSR-related activities as a greenwashing attempt. Such impressions will ultimately tarnish the reputation instead of uplifting it (Zhu et al., 2013).

The hypothesis for performance as a predictor of corporate reputation is also accepted. Desirable financial performance can create the impression that an organisation has a good corporate reputation (Lu et al., 2015). On the other hand, other researchers have pointed out that positive reputation tends to generate positive sentiments and supportive behaviours among stakeholders, which naturally contribute to better performance such as increased market value, dedicated employees, increased revenue, positive word-of-mouth and stronger customer loyalty (Feldman et al., 2013; Taghian et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

This research examined the relationships between five facets of the RepTrak™ reputation model and customer loyalty with corporate reputation as a mediator. The findings indicate positive relationships between the four facets of RepTrak and corporate reputation in the context of airline industry. In addition, the relationship between corporate reputation and customer loyalty is also established. The results also establish that corporate reputation is a mediator that mediates the relationship between the facets of RepTrak™ model and customer loyalty.

Implications

In terms of academic implications, this research contributes empirically to the communication management literature by proving that the RepTrak™ reputation model, developed by Fombrun et al., (2015), is applicable in the Malaysian setting. The study also expands the knowledge base regarding the practicality and suitability of the RepTrak™ reputation model in the aviation industry in a developing economy like Malaysia, as well as a multicultural and multiracial environment.

In practical terms, this study carries numerous implications to the corporate and marketing communications department of MAB in understanding its customers' perspectives and current reputation status using the RepTrak™ reputation model. Businesses with similar settings and cultures can also identify the variables that come into play in their reputation management.

Notably all the facets studied, namely, products/services, innovation, citizenship, vision & leadership, and performance are found to contribute significantly to reputation, except innovation which is perceived negatively. Thus, organisations should pay particular attention to these aspects. For instance, the top management and leaders of airline companies should advocate for and incorporate innovative green product/service in their daily operations. Companies should also strive for green rating or certification to garner stronger confidence and admiration among all stakeholder groups as well. Ultimately, the findings also inspire airline companies to re-evaluate the effectiveness of their business and communication strategies in their stakeholder communication and engagement to achieve stronger sustainability and long-term survival.

Limitations & suggestions for future study

Similar to other studies, this study also possesses several limitations. Firstly, the use of a non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) limits the generalisability of the results since not everyone in the target population were given an equal chance to participate in the study. Future studies are recommended to employ probability sampling techniques under a similar context, so that the findings can be more generalised.

Secondly, this study only focused on the customers as one of the stakeholders of MAB. Future research should therefore include different combinations of stakeholder groups (such as employees, media, potential customer). Comparisons between different brands of airline companies or industries can also add more interesting perspectives into corporate reputation research.

Thirdly, future studies can include other outcome variables as suggested by previous literature such as positive word-of-mouth, customer satisfaction, perceived value, customer commitment to test the moderating and mediating effects of the reputation model in advancing the corporate communication and marketing research.

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