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An Empirical Study on Branding as a Predictor of Market Competitiveness: The Mediating Role of Brand Reputation

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Abstract

In today's competitive business world, branding has become a strategy which helps to distinguish an organization and maintain market position. The study aims to investigate the mediated relationship of brand reputation and the role of branding as a predictor of the competitiveness in the market. The research used a quantitative research design, and primary data were gathered from 490 respondents from Tiruchirappalli district in Tamil Nadu using structured questionnaire and convenience sampling technique. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to determine direct and indirect links between branding, brand reputation, and market competitiveness. The results showed that branding positively affects market competitiveness and brand reputation significantly affects market competitiveness. Moreover, the mediation analysis has also yielded that brand reputation plays a significant mediation role between brand and market competitiveness, which means that the organizations can improve their competitiveness if they have strong and credible brand reputation. The study concludes that integrated branding and reputation management practice can be a strategic advantage in sustaining a sustainable competitive advantage. The results are relevant for branding literature because they offer empirical evidence of the mechanisms by which branding can have an impact on the competitiveness of an organisation and provide managerial, marketing and policy implications for managers, marketers and policymakers interested in improving the long term competitiveness of organisations.

Keywords: Branding, Market Competitiveness, Brand Reputation, PLS-SEM, Competitive Advantage, Brand Equity, Organizational Performance.

Introduction

In today's world, branding is a key strategic weapon for any organisation that is looking to have a sustainable brand in a fierce competitive market. The quality of the product, the price, and the superiority of the technology are no longer the only parameters of the competition among firms in today's business environment but their brand identity, which helps define customer perception and positioning. An established brand can help distinguish a company from others, boost customer loyalty, and build value. Market competitiveness is the capacity of an organization to remain competitive in the marketplace by using resources efficiently, satisfying customers, innovating and differentiating strategies. In this context, branding is a strong indicator of competitiveness in the market since it directly affects consumers purchasing decisions and consequently the organization's performance. A robust branding program helps build a brand and consequently support the development of the organization by establishing an emotional bond with customers and positioning the brand as unique in the market (Rua & Santos, 2022). Brand reputation has become a critical intangible asset that not only enhances the link between brand and competitiveness but is also a key component in this relationship. Brand reputation is the overall impression consumers have about a business in terms of credibility, reliability and trustworthiness among stakeholders. Companies with good company image are likely to have higher customer loyalty, better relationships with stakeholders, and be more resistant to competition. Prior research has shown that corporate social responsibility, brand image and branding strategies play a significant role in building corporate reputation and eventually performances (Lai et al., 2010; Le, 2023). Because in the increasingly transparent and digital markets, brand reputation has become a factor that is no longer optional in order to qualify a brand as a trustworthy brand and socially responsible, consumers are actively seeking them out. Digital transformation and social media platforms have also played a significant role in enhancing the importance of branding. Since consumers are constantly bombarded with brand messages in a number of ways, it is important for an organization to be consistent with their branding efforts. Being emotionally connected to a brand has become a major topic of interest when it comes to consumer behaviour. These three factors, brand equity, emotional attachment, and social media engagement, contribute to the value proposition of organizations (Brandão & Ramos, 2024). Likewise, sustainable branding has been proven to enhance the market performance by the creation of sustainable competitive advantages (Hussain et al., 2020). The results suggest that to sustain long-term competitiveness branding strategies need to be combined with other sustainability and stakeholder strategies.

The brand reputation factor also has a significant mediating role in the process of converting branding activities to competitive effects. Companies with a strong investment in their branding efforts tend to have a better reputation, which in turn can impact customer loyalty, market share, and the overall sustainability of their companies. Research suggests that a good corporate reputation can lead to improved customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, which enhances the competitiveness of the organization (Khan et al., 2022). Moreover, environmental reputation is found to mediate the relationship between environmental proactivity and market performance, revealing the role of reputation in achieving superior market performance (Nguyen & Adomako, 2021). This evidence indicates that brand reputation serves as a link between branding and organisational success in a competitive setting.

Strategic marketing capabilities and entrepreneurial orientation further reinforce the relationship between branding and market competitiveness. Companies that have good marketing skills have a better chance to relay their corporate values and react to the changing market demands. According to Hanaysha and Al-Shaikh (2024), entrepreneurial orientation, marketing capability, and market orientation play significant roles in the business' sustainability and corporate reputation. In the same way, positioning theory has been identified as a mediator between branding and competitive advantage, which helps organizations create a unique identity in the market and enhance their performance (Rua & Santos, 2022). Thus, branding must be perceived as a holistic strategic action, and not only as a promotional activity. From methodological standpoint, study of the relationship between branding, brand reputation and market competitiveness needs strong analytical techniques to discern the complex relations between the variables. Therefore, PLS-SEM has become immensely popular for studying models with such multidimensional constructs, since it is oriented towards prediction and is suited for the analysis of mediating relationships (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM is especially relevant for research studies that aim to predict the outcomes of the organizations and investigate indirect effects between latent variables (Hair Jr. et al., 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2014). As a result, by using PLS-SEM, a robust framework can be used to evaluate the intervening role of brand reputation between brand and competitiveness. While there has been a lot of literature on branding and brand performance, few empirical studies have attempted to study the link between branding and market competitiveness with the aid of brand reputation as a mediator. Past research has mainly addressed customer loyalty, corporate social responsibility and sustainable performance, but there is no study that has addressed the indirect mechanisms, through which the brand impacts competitive performance. To fill this gap is crucial since the role of brand reputation as a mediator can be used to obtain valuable information for managers who want to improve their market positions and increase their organization's sustainability. This study, therefore, seeks to add to the literature by taking an empirical look at the relationship between branding and market competitiveness and investigate the mediating variables of brand reputation.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of branding on market competitiveness.
2. To analyze the influence of branding on brand reputation.
3. To investigate the mediating role of brand reputation in the relationship between branding and market competitiveness.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Branding is no longer just a way of identification; it has become a strategic asset of the organization and plays a key role in determining the competitiveness of the organization. In today's competitive business world, branding is used to differentiate, to build customer relationships and develop long-lasting business positions. The strong brands, send the organizational values to the customers, improve their perceptions, and create barriers for the competitors to imitate. Branding plays a crucial role in enhancing competitive advantage as it is a factor that helps to improve market orientation and positioning strategies, as cited by Rua and Santos (2022). Likewise, sustainable brand equity and marketing innovation have a positive impact on market performance as they help to create sustainable competitive advantage (Hussain et al., 2020). The results of this study show that organizations that have strong branding strategies are more likely to be more competitive in the market compared to organizations that have low branding. Hence, it can be said that branding is a key determinant of organizational success and competitiveness.

Branding can also affect the emotional and behavioral reactions of consumers, and these will result in organizational performance outcomes. Digital platforms also have given a boost to organizations when it comes to customer engagement, as they can interact with brands. Studies have shown that brand equity and emotional brand attachment have a positive impact on social media engagement and customer perceptions (Brandão & Ramos, 2024). In the service sector, the hospital brand and social factors play a significant role in customers' behavioral intentions prior to and following service use (Cham et al., 2022). In addition, cause-related marketing activities also helps to build consumers' purchase intentions by generating positive emotional reactions towards brands (Kao et al., 2025). Overall, these findings indicate that the effective branding strategies help to increase the organizations' capability to attract, retain and satisfy its customers, which in turn helps to increase the competitiveness of the organization.

H1: Branding has a significant positive effect on market competitiveness.

Brand reputation has become an important intangible asset of stakeholders which is a reflection of their overall view on the credibility, reliability and ethical behavior of an organization. The organizations that are renowned for their good brand will have the advantage of customer trust and thus, the customer loyalty, as well as the better performance of the business. Lai et al., (2010) concluded that CSR has a positive impact on brand performance and that it is a vital difference maker as a part of industrial brand equity and corporate reputation. Similarly, Le (2023) revealed that CSR has a positive impact on the performance of SMEs through corporate image, corporate reputation, and customer loyalty. Such results suggest that the reputation is a strategic asset that gives more strength to the competitiveness and sustainability of the organization.

Branding activities are one of the main forces behind building the reputation of a brand. It is a combination of consistent brand communication, consistent customer experiences and consistent value creating activities that influence stakeholders' perceptions of organisations. Research demonstrates that employer branding makes a positive impact on corporate reputation—it enhances organizational identification and stakeholder trust (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; Binu Raj et al., 2022). Place brand credibility and place brand attachment play a crucial role in customer loyalty within the field of tourism and hospitality (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021). Also, the credibility and bonding of the brand have an impact on the selection of hotels and long-term loyalty of the travelers (Rosli et al., 2019). Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that strategic investment in branding is likely to bring better brand reputation for the organization among all stakeholders.

H2: Branding has a significant positive effect on brand reputation.

Brand reputation also acts as an intermediate mechanism that translates the branding action into competitive results. Positive reputation is advantageous for organizations to attract customers, retain stakeholders, and to sustain market leadership. Reputation helps to decrease uncertainty and boost consumers' faith in organizational offerings. Khan et al. (2022) found that there is positive relationship between firm reputation and customer loyalty with the help of customer satisfaction. Similarly, Özkan et al. (2020) concluded that service quality positively affects customer loyalty and corporate reputation plays a mediating role between service quality and customer loyalty. These results suggest that a good reputation contributes to the performance of the organization by encouraging good relationships with stakeholders and creating a sustainable competitive advantage.

Reputation studies focusing on sustainability and environment responsibility further highlight the strategic importance of reputation. It has been revealed that there is mediation between environmental proactivity and market performance in terms of environmental reputation (Nguyen & Adomako, 2021). Moreover, entrepreneurial orientation, marketing capability, and market orientation are all important factors that shape the reputation of the company and the sustainability of the business (Hanaysha & Al-Shaikh, 2024). The study also indicated that organizational responsibility and brand perception are also beneficial to increase customer trust and loyalty (Huo et al., 2022). Hence, it can be said that an organization with a good reputation can be more capable in maintaining the competitiveness of its business under dynamic business condition.

H3: Brand reputation has a significant positive effect on market competitiveness.

The mediating effect of brand reputation has become an important area in the current marketing literature as it provides the mechanism by which a brand can have an impact on organizational outcomes. Competitive advantages cannot be attained through branding activities alone if these activities do not create favorable perceptions among stakeholders. Past studies have outlined a number of mediational processes linking branding and performance. For instance, the impact of brand equity on social media engagement is mediated by emotional brand attachment (Brandão & Ramos, 2024) and the effect of sustainable brand equity on market performance is mediated by sustainable competitive advantage (Hussain et al., 2020). Furthermore, positioning strategies are used to mediate the relationship between branding and competitive advantage (Rua & Santos, 2022). The results of these studies all point to indirect effects of branding on intermediary constructs.

Building on this, the present study aims to propose brand reputation as a bridge between the two, which is branding and market competitiveness. Good branding efforts make organisations more credible, and increase trust from stakeholders, leading to better competitive positioning and performance in the market. This is an indirect route that offers a complete account of the role of branding in long term organisational success. In today's world, intangible assets play an increasing role in the business world and from a theoretical and practical perspective, it is interesting to examine this mediating mechanism.

H4: Brand reputation significantly mediates the relationship between branding and market competitiveness.

Methodology

This study used quantitative research design in the study of the role of branding as a predictor of market competitiveness with brand reputation as a mediator between consumers in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu. The primary data were gathered by using a structure questionnaire that has validated measurement items based on previous studies. 490 individuals responded to the survey. A convenience sampling technique was used in selecting respondents since this allowed the researcher to readily obtain a diversity of consumers within the study area. The constructs of the questionnaire were measured by using a five-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), for the constructs of 'Branding', 'Brand Reputation' and 'Market Competitiveness'. Collected data were analysed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), as it is suitable for exploring the complex relationships among latent variables and testing the potential mediating effects at once (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis was performed in two phases: measurement model (reliability and validity) and the structural model (direct and indirect relationships between the study variables). PLS-SEM was chosen for its proven predictive power and suitability for mediation analysis in empirical business research (Sarstedt et al., 2014; Hair Jr. et al., 2017). In this method, the result can be obtained to assess the influence of branding on market competitiveness as a mediator in brand reputation that is solid and reliable.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 490)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	278	56.7
	Female	212	43.3
	Total	490	100
Age Group	18–25 years	118	24.1
	26–35 years	182	37.1
	36–45 years	121	24.7
	Above 45 years	69	14.1
	Total	490	100
Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	84	17.1
	Undergraduate	198	40.4
	Postgraduate	162	33.1
	Professional/Doctoral Degree	46	9.4
	Total	490	100
Occupation	Student	92	18.8
	Private Employee	196	40
	Government Employee	88	18
	Self-employed	73	14.9
	Others	41	8.3
	Total	490	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 shows the demographic status of the 490 respondents who were surveyed in Tiruchirappalli district. The results show that most of the respondents were male (56.7%) and 43.3% were female, which shows a relatively balanced gender distribution. When asked about age, the majority of the respondents were in the age group of 26–35 years (37.1%), followed by 36-45 years (24.7%) and 18-25 years (24.1%) which suggests that young and middle aged age group formed a significant proportion of the sample. With respect to educational qualification 40.4% of the respondents were university graduates and 33.1% were post university; a well-educated response base was available. As for occupation, most respondents were private sector workers (40.0%) followed by students (18.8%) and government workers (18.0%). In general, it can be seen that the respondents have a wide background of education and occupation, which is suitable to study the effect of branding and brand reputation on market competitiveness.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Measures

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Branding	5	0.891	0.920	0.698
Brand Reputation	5	0.908	0.931	0.731
Market Competitiveness	5	0.884	0.915	0.683

Source: Primary Data

The result of the reliability and convergent validity assessment of the constructs used in the study is shown in Table 2. The findings show that all three constructs, namely, branding, brand reputation and the market competitiveness had a good internal consistency and acceptable level of validity. Cronbach Alpha scores for the scales ranged from 0.884 to 0.908, which is above the accepted cut-off of 0.70, thus showing good reliability. The Composite Reliability (CR) values also exceeded the acceptable range of construct reliability, which is 0.70, and ranged from 0.915 to 0.931. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores of all the constructs fell within the range of 0.683 to 0.731, which is above the suggested threshold of 0.50, providing sufficient convergent validity. Brand Reputation has the highest value of Cronbach's Alpha (0.908), CR (0.931) and AVE (0.731) among the constructs which implies that it is a robust construct in explaining the market competitiveness. The measurement model meets the PLS-SEM requirements and the constructs are reliable and can be used for the structural model.

Table 3. Model Fit Summary (PLS-SEM Path Analysis)

Model Fit Index	Recommended Threshold	Obtained Value	Interpretation
SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)	< 0.08	0.057	Good model fit
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.928	Excellent model fit
d_ULS	Lower value preferred	0.816	Acceptable fit
d_G	Lower value preferred	0.689	Acceptable fit
Chi-Square (χ^2)	Lower value preferred	412.537	Acceptable fit
RMS Theta	< 0.12	0.096	Good model fit

Source: Primary Data

The results of the model fit assessment obtained from the PLS-SEM analysis are given in Table 3. The results show that the overall fit of the proposed structural model is satisfactory. The SRMR value of 0.057 is less than the threshold value of 0.08 which means that the observed and estimated correlation matrices are a good fit. The value of NFI is 0.928 with a recommended value of 0.90, which indicates good model adequacy. The difference d_ULS (0.816) and d_G (0.689) are in the acceptable range, indicating that the difference between the empirical and estimated covariance matrices are not significant. In addition, the Chi-Square value (412.537) reflects a reasonable level of model fit, given the sample size and the complexity of the model. The RMS Theta value of 0.096 is less than the threshold value of 0.12, thus providing further evidence of the reliability of the reflective measurement model. These results overall show that the proposed PLS-SEM model is statistically sound and appropriate for examining the relationships between the three constructs of branding, brand reputation and market competitiveness.

Table 4. Structural Model Summary

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Branding → Market Competitiveness	0.418	8.742	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Branding → Brand Reputation	0.687	16.283	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Brand Reputation → Market Competitiveness	0.372	7.915	< 0.001	Supported
H4	Branding → Brand Reputation → Market Competitiveness (Indirect Effect)	0.256	6.584	< 0.001	Supported

Source: Primary Data

Table 4 shows the findings of the structural model analysis through PLS-SEM to explore the direct and indirect relationships between the variables of branding, brand reputation and market competitiveness. The findings show that brand has a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.418$, $t = 8.742$, $p < 0.001$) on market competitiveness, substantiating H1, and suggesting that the more powerful brand is, the more it will strengthen the competitiveness of an organization in the marketplace. Likewise, branding has a significant effect on brand reputation ($\beta = 0.687$, $t = 16.283$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2 and indicating that branding efforts can play an important role in creating a positive brand reputation among stakeholders. In addition, brand reputation has a positive impact on market competitiveness to a significant extent ($\beta = 0.372$, $t = 7.915$, $p < 0.001$) and thus H3 is supported. Additionally, the mediation analysis results show that brand reputation significantly mediated the relationship between the variable of branding and market competitiveness ($\beta = 0.256$, $t = 6.584$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. The important indirect path means that branding can increase the competitiveness of the market both directly and indirectly by building brand reputation. The results of the structural model indicate that companies aiming at increasing their competitiveness should invest in a holistic branding strategy where they simultaneously develop a good brand reputation in combination with a high credibility, meaning sustainable competitive advantages.

Discussion

The results of this study prove that branding is a major determinant of competitiveness and that companies having better branding strategies have better competitive performance. The significant positive correlation between branding and market competitiveness suggests that branding is important for customer recognition, differentiation and positioning, which helps the companies to maintain their competitiveness. Moreover, branding was identified as a significant factor that affects brand reputation: brand communication and value creation has been shown to reinforce stakeholders' views of organizational credibility and trustworthiness for them. The findings are in line with studies conducted by Rua and Santos (2022) finding that branding through market orientation and positioning strategies enhances competitive advantage, and Hussain et al. (2020) showing the positive relationship between sustainable brand equity and market performance by sustainable competitive advantage. The results are also consistent with those of Brandão and Ramos (2024) that good brands create an emotional connection and improve engagement of stakeholders.

The study also showed that brand reputation has a significant impact on the market competitiveness and acts as a mediator between brand and market competitiveness. It means that if the organization does not turn the branding activities into a positive image for the stakeholders, sustainable success is not possible. This reputation translates to a positive impression, increased customer confidence and loyalty, and greater stakeholder confidence, all of which support better competitive outcomes. The results confirm the findings of Khan et al. (2022) who revealed that company reputation has a positive impact on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction and Le (2023) who indicated that corporate reputation has a significant effect on the performance of the organization. Likewise, Nguyen and Adomako (2021) emphasized the role of environmental reputation as a mediator toward improving market performance. Based on this, the present study adds to the previous literature by proving that brand reputation is a key intermediary mechanism which explains how branding helps to make a company more competitive in the long run and more sustainable.

Implications

The results from this study have significant implications for the managerial and theoretical aspects of organisations that want to reinforce their market position. Brands are a strategic investment, not a promotion from a management standpoint because strong brands directly help firms become more competitive, and indirectly, through their brand reputation, help them become more competitive. Consistent brand messaging, product and service quality, and good stakeholder relationships are important aspects of building a good reputation for an organization. Brand reputation plays a crucial role in the link between brand and market competitiveness, so managers need to adopt long-term brand reputation management strategies that focus on credibility, trust, and customer engagement. Theoretically, the study adds to the literature on branding by empirically demonstrating the mediators of brand reputation in the context of a PLS-SEM path model, and offers a better understanding of the mechanism of how branding affects competitive outcomes. The results of this research can help the policy makers, marketing practitioners and business leaders to design sustainable branding strategy in order to gain a long-term competitive edge.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are that branding is an important variable that can predict the level of competitiveness in the market and that brand reputation is a very important mediator that can enhance this relationship. The results show that branding practices can directly contribute to strengthening an organization's competitive position and indirectly can influence market competitiveness in the form of a strong and credible brand reputation. A strong brand strategy, stakeholder relationships, and reputation management are all part of a company's ongoing efforts that can help it gain lasting competitive advantages in a constantly changing marketplace. The study also validates the importance of brand reputation as an intangible asset which can convert any brand building activity into better performance of the organization and sustainability in the market. The overall findings of the study can be used to enrich the knowledge pool by offering empirical evidence that branding, brand reputation and competitiveness are interlinked and organizations need integrated branding and reputation management approaches to maintain their competitive standing.

Future Research Directions

Future studies can potentially build on this research and study other mediating and moderating factors that may impact the relationship between branding and market competitiveness, including customer loyalty, brand trust, customer engagement, digital marketing capabilities, and organizational innovation. Comparative studies between the industries, geographic areas and organisation sizes can also be performed to be able to generalise the results of the study. The study was conducted on the respondents from Tiruchirappalli district only and the research design used was cross sectional in nature, future research could be longitudinal to see the changes in the effectiveness of the brand and its brand reputation over a period of time. In addition, combination of qualitative method with PLS-SEM can help to gain more insights into the perceptions of the stakeholders and the ways that branding affects sustainable market competitiveness.

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