# Reputation attributes in retailing services: managerial perspective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to study the construct of reputation in retail services, its dimensions and attributes from the store management perspective.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article adapts the conceptual model developed by Vidaver-Cohen who suggests that reputation predictors are formed by eight quality dimensions. In the first stage of the study 18 interviews were carried out. In the second stage a survey containing 170 statements was conducted.

**Findings** – The main contribution lies on the identification of the context specific attributes of the quality dimensions of reputation and their content in retailing.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study focuses on identifying reputation dimensions and their attributes and contents in the retail context. The empirical data were gathered from stores located in shopping centres.

**Practical implications** – The study suggests that reputation management in the service sector might be easier if managers were better able to recognise the industry-related quality dimensions of reputation. In addition, stores should be more prepared for unforeseen, even disastrous events and publicity that may ruin their reputation in one way or another.

**Originality/value** – Numerous researchers have recognised the critical role of reputation in marketing, but as yet empirical reputation studies are scarce, at least in retailing services.

**Keywords** Reputation, Retailing services, Quality management, Customer service management, Corporate image

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

A favourable corporate reputation is an effective mechanism for maintaining or gaining a competitive advantage (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) A good reputation can lead to profitability while a poor reputation can lead to a loss of sales (e.g. Balmer, 2001; Fombrun, 1996). Thus, reputation can act as a useful hint of a service organisation's ability to satisfy customer needs, as services are challenging to evaluate due to their intangibility (see Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001b).

Compared to other marketing constructs, such as brand, image and quality, reputation has been granted much less attention regarding academic research into services, although numerous researchers have recognised the critical role of reputation in marketing (e.g. Chun, 2005; Fombrun, 1996; Wang *et al.*, 2003). Yet academic reputation studies are scarce, mostly concentrate on theoretical reasoning and lack empirical research. In particular, in retailing services there seems to be a lack of

empirical research on reputation. Therefore, it would appear to be especially relevant to find workable academic models for studying reputation and producing new empirical findings in this context. Thus, this article contributes by applying existing theoretical models to the retailing context and presenting new findings in this area.

The purpose of the article is to study the construct of reputation and its dimensions and attributes with content in the context of retailing services. The article applies the definition of Barnett *et al.* (2006) and Ou *et al.* (2006) and discusses former reputation studies, especially in retailing (e.g. Caruana and Ewing, 2010; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001a) but also in other service contexts (e.g. Chun, 2005; Fombrun, 1996; Markwick and Fill, 1997). The framework of the article is modified from the conceptual model of reputation that was originally developed by Vidaver-Cohen (2007). The empirical data was gathered from stores located in shopping centres. Therefore, it may be possible, that other types of stores or stores not situated in shopping centres would produce results that deviate from those of our study.

The article adopts the managerial perspective. Several authors (e.g. Chun, 2005; Fombrun, 1996) consider various stakeholders to be key groups in assessing reputation. However, it is impossible to study all stakeholders at the same time. Therefore, it was decided to start the study by studying from the management perspective due to the access provided by the larger research project.

The article is organised as follows. First, the article deals with the theoretical concepts and framework of the study. Second, the data collection and methods of analysis are explained. Thereafter, the results of the study are presented. Finally, a brief summary and the main contribution are presented and directions for future research close the article.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Construct of reputation

During recent years a discussion about the construct and content of reputation has emerged in academia. As a result of the discussion Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001b) conclude that there seems to be mutual understanding between scholars that reputation is the result of the past actions of an organisation. On the grounds of lexicological reasoning, the opinions of the majority of other scholars, and pragmatic criteria Barnett *et al.* (2006, p. 34) define corporate reputation as "observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time". The present article adopts that definition. In contrast to that, Walsh and Beatty (2007) define customer-based corporate reputation as stressing a customer's personal experiences with and perceptions about a firm, whereas Barnett *et al.* (2006) see corporate reputation as a collective phenomenon.

Fombrun (1996, p. 37) connects reputation to the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents forming "the 'net' affective or emotional reaction – good or bad, weak or strong – of customers, investors, employees, and the general public", whereas Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001b) stress the degree of trust (or distrust). Markwick and Fill (1997) and Alessandri *et al.* (2006) emphasise the impact of long-term orientation, especially "the historical, accumulated impacts of previously observed identity" (Markwick and Fill, 1997, p. 398). The above discussion shows that the construct of reputation seems to be multidimensional and longitudinal in its nature.

Reputation as such has many advantages. First of all, it is considered to be one of the most valuable intangible assets of an organisation by academics and practitioners (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). A positive reputation seems to impact favourably on profits (Balmer, 2001; Roberts and Dowling, 2002), enabling lower marketing costs, acting as a barrier against imitation, and generating positive word-of-mouth (Fombrun and Gardberg, 2000). Chun (2005) argues that corporate reputation affects various stakeholders' behaviour towards an organisation, e.g. by reducing stakeholder uncertainty about an organisation's future performance, influencing employee retention, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, strengthening competitive advantage and enhancing public confidence. Roberts and Dowling (2002, p. 1,077) consider a good reputation to be crucial due to its potential for value creation, and also because the intangible character of reputation makes it difficult for competing organizations to replicate.

Some researchers consider the reputation construct to be related to image (e.g. Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001a; Chun, 2005) and quality (e.g. Chu and Chu, 1994; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Some scholars see reputation as a deeper and more durable concept than image (see Preece *et al.*, 1995; Markwick and Fill, 1997) and some suggest reputation as broader concept, which includes multiple stakeholder groups (see, e.g. Fombrun, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Chun, 2005). Image is also seen as something that can be changed relatively quickly compared to other two (Preece *et al.*, 1995; Markwick and Fill, 1997, p. 398).

### 2.2 Conceptual model of reputation
The article adapts the Vidaver-Cohen (2007) conceptual model of reputation. The model was originally developed to measure reputation among private sector firms by the Reputation Institute, and was applied by Vidaver-Cohen to the business school context. It follows RepTrak's "reflective" measurement strategy and thus makes a clear conceptual differentiation between reputation predictors and reputation assessments (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). The reason for choosing this model for this study is that there are only a few workable models for measuring reputation scientifically, especially in the service context (Walsh and Beatty, 2007; see also Vidaver-Cohen, 2007).

Figure 1 illustrates the following eight reputation predictors, called quality dimensions, that Vidaver-Cohen's model deals with: performance, product, service, leadership, governance, workplace, citizenship and innovation. Moreover, each of the eight quality dimensions consists of different reputational attributes, e.g. the performance dimension can be divided into attributes, such as intellectual performance, network performance and financial performance. The leadership dimension, for example, consists of the following attributes: strong and appealing leaders, competent, well organised management and a clear vision for the future. The workplace climate contains among others fair rewards, employee well-being and equal opportunities. Finally innovation targets adaptability to changes, among other aspects (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007).

Vidaver-Cohen (2007) considers reputation an assessment (see also Barnett *et al.* 2006). Reputation assessments are a function of the degree to which key constituents perceive that an organisation and its practices meet their unique expectations for quality. She (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007) conceptualises assessments as the level of trust, admiration, good feeling and perception of an organisation's overall public esteem.
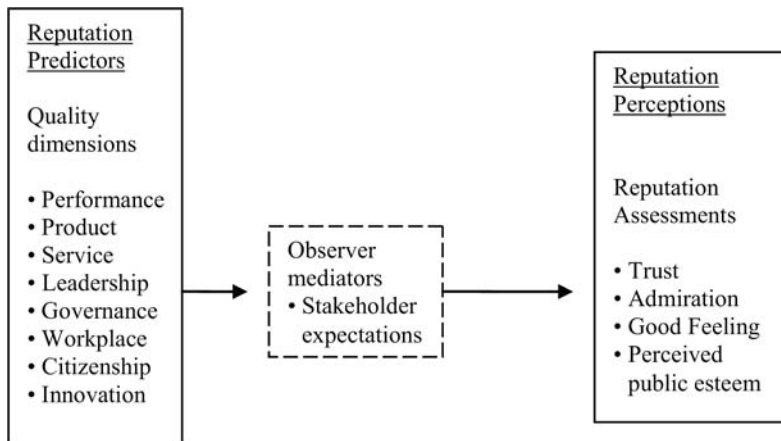
**Source:** Modified from Vidaver-Cohen (2007, p. 284)

**Figure 1.**
Conceptual model of
reputation

However, in this article the assessments are not studied as such, although their influence is briefly discussed at the end of the article.

The weakness of the Vidaver-Cohen model is that it is not empirically tested. Therefore, the relevant dimensions of retail reputation according to previous research need to be discussed.

### 2.3 Reputation in the context of retailing

In retailing it is crucial how much consumers really care about retailer reputation and how much it affects their purchasing decisions (Graham and Fearn, 2005). Akaah and Korgaonkar (1988) believe that consumers are more likely to purchase from reputable retailers than from unknown retailers, and Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001a) find consumers are more likely to remain loyal to retailers with a favourable reputation rather than purchase from retailers with a weak or poor reputation (Lwin and Williams, 2006). Purohit and Srivastava (2001) argue that consumers perceive retailers who possess a reputation for providing good service and high quality products as a lower risk (see also Dawar and Parker, 1994). Koistinen and Järvinen (2009) also stress quality in connection with consumer retail store choices.

The article follows the suggestion by Ou *et al.* (2006), which states that retail reputation is formed by consumers' and other stakeholders' perceptions of a retail chain organisation over time. Moreover, Ou *et al.* (2006, see also Caruana and Ewing, 2010) consider retailers with a good reputation ethical if they offer customers good value, communicate honestly, and are well managed and Bailey's (2005) study underscores the importance to retailers of fulfilling their obligations to consumers.

Summarising the above discussion, it can be stated that in the retailing context reputation is formed from, at least, product quality, good service, keeping promises, offering customers added value, having customer loyalty, honest communication and professional management. All those qualities except for loyalty and communication are included in the Vidaver-Cohen (2007) model. However, the reputation factors suggested by Rayner (2003) contain factors like promises to partners and

communication and crisis management that may also prove to be relevant in the retail sector.

Ou *et al.* (2006) argue that retailer reputation serves as a signal of attractiveness, and raise the question of whether product assortment and price level influences retailer reputation (see also Purohit and Srivastava, 2001). The study by Koistinen and Järvinen (2009) indicates that both price and assortment are important criteria for store choice, but their study also revealed the importance of the shopping environment. In contrast, Ou and Abratt's (2006) findings indicate that reputation does not correlate with shopping expenditure, time travelled and patronage frequencies.

### 3. Data collection and methods of analysis

In this study, mixed methods were utilised, both interviews and surveys in order to find the best combination of the results, and to quantify and achieve a richness of data (see, e.g. Brannen, 2003; Bryman, 2003; Silverman, 2005). In the first stage, the study was conducted in three shopping centres in Southern Finland. Empirical data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews during spring 2009, while bearing in mind that the major advantage of semi-structured interviews is the gathering of rather systematic and comprehensive data, although the interviews remain conversational and informal (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Altogether 18 interviews were carried out. Nine of them were conducted with sales staff and nine with either shop owners or managers. The interviews lasted from one hour to one-and-a-half hours. The interviewer let respondents talk freely and in some cases they discussed the theme more broadly than was originally intended. Thus, the data that were generated in interaction between the interviewer and the respondent are typical of qualitative research (see Gummesson, 2005). The interviews followed the suggestion of Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001a) that new dimensions of reputation can be found through in-depth interviews. Moreover, in qualitative research, to some degree, data collection, analysis and interpretation take place simultaneously (Gummesson, 2005).

The interviews led to the second step which was a survey consisting of 170 statements. The survey was formulated on the basis of the interviews and existing literature, which included, among others, those linked to store and shopping centre reputation, e.g. as follows:

- Store assortment includes products that are sold during the economic downturns.
- Economic downturns threat the survival of the store.
- Products are repaired under warranties.
- There is enough waste disposal units in the shopping centre area.
- Employee satisfaction ratio is regularly measured.
- Employees have equal opportunities to move to another job in the store.

In an exception to normal practice the questionnaire was filled in with the cooperation of the researchers and respondents. This allowed important items to be discussed in depth and ensured that the respondents understood the statements properly. Sapsford (1999) recommends the use of an interviewer if the questions of questionnaire are complex, exacting or numerous.

At this stage 31 shop owners and managers from eight shopping centres participated in the study. They represented the following store types: seven department stores, five food stores and 21 non-food stores (seven footwear stores, six sport equipment stores and eight electrical goods stores). The sizes of the stores varied from small to medium-sized and large. The research was conducted between July 2009 and January 2010 and each meeting took from 55 minutes to two hours. First, the respondents assessed whether the statements held true, and thereafter evaluated their probability and importance in relation to their own business.

The respondents represented the perspective of a single store and from that point of view they also assessed reputation. The interview data were analysed by content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) and the survey by using data-base-analysis (e.g. Patton, 1990). The data partly complemented and partly confirmed one another (see Janesick, 2000; Richardson, 2000).

## 4. Results of study

The shop owners and managers acted as the main observer mediators in the retailing stores participating in the study. In addition, shop staff participated through interviews.

Table I summarises the results of the survey. The content of each quality dimension is discussed in brief below by utilising the interview data and the survey data. First, it can be concluded that all the quality dimensions suggested by Vidaver-Cohen (2007) can be identified in the retail stores, but the content of the dimensions deviates in the context of this study. In addition, one new dimension titled "location" is identified.

Performance is one of the most important reputational attributes. It is divided into:

- intellectual performance consisting of low employee turnover and the high availability of professional staff;
- network performance, which covers both co-operation within the shopping centre, and co-operation with chain management and other stores within the retail chain; and
- financial performance referring to turnover and profits, which all stores reported as being lower than normal due to the strong recession negatively affecting customer purchasing power.

The majority of customers had also shifted to buying cheaper products because of their need to save money. As a result sales turnovers and profits decreased. Luckily, all stores sell products that are required, even in the worst economic downturns, i.e. necessities.

The quality of customer service depends on the amount of staff and their service orientation. Stores have not invested in human resources due to the dominant self-service culture in Finnish stores. Nevertheless, they consider the amount of staff to be adequate. Service recovery is an important task in keeping customers, but it requires personal interaction in order to avoid customer exits, as one of the respondents noted:

Customer complaints can be highly demanding, of course they tend to lead to overreactions, but so far they have been settled during discussions with customers (E).

| Quality dimensions | Reputational attributes | Content of attributes |
|---|---|---|
| Performance | Intellectual performance | Employee turnover, availability of professional staff |
| | Network performance | Co-operation within the chain and shopping centre |
| | Financial performance | Sales turnover and profits |
| Services | Customer service | Staff amount and service orientation |
| | Service recovery | Customer interaction |
| | | Number of complaints |
| | | Customer feed-back |
| Products | Product assortment and quality | Product mix |
| | | Warranties, product faults, sales returns |
| | Recycling | Re-use of old products |
| | | Waste management |
| | Tenant mix | Stores' assortments complement each other |
| | Price | Price position |
| | | Bargains |
| Leadership | Capable leaders | Employee satisfaction ratio |
| | Future visions | Future risks |
| Governance | Ethics and fairness | Coping with adverse publicity |
| | Communication | Failure or success with media |
| Workplace climate | Employee well-being | Employee satisfaction ratio |
| | | Amount of sick leave |
| | Equal opportunities | Ability to change position |
| | Loyalty | Employee turnover |
| Citizenship | Corporate social responsibility | Corporate social responsibility policy |
| Innovation | Store design | Renovation |
| | Adaptability to changes | Renew product assortment |
| | | Changes in price |
| | | Opening hours |
| | | New customer segments |
| Location | Location | Urban, sub-urban, rural |
| | Traffic connections | Own car, car parks |
| | | Public transport |

**Table I.**
Quality dimensions, reputational attributes and their content in retailing

In addition, nearly all stores follow the number of complaints and carefully study customer feedback in order to keep customers satisfied. This function is taken care of shop owners and managers themselves.

The quality of products can best be assessed by monitoring product faults and returned products, but also by treating complaining customers carefully and fairly, especially with regard to product faults. The best quality products also tend to have the best warranties (Purohit and Srivastava, 2001). In addition, a good reputation encompasses environmental attributes like recycling and the reusability of products.

Product quality is also connected to product assortment. Stores in a shopping centre should complement one another, as an interesting variety of stores and other services

attracts new customers and improves the atmosphere of a shopping centre. Therefore, the ideal tenant-mix (see Teller and Reutterer, 2008) should be one of the key strategies in shopping centre management. In addition, tenant mix seems to affect automatically shopping centre reputation.

Koistinen and Järvinen (2009) have identified price as an optional factor of reputation. However, in this study, price was classified within product quality dimension, and this indicates that price positioning is subject to economic fluctuations, which strongly influence the willingness of customers to pay. During economic downturns customers buy cheaper or bargain products, whereas during the economic boom times they choose more expensive products.

Shop owners' and managers' leadership capabilities are based only on their self-evaluation, and are not reliable as such. However, the evaluation reveals many critical store management routines, such as a lack of key governance or the importance of honesty among staff. Future visions were not discussed much during the interviews because of the ongoing economic recession that required all the energy and effort of the stores. Only future risks earned some attention, but those visions focused on unemployment causing loitering and shoplifting causing other threats. Bamfield (2009) confirms that shoplifting is more organised and more professional than ever before.

Governance, for its part, contains the negative events that may damage a reputation in one way or another. Often any damage to reputation is a concern for a shopping centre as an entity because every store receives some share of it. Adverse publicity is one example of well-known reputation risks, but all kinds of other negative phenomenon, like bomb threats, vandalism and robberies, can damage reputation. Also, unintended alarms lead to the distrust of security systems.

> As long as nothing happens everything is fine, but when something does happen! Well, then it is a stain on everyone's reputation, something that we all suffer from. Especially, if some drug user comes in with a pistol and decides to start shooting (Q).

For events that create publicity, ethical rules help to maintain reputation but ethics has its place in all operations. In addition, communication through well managed information systems assists in maintaining reputation. This includes computer based systems within shopping centres as well as regular communication with outside stakeholders.

The workplace climate can be evaluated through employee satisfaction ratios and sick leave resulting from stress and burnout. Regular staff meetings, caring for employee well-being and having equal opportunities to change position or be promoted seem to be the most important means to affect and produce a positive workplace climate in retail stores. A high employee satisfaction ratio leads to high loyalty among employees. Loyalty is an important new attribute in keeping the most qualified staff members (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001a). In conjunction with the economic recession internet shopping is also about to start to affect stores and shopping centres. If shopping centres lose their attractiveness staff redundancies will follow. On the other hand, the most qualified staff members will be able to move to other branches, if they find such a move attractive for themselves.

Citizenship manifests itself in the corporate social responsibility policy that stores have committed to following. Usually the policy itself is prepared and managed by retail chain management, whereas shopping centres as entities lack their own social responsibility programmes. Innovation in retail stores culminates in two attributes,

namely the ability to adapt to changes in a turbulent economic climate and store redesign that appears in the form of renovations. The usual way to improve a store's reputation is to renovate the whole space inside or renew the product assortment. Inside a shopping centre architecture can be used as a way to maintain reputation (wide walkways, piazzas, lightning, exotic entertainment facilities etc).

Price level tends to change over time. The price of some products, e.g. electronic devices, often decreases, while the price of some fashion products may increase if a brand becomes highly valued. This may lead to the situation that some stores in a shopping centre are positioned as expensive and some of them as bargain stores, which may result in confused and frustrated customers:

> This means that the amount of customers decreases, that is a threat (R).

Finally, location is the new quality dimension identified in the study. The location of a shopping centre may or may not protect stores from damage of reputation. Our study suggests that those shopping centres located in city centres experience more disturbance than those outside city centres. In fact, all kinds of disturbance and disorder seem to have a adverse effect on reputation. However, good traffic connections are providers of important reputation attributes. Regarding this, having appropriate parking areas for cars provides a higher reputation than having a location close to public transport stations or bus stops (Lee *et al.*, 1999; Järvinen and Juvonen, 2010) However, the connection between location and reputation is an issue that has not been discussed in previous studies on the retailing sector.

The study did not focus on the quality assessments contained in the Vidaver-Cohen's (2007) model. However, the study recognised trust as an important part of any assessment, but less than half the respondents emphasised good feeling. The latter is a surprise, because a good feeling may activate customers to buy and help promote a positive workplace climate. The other two quality assessments, namely perceived public esteem and admiration did not receive any attention.

## 5. Conclusions and discussion
### 5.1 A short summary and the contribution of the study
The purpose of the article was to study the construct of reputation and its dimensions and attributes in the context of retailing services. The article adopted the reputation definitions devised by Barnett *et al.* (2006) and Ou *et al.* (2006) and applied Vidaver-Cohen's (2007) conceptual model of reputation. The empirical data for the study were gathered by conducting interviews and surveys with sales staff and shop owners and managers working in Finnish shopping centres.

The study indicates the adaptability of Vidaver-Cohen's model for the retail context, as all quality dimensions were identified. However, the main contributions of the study rest on the identification of quality dimensions and their attributes and content in the retail context. This means that the attributes and content differed partly from the original model. In particular, the dimensions of product quality and innovation resulted from context specific attributes such as price, warranties, product faults and sales returns caused by quality problems, which are not relevant in the original Vidaver-Cohen model. In addition, innovation in retailing materialised mainly in all kinds of store designs, whereas the original model does not pay attention to physical surroundings. Moreover, tenant mix (Teller and Reutterer, 2008) and service recovery

as new reputational attributes would appear to be significant in the shopping centre environment, and it may well be that these attributes can also be identified in other service sectors. Finally, the empirical study suggests location is an important quality dimension with its own attributes in the context of retailing. Thus far, location has received practically no attention in retailing research or in reputation research.

The other possible retail-specific reputation attributes discussed in 2.3, namely loyalty, price and communication are recognised in the study. Loyalty refers to the dimension of "workplace climate" when staff loyalty is being discussed, but customer loyalty cannot clearly be included in any existing dimension. Price level belongs to the "innovation dimension" in those cases where the price position is variable, however, when it is a stable element it is placed within the product dimension as an attribute. With regard to communication with stakeholders, its importance is not acknowledged in this study because of the self-service dominance in Finnish retailing stores. Moreover, reputation assessments were difficult to identify and only trust was found to be important, but others, i.e. admiration, good feeling and public esteem played minor roles in this study.

This study was carried out from the perspective of sales staff, shop owners and managers representing one group of stakeholders. Yet, it is surprising how little customers were discussed during the interviews, although all respondents were working on a daily basis with customer service. It is probable that taking the perspective of customers in future studies, may reveal another world of retail reputation with different impressions.

The study confirms that reputation as a construct is context specific in its nature. So far only Vidaver-Cohen (2007) has paid attention to this option, when she suggested executing empirical studies within various service sectors in order to test the model. The main streams of reputation literature have concentrated on developing constructs that are generalised rather than context specific. However, the Vidaver-Cohen model, as such, is based on theoretical considerations, therefore more empirical evidence is required to define quality dimensions and their attributes.

With regard to the practical managerial implications, the study suggests that reputation management in the service sector might be easier if managers would better recognise the industry-related quality dimensions of reputation. The results of this study suggest that reputation management in shopping centres should be given more attention. For example, it was also acknowledged that the risk of a catastrophic event affecting a shopping centre's reputation cannot be predicted, but following the idea of Gaultier-Gaillard and Louisot (2006), stores should be better prepared for such events.

### 5.2 Avenues for future research
In this article the main emphasis was placed on the identification of the dimensions and attributes of reputation. The next step would be to quantify the dimensions. This is a challenging task as the study conducted in the financial sector by Gaultier-Gaillard and Louisot (2006) revealed that only 16 per cent of companies have formalised quantification processes for measuring and monitoring reputation, while others use informal information and published rankings.

Vidaver-Cohen (2007) recommends industry-based research in order to test her model in various service branches. Also Liljander *et al.* (2009) wonder if relevant corporate image dimensions, which are considered one of the antecedents of reputation,

vary from context to context. Thus, a logical extension to the present study would be a study comparing reputation dimensions and their attributes within different service industries. Such a research project might provide interesting information for both researchers and practitioners, and could highlight industry-related differences, and thus might help reputation management in different service industries.

Moreover, a study focusing on the context of higher education would be particularly useful. A study utilising Vidaver-Cohen's (2007) model would present an opportunity to reflect upon her results and be important because some prior studies (see e.g. Conard and Conard, 2000; 2001; Helgesen, 2008; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001b; Yang *et al.*, 2008) have recognised the significance of reputation in the context of higher education. In particular, Sung and Yang (2009) stress the perceived reputation of a university as one of the four most critical factors affecting students' supportive behavioural intentions.

Furthermore, customers, as one stakeholder group, are especially important for retailing research, as well as research in other service sectors, and this group should provide the most important perspective from which to make future reputation studies.

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